Advancing ERP Solutions for Modern Manufacturing with Terri Hiskey

Introduction

[0:12] Jessica Ly: Welcome to Tech It Up with Jessica Ly. I'm here with Terri Hiskey, who is the VP of Global Product Marketing at Epicor Software. Hi, Terri. Welcome to the show.

Terri Hiskey: Hey, Jessica. Thank you for inviting me. I'm so happy to be here.

Section 1: Manufacturing Trends During the Pandemic

[0:30] Jessica: Yeah, it's an exciting time. It's a scary time, too. And I know Epicor provides software for ERP, and you are handling the manufacturing side of the business, so I wanted to get your take what trends are you seeing in your industry?

Terri: Sure. You know, manufacturing has been really interesting during this time of the pandemic. A great number of manufacturers are also deemed as essential workers, so a lot of manufacturers have been working this entire time.

But some of the things that they have been emphasizing during this time is, one, the health and safety of their workers. So, making sure that on the manufacturing floor they have the proper amount of social distancing, that they have gloves, and all the safety requirements checked off to keep their workers safe.

We're certainly seeing a trend in manufacturing of e-commerce. A lot of manufacturers were not able to have their facilities open and needed a way to interact with their customers. And so, a lot of them made sure, within the first few weeks of the pandemic, to have some sort of e-commerce or online portal that customers and suppliers could interact on.

I would say the third trend is really the move towards automation. There were a lot of people that were still using paper-based processes in manufacturing facilities, which are not only slow and certainly an older process, but started to become something that was unsafe with

the virus. People didn't want to physically pass paper from person to person.

So, we're seeing a lot of emphasis on companies looking at their processes and figuring out what they could use software to automate versus using these older manual processes.

[2:17] Jessica: Now, you work with small- to medium-sized manufacturing places, shops, right? We're not talking about huge, billion-dollar manufacturing. We're talking about smaller firms.

Terri: Yeah, we have a range of them. We have certainly manufacturers at the top end, too, but I would say the heart of our customers are mom-and-pop shops. They're really the heart of America, right? The Midwest—smaller manufacturers that are a little bit further down the supply chain to some of the bigger, kind of Tier 1 auto manufacturers or some of those other places.

So, they definitely have been hit hard. These are places that were already lean. They were already working as smart as they could with the least amount of resources. And so, to have something like this come in, unless they were deemed an essential worker—in which case they could keep their facilities open—you know, it's definitely been impactful.

So, a lot of these places have been really looking to technology to kind of help them keep going and really help them compete with a lot of the bigger players.

Section 2: Technology and Innovation in Manufacturing

[3:26] Jessica: You're in charge of product marketing, which means you have to be out there understanding what clients need and then making the kind of roadmap planning to serve the demand. What are you seeing in the innovation and the excitement, and the innovations that you're bringing out?

[3:47] Terri: Well, you know what I'm really excited about, especially for small and midsize manufacturers, is the opportunity to leverage new Industry 4.0 technologies like IoT, like big data and analytics, like machine learning and artificial intelligence.

I think the perception has been, at least as these new technologies were introduced, that they were maybe cost-prohibitive to people that were in smaller, midsize businesses that maybe don't have the money or the resources to experiment or play or pilot some of these technologies.

So, one of the things that I'm excited that Epicor has been able to do is that we've built a lot of these connection points and functionality into our product so that small and midsize companies have access to an IoT module that can help them monitor machines remotely.

We have introduced something called Epicor Virtual Agent, which is artificial intelligence within our product to help those processes move faster, and so that these smaller companies can leverage these technologies to make themselves even more competitive.

Section 3: Generational Differences in Technology Adoption

[4:56] Jessica: Are you finding that there are certain groups of people who adopt technology much faster than others? Is there a generational difference between who accepts these things and who's a little bit more hesitant?

[5:11] Terri: Yeah, that's a great question. Actually, when we first introduced our Epicor Virtual Agent, we call her Eva. She's very much like a Siri for our Epicor ERP product.

We definitely did find generational differences in people. Folks of, you know, I would say Gen X—you know, I'm a Gen Xer myself—the reaction was, "Oh, it's interesting. It's like Siri on my phone," but they didn't really kind of... shrugged, "Okay."

But it was really the newer Millennials, the Gen Zers, that have been interacting with voice-activated assistants for much longer that really saw right away, "Wow, I could leverage this." And my hands could be tied up, you know, doing something on the shop floor, but I could use my headset to talk to Eva and get some information from her.

And they could really see the power of what Eva could do. And we were definitely seeing adoption move across those generational lines, where we're seeing younger people really gravitate towards that technology at a much faster pace than, I would say, older generations.

[6:15] Jessica: I see. So, I take it they are the ones helping the older generation to understand the power of it and how to use it?

Terri: Absolutely.

Section 4: AI as a Tool to Augment Workers

[6:24] Jessica: And so, when you think about AI, and I know that that has been deployed in a lot of places, do you see that as a permanent replacement of some of the tasks? And that shifts the people to taking on tasks that technology may not be able to do, maybe like being more creative and analytical, so that elevates their role, right? Are you seeing an impact on reducing working hours for the workers or replacing their jobs?

[6:56] Terri: No. I mean, we call even—she's an Epicor Virtual Agent or virtual assistant—she's not there to replace anyone. She's there to enhance the work of people that are already there.

I mean, first of all, artificial intelligence, specifically in manufacturing, can actually help in areas that were perhaps unsafe for workers or a little bit more dangerous. You can deploy machine-led technology, cobots and robots, and things like that, which can actually help then protect your workers.

