SHIFTING THE ERP BURDEN TO THE CLOUD

|| *by Ed Huntress, Editor* ||

Now we're starting to see the promise of cloud computing for fabricators: the goal of this software company is to take the burdens of coordinating ERP out of the hands of the users.

We call it the 'We contain multitudes' moment. They approach rapture: 'Everything is connected,' they say, 'and it's all Big Data, interactive and real-time, networked and device-friendly.' They may hold up their cell phone with a smile, 'Everything is right here, and it's all under control.'

Here's an idea of what reporting on advanced manufacturing software has become. This is fictional, but it's also close to the truth: There is a moment in the discussion when we know that things are about to go off the rails. The experts spread their arms wide and their language becomes more abstract – clouds, systems, data, devices -- we need a definition for every other word they speak. They become starry-eyed. We call it the "We contain multitudes" moment. They approach rapture: "Everything is connected," they say, "and it's all Big Data, interactive and real-time, networked and device-friendly." They may hold up their cell phone with a smile, "Everything is right here, and it's all under control."

And all we wanted to do was to keep an eye on how well our machines and operators were doing… >

Seriously, software tools and technologies have proliferated beyond our dreams, and, to understate the point, staying current has become a challenge. So we took some comfort from the words of one expert, Dave Lechleitner, senior mgr. of product marketing for Epicor Software Corp., when he put it this way:

"At the end of the day, I think most manufacturers could care less about the technology. In fact, technology often is burdensome. They equate technology with burden."

Dave has a broad perspective. Besides his work at Epicor, he is also the chair of the Software Technology Council for FMA. In this discussion he was explaining the general function of clouds in manufacturing software. "What I think cloud really does, at a very practical level, is that it shifts that burden from the manufacturers to the ERP vendor, and to the solution vendor."

That's encouraging. And, when you look into the newer systems, you can see that vendors are thinking along those lines, using the technology to make life easier for users, as well as expanding functions. Three basic examples are the use of ever-improved graphical displays; internet protocols and the Web itself for connectivity; and remote processing on dedicated servers in the cloud. To stretch the meaning of a term, it's reaching for comprehensive plug-and-play, in which everything works the way it's supposed to and the practical problems have been anticipated and solved beforehand. No headaches, lots of joy.

"Cloud simply becomes an enabler helping to support the direction in which I want to go, which is that I don't want technology to be a burden. I don't want to have to worry about it. I want to say, 'you know what, let's leave it to the experts.'

"To accomplish that, at the end of the day it's simply about always being on," he says. "I don't want to have to worry that my file server is up and running. I don't want to have to worry that my individual workers' PCs are connected to the network. Then, I don't want to have to worry that these different systems are connected to each other and the data is flowing back and forth. The easiest way, and I would almost argue the only way to do that, is through the cloud."

This is a bit different from some of the other cloud-related applications we've reported on. Different disciplines have different objectives for cloud computing. For nesting software, we've seen the cloud focus placed on sheer number-crunching power made possible by a network of powerful servers. For many us, our familiarity with the cloud is based on file storage with the various cloud-based services that offer it today. ›

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Dave Lechleitner, Epicor Software Corp.

Here, with ERP, we see the cloud being used to get the connectivity problems out of your shop.

But Epicor is still connected with the in-plant ERP technologies, and says that many actual systems are hybrids.

"We put together solutions that have combined some operations performed in the cloud, with functions going on in computers within the four walls of a plant. Technically it is possible to do that — you may read about in some of these white papers about hybrid files, and that's really what they're talking about. But you're leaving yourself open to possible problems. Whatever part of solution is still on premises is your responsibility -- you, meaning the manufacturer."

In other words, trending toward cloud-based solutions is the way to go. Lechleitner is in a position where he is among forward-lookers, and he says that there are more possibilities that are enabled by doing ERP in the cloud.

Looking ahead

"Optimizing time and money are the obvious goals of ERP -- five, six, 10 years ago that would have been the end goal -- but we can look ahead and see that having all of these answers can lead to greater insights, which will impact a company's total outlook. Now we can have another type of conversation. 'Hey I can have insights not just in my facility here in my own town, by I can see that maybe it makes sense for me to open up another operation. Maybe in China. I can have real-time visibility of the entire operation anywhere in the world."

ERP vendors are making it easier on us while giving us more usable information. And they're thinking big. The cloud is making a lot of it possible. ■

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