EXPERT PERSPECTIVE: OWNERSHIP STARTS BEFORE GO-LIVE

Why the Most Important Automation Decisions Are Made Before Design Begins

Featuring Jaime Townsend, Director of System Design and Simulation

When organizations begin exploring warehouse automation, the conversation often starts with equipment. Leaders discuss AS/RS systems, goods-to-person technologies, robotics, and conveyors. But according to Jaime Townsend, those conversations can start in the wrong place.

"The question shouldn't be what technology do we need," says Townsend. "The question should be what problem are we trying to solve and what outcome are we trying to achieve?"

For Townsend, successful automation isn't defined by the equipment selected or whether a project launches on time. It's defined by whether the operation can sustain performance long after go-live.

That starts by involving the right people much earlier in the process.

The Disconnect Between Design and Operations

One of the most common challenges Townsend sees is a disconnect between the teams designing a solution and the teams responsible for operating it every day.

Corporate stakeholders are often focused on network strategy, ROI, and growth objectives. Meanwhile, operators, supervisors, and site leaders are focused on executing the work and managing day-to-day performance.

Too often, those operational voices enter the conversation after key decisions have already been made.

Townsend believes that operational teams should be involved throughout the entire lifecycle from requirements gathering and design reviews to testing, commissioning, and go-live readiness.

"When we talk about automation, we're not just changing technology," he explains. "We're changing the way people work. Manual processes often need to adapt alongside automation, and those impacts need to be understood early."

Think Beyond the Bottleneck

Many organizations approach automation with a specific pain point in mind. A pick area may be struggling to keep pace with demand. An inbound process may be creating delays. A sortation area may be operating at capacity.

While those challenges are real, Townsend cautions against viewing automation through the lens of a single bottleneck.

"PREVENT OURSELVES FROM HAVING A SUBSYSTEM-BASED CONVERSATION AND HAVE A SYSTEM-BASED CONVERSATION."

Improving one area of an operation can create unexpected impacts elsewhere. Increasing throughput in one process may expose limitations upstream or downstream if the broader system isn't considered.

For that reason, Townsend advocates evaluating automation decisions within the context of the entire operation not just the area creating the most immediate pain.

"What are the operational impacts upstream? What are the operational impacts downstream?"

Organizations that take this approach are often able to uncover opportunities that extend beyond solving a single problem and create greater long-term value.

WHY IT MATTERS

The most successful automation projects dont start with equipment selection. They start with understanding the operational problem, validating the data, and aligning the people who will ultimately own the solution.

1. DEFINE

Align the operation before the solution.

- Define business and operational objectives
- Establish success metrics and performance expectations
- Identify operational constraints and risks
- Align stakeholders around ownership responsibilities

2. DESIGN

Build for operational reality, not ideal conditions.

- Evaluate impacts across the entire operation
- Design for maintainability and long-term support
- Validate operational assumptions with real-world data
- Balance performance, flexibility, and lifecycle value

4. SUSTAIN

Protect performance long after go-live.

- Establish reliability and maintenance routines
- Drive continuous improvement initiatives
- Manage system performance and operational risk
- Plan for upgrades, modernization, and future growth

3. PREPARE

Equip people, processes, and technology for success.

- Train and prepare operational teams
- Develop documentation and standard operating procedures
- Establish ramp-up and support plans
- Ensure readiness across people, process, and technology

Data Tells the Story

Another common challenge occurs when organizations move too quickly into solution design without first validating the data behind their assumptions.

Key inputs include:

- **SKU characteristics and profiles**
- **Order volumes and order patterns**
- **Growth projections**
- **Inventory requirements**
- **Throughput expectations**

The quality of those inputs directly impacts the quality of the solution.

"If the business case depends on future growth, the data needs to support it," Townsend says. "The goal isn't to design the biggest solution possible. It's to design the right solution for the problem you're solving."

Go-Live Is a Transition, Not a Finish Line

Many automation projects celebrate go-live as the finish line.

Townsend sees it differently.

The period immediately following launch is often where operational ownership becomes most important. New processes are being adopted, teams are learning new ways of working, and performance expectations are beginning to meet reality.

A successful launch depends on more than equipment performance. It requires training, documentation, ramp-up planning, and organizational readiness.

The organizations that perform best after go-live are often the ones that planned for that transition long before implementation began.

JAIME'S OPERATIONAL OWNERSHIP PRINCIPLES

- Include **operators, supervisors, and site leaders** throughout the project lifecycle.
- **Define the business challenge** and desired outcome before discussing technology.
- Consider upstream and downstream impacts, **not just individual bottlenecks.**
- **Use operational data** and realistic growth assumptions to guide design.
- **Training, documentation, support, and ramp-up planning** are as important as the technology itself.