Written by Robert C. Baldwin, CMRP, Editor
Saturday, 01 December 2001 10:03

Robert C. Baldwin, CMRP, Editor "Plant floor to the top floor" and similar slogans are being used by analysts, pundits, and the larger players in the automation and control system arena to push investment in enterprise information systems and automation and process control systems.

To me, their promotional materials invariably conjure up a picture of an executive peering at a computer terminal to find out what is happening. What is he looking at? An idiot light on the enterprise dashboard?

Perhaps you get another image when you hear "plant floor to top floor," but my first vision is of the big boss trying to manage a company from a computer terminal. What should top managers be doing? I think they are getting paid to focus on shareholder value and enterprise strategy.

If the leader has competent associates, then things run smoothly. A plant manager needs a competent operations manager and a competent maintenance and reliability manager. If they are doing their jobs, their boss can focus on the future and not have to get mired down in day-to-day activity.

The boss doesn't need an idiot light to tell him that his production engine needs servicing. He needs competent people who can operate it and service it effectively. And there lies the rub. Most of them don't have the information and systems to make them as effective as they need to be.

So what is really needed is horizontal communication on the plant floor. Without it, there isn't much to send up to the top floor.

Plant information typically resides in functional islands: operations, control, predictive maintenance, asset management, etc. They are all components of the information matrix needed for competent decisions. If they are not readily available, how will the plant floor know when to turn on the idiot light, or what color it should be?

Open standards will play an important role in building the information network for the plant floor and the enterprise. They free the builders to select components based on performance rather than pedigree. (We expect MIMOSA to be an important contributor to open information standards.)

In spite of my vision of "plant floor to top floor," I'm embracing it because it promotes action. Whether communications is best established top to bottom, bottom to top, or side to side, you have to begin somewhere. And once you start, you find that the value of the network increases as the product of the number of nodes, and everybody wins. **MT**

Joomla SEO powered by JoomSEF