And then in other areas that we've seen AI, it's actually been more that it can help with newer employees as they come into the workforce. You can ask AI to help you build a workflow, for example, so that you're not having to take training.

You know, I'm an old-schooler. I remember when I first used an ERP system, they used to send people to four or five days of training. Can you imagine that now? Nobody will go to four or five days of training. Everyone expects to be able to open up your software package and use it right away.

And with AI, you've got the—you can actually build in these pointers of, you know, you can do this with this product. You can open up an order, you can check on a customer status using AI.

So, we found it actually makes workers much more productive because they're not having to manually search, they're not having to ask other people for reports. They can actually use AI to help guide them to the places that they need to get to.

Section 5: Being a Woman in Manufacturing

[8:27] Jessica: Okay, that sounds great. Tell me about being a woman in manufacturing. I think manufacturing is usually more dominated by men.

[8:36] Terri: Yeah, I've been in manufacturing for about 20 years now, and I would say it's definitely a male-dominated industry. I've been marketing in manufacturing for all of these years, and it hasn't always been easy. It's definitely been a struggle sometimes being the only woman in the room.

And, you know, I have the same stories as other people. When I was very young in my career, as the only woman in the room, people naturally assumed I was the admin, or I was the note-taker, or I was the one taking lunch orders.

So, those are all, you know, kind of smaller things, but over the course of working at a certain place, it kind of gets tiring, you know, after a while. So, I've definitely seen and had to deal with a lot of those types of situations in the workplace.

As well as even within companies I've worked for, there have been glass ceilings where, you know, there are men that are managing literally teams of women, but as a woman, it can be hard to try to break through and get into those managerial roles.

Section 6: Mentorship and Taking Initiative

[9:43] Jessica: So, how have you done it, then?

[9:51] Terri: I've been lucky enough that I've had some great female mentors, you know, in my career, that have given me some great advice about how to present yourself in a room, when you should insert yourself, to not apologize for seeming aggressive—or not even aggressive, but, you know, just assertive.

Jessica: Assertive.

Terri: You know, and making sure that that's not negatively perceived. So, I've had some great mentors. I actually have been mentoring women myself because I think it does take someone to kind of guide you and give you those hints of, "How do you manage a room when you're the only woman among 40 men?" And how do you do that in a way that isn't making fun of yourself, you know, it puts yourself in a good light, but then also puts everyone else at ease as well?

So, I've had a lot of help along the way to really guide and give me advice to try to overcome those obstacles.

[10:47] Jessica: Now, have you had opportunities where you see a need and you just take the initiative to lead?

Terri: I have, I have, and I've had that opportunity. You have to have the right management above you that will empower you to do that. And I've been lucky enough to work at organizations—Epicor is one of them—where they really encourage people to, if you see a problem, say something. If you want to fix something, then step up and fix it, and you're empowered to do so.

And you don't feel like you're going to get your hands slapped or that you're getting sucked into some sort of political thing, you know, with someone else. Here, it's very equitable, and that if you see something that's unfair or you want to help someone that is deserving, you know...

Section 7: Building an Inclusive Company Culture

[11:36] Terri: Then that's something that you can definitely take your own initiative and do.

Jessica: That sounds like a great culture. How did that come about? Is it a top leadership-down, or how is the culture?

[11:50] Terri: Yeah, I would say it does start at the top. In fact, when I first joined Epicor, because I had run into a lot of issues around, you know, the glass ceiling and not feeling like I was able to move my career, certainly when I was looking at other companies, I was looking at, you know, who's on your executive team? Are there women on your executive

team? Is there diversity in your executive team?

And I was pleased when I was interviewing at the time at Epicor and I saw all of those things. In fact, at the time I was reporting to the Chief Marketing Officer, who was a woman.

So, it was good to see women in not just marketing roles, but in sales roles, in support roles, consulting as well. So, that was really important for me to see that diversity and to see that representation.

And so, that was one of the things that I definitely looked at when I came to Epicor.

Section 8: Addressing Workplace Bias and Challenges

[12:38] Jessica: Do you still face challenges now?

[12:47] Terri: The challenges never go away, Jessica, the challenges never go away. But I think that we are now able to talk about them more openly. Perhaps before, you know, instead of a side conversation with your other female colleague, I think that the workplace has opened up enough that you can have a conversation with, you know, perhaps a male colleague who said something as a joke, but maybe isn't funny to you, or may come across as sexist or offensive.

I think that the workplace has opened up enough that you can have frank conversations with people and not have to worry about retaliation or people getting upset or offended.

I think people genuinely want to do better, and they're appreciative when you can point out areas that maybe they weren't even conscious of that perhaps offended other people.

Jessica: Right, right. I think we all have that unconscious bias, and that's good. I mean, I do agree with you. I think a lot of people may not be aware, so when you point it out, it makes them realize that, and they can try to behave better.

Terri: Exactly. Exactly.

Jessica: Great. Well, this has been a great conversation, Terri, about the innovation...

[14:03] Jessica: You're bringing to the manufacturing shops, the career tips that you provide for women in manufacturing. What are you looking forward to after we are over with this pandemic?

[14:12] Terri: Oh gosh, I'm really looking forward to seeing our customers in person again. We've had a lot of video chats, video conferences, but I miss being able to connect with our customers in person, being able to walk on their floors and see what's going on. So, definitely looking forward to those in-person visits again.

[14:29] Jessica: There you have it, folks. Tech It Up with Jessica Ly. Terri Hiskey from Epicor Software.

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