CONEXUS INDIANA

Building an Internal Support Team

The Missing Piece in Your Technology Strategy May Be a Champion Who Owns It

For manufacturing and logistics (AML) companies, adopting technologies like robotics, machine vision, advanced analytics or AI promises real gains in productivity and competitiveness. But technology alone rarely delivers transformation.

After speaking with hundreds of AML companies, Conexus Indiana has found a consistent differentiator: companies that treat technology adoption as an organizational priority, not a side project, are significantly more successful.

Why an Internal Champion Matters

Without clear ownership, even promising pilot projects stall. That's why successful adopters designate an internal champion, someone responsible for moving technology from exploration to implementation and driving the automation that delivers productivity gains.

Recent Conexus surveys show about half of manufacturers have a dedicated Industry 4.0 leader or team and, in many cases, those are the companies making measurable progress. These champions connect leadership priorities with shop-floor realities, coordinate implementation and ensure the workforce is prepared to use new tools effectively. Critically, they understand the existing processes—an essential foundation for any automation effort.

What the Role Looks Like in Practice

In AML companies, this role goes by many names, including manufacturing engineer, process engineer, industrial engineer or automation engineer. The title varies, but the mission is consistently to make automation happen.

Automating a process that isn't fully understood leads to compounded problems. Many processes also can't be fully automated right away, or ever. A skilled manufacturing engineer knows how to semi-automate by identifying which steps in a workflow can be automated now, even when full automation isn't yet feasible.

Another key distinction between an internal champion and an outside consultant is the fact that the internal person stays with the organization to monitor performance and troubleshoot issues. This ongoing oversight and maintenance is the fourth step in a successful technology adoption process, and it's one that external resources often can't replicate.

These champions don't always require hiring a new staff member. In many cases, the right person is already on your team. It's someone in an engineering or operations role who simply needs to be dedicated to this work. Others may come from technical training programs or apprenticeships designed to build exactly these skills.

The Challenge for Small and Mid-Sized Companies

For SMEs, dedicating someone to technology adoption is hard. Lean teams and tight margins make it tempting to stack innovation work onto someone already managing operations, engineering or IT. But research consistently shows this approach slows progress. When technology adoption becomes a third or fourth responsibility, daily production demands will win every time.

How to Build the Right Internal Structure

You don't need a large innovation department. Start focused:

1. **Identify a clear internal champion.**
   Designate a leader responsible for technology exploration and implementation. If hiring isn't an option, reallocate someone's time. Sometimes, your champion is already on staff and ready for a new challenge.
2. **Protect time for the work.**
   For most companies, technology adoption cannot be an "extra task." Make it part of someone's core responsibilities, and create incentives to prioritize it. Without them, the daily work will always take over.
3. **Connect to external expertise.**
   Industry organizations, tech integrators, and peer networks can accelerate learning and help you avoid common pitfalls. Ensure your champion has access to a network of peers, such as the Conexus Indiana Advanced Industries Council, who share relevant tech adoption learnings freely.