

Brainstorm: Plant Automation (Part I)

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The *Food Manufacturing* Brainstorm features industry experts sharing their perspectives on issues critical to the overall food industry marketplace. In this issue, we ask: What types of plant automation should food manufacturers be looking at on a component level to most effectively streamline their operation?



To me, the area that should be a point of focus is packaging. Typically, I see that processes upstream of packaging have been sufficiently mechanized, while processes downstream of packaging remain labor intensive. While not all applications lend themselves easily to automation, ever-improving technology may open opportunities not previously considered viable.

Correctly configured vision systems can find and inspect almost any product, wrapped or unwrapped. Robotic systems designed with flexibility in mind can pick-and-place or pack faster and more reliably, increasing throughput and quality. Integration of a robotic system is further simplified by advanced software products, now becoming increasingly available, that allow for line construction in a virtual world without the need for programming knowledge. Other packaging equipment, be it flow wrappers, cartoners or case/carton formers and closers, are all able to interface seamlessly with robotic systems.

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The emergence of stainless steel washdown IP69K robots have begun to move robots further up the line, especially high-speed, pick-and-place, Delta-style robots. These hygienically designed models are able to handle the harshest plant environments, and are capable of withstanding caustic cleaners. This allows for robotic integration in primary packaging applications where raw or unwrapped frozen products must be handled. We work closely with a system integrator that has designed a system using the IP69k stainless steel washdown version of a Delta robot for use in packaging applications with open food, such as meat, dairy products and ready-made meals.

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