Skills: a key ingredient for success

Andy MacPherson examines how the UK food industry can develop the skills set required for a more automated future.

Making the transition from a largely manual way of working to an automation-based future is no easy task. However, it is road down which the UK food industry must travel if it is to continue developing the agility and resilience it needs to meet the demands of a growing – and increasingly discerning – population.

Defining what skills are likely to be required is a challenge as the food sector is particularly diverse with different parts of the supply chain at very different stages when it comes to adoption of digitalisation and Industry 4.0. Within the agricultural community, for example, manual working continues to be the norm because people are still quicker and more adaptable than machines in many scenarios. Automated tasks are evident, but limited: GPS on tractors and software that enables fertiliser dosages to be carefully controlled are examples.

However, even this sector may not be able to rely on the availability of manual labour in the future. The seasonality, the long hours and the physical nature of many agricultural tasks mean that working on the land is simply no longer an attractive proposition for many. Migratory workers from other countries may have helped to mask this trend, but with Brexit making economic migration more uncertain it is likely that increased automation may be the only answer for agriculture. This will lead to a need for differently skilled people to operate and maintain automation equipment.

Automation is more prominent once food enters the processing phase. Indeed, minimising human contact during food processing is positively beneficial from a hygiene perspective. Picking, packing and warehousing are also highly automated processes, supporting the growing customer trend for online grocery shopping. It follows that the skills set to develop and maintain...
Automated equipment is also more prevalent in food processing and packaging, so there may be some opportunities to attract these people out into other parts of the food production supply chain.

However, it is likely that in the short term the food sector may need to look to other industries to bring in the skills it needs. For example, the automotive sector is highly automated and has successfully upskilled its workforce. As this sector is cyclic, the food sector could look at attracting people who already possess the required automation skills and help them to acquire the additional food industry-specific skills.

While 'sharing' skilled workers with other sectors may provide a stop-gap, it is clear that there is a real and urgent need for the food sector to grasp the implications of increasing automation and identify what skills it will require in the medium- to longer-term. To do so, it needs to collaborate with academia and lobby hard for Government funding, as well as taking full advantage of existing training facilities, such as the Cyber Factory training facility at Middlesex University. Equipped with automation equipment from Festo and Siemens, the Cyber Factory aims to ensure that the key skills necessary to deliver the full potential of industrial automation are being developed alongside advances in the technology.

**A key ingredient**

A skilled workforce is a key ingredient for the long-term success of any industry and the food sector is no exception. The increase in automation and the need to be more agile and flexible in meeting customer expectations is exacerbating the challenges of training and retaining employees with relevant skills – so the food sector needs to act now to identify the opportunities and develop the training that will help ensure it retains its position as the largest manufacturing sector in the UK.

For further guidance on putting Industry 4.0 into practice download Festo’s whitepaper ‘Practical Tips for Industry 4.0 implementation’ from www.festo.co.uk/4practicaltips.

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