

AUGUST 2020

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LEADERSHIP



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## M A G A Z I N E

### Leadership

Leadership is the foundation of a successful business. There's an art/philosophy to it, but there's also a science/method to leadership. In this issue, we explore both sides of leadership and its impact in the electronics industry and beyond.

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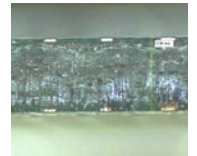


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# Navigating the Challenges of the New Normal

**Feature by Kevin Jobsky**  
ICM CONTROLS

Stroll out onto the manufacturing floor at ICM Controls, and it appears to be business as usual. The bustling activity of employees and the sounds of their voices reaching out over the constant hum of the board shop and assembly equipment is a clear indicator that production is in full swing at the facility in North Syracuse, New York.

Take a closer look, however, and you'll realize the many subtle changes implemented throughout the factory from just a few short months ago that serve as a constant reminder of how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the workplace and how business is done—possibly forever.

Workers now don masks, and an attempt has clearly been made to space people out to meet social distancing guidelines—not an easy task in a manufacturing facility designed for worker efficiency. Separation barriers have been installed between work areas to limit exposure to each other. Sanitizing stations and floor stickers adorn the hallways, with notices on the

walls that remind us all to avoid touching our face area and to stay six feet apart. Even before employees leave home for work, they are asked to check their temperatures and to not come in if they show signs of a fever.

Welcome to the new normal.

Fortunately for ICM Controls, a captive shop turned contract manufacturer at the onset of the pandemic, the company was declared to be essential and allowed to remain operational early on by New York State—albeit with restrictions on the number of employees that could physically be in the building at any one time. Being able to keep our doors open afforded us the luxury to prepare ourselves and our facility in real-time, giving us a head start over others that had to wait to reopen their doors.

Even so, a multitude of challenges still lays ahead—more far-reaching than sourcing hand sanitizers and masks—that ICM Controls must successfully navigate if it hopes to come out on the other side of this pandemic with only a handful of minor battle scars. Undoubtedly, there are many companies—large and small—that will not be so fortunate.





Masked worker filing away a large stack of recently manufactured bare boards for a large OEM customer, prior to the boards moving on to assembly. It is just one of several shelving areas throughout the board shop/auto assembly area.

As government leaders ease restrictions, a mountain of uncertainty looms that local businesses must contend with if they hope to survive, let alone prosper. Everyone wants a speedy recovery and, based on the recent jobs report, companies are betting on it. But those who believe that companies can simply “flip a switch” to turn the economy back on and “everything will revert back to business as usual” are being naïve.

Over the next few months, companies of all sizes will routinely be required to make pivotal decisions concerning a web of complex personnel, operational, and supply chain challenges that will have a significant impact on not just their operations, but also those of their customers and their customers. Companies with multiple locations, or those that do business in multiple states and multiple countries, will be tested even more. These decisions collectively

will largely determine just how fast the U.S. economy is able to bounce back.

States and countries around the world are opening on their own timetables and with their own guidelines and restrictions. This discontinuity can wreak havoc on buying and forecasting decisions. A company’s customer base may be fully operational in one state, but restricted to 50% capacity in another, and their customer base may be experiencing the same. Worse yet, some customers may have been forced to shut their doors forever—a non-human statistical casualty of COVID-19.

These uncertainties, if prolonged, can lead to an operational paralysis and alter a factory’s production schedule and how fast it elects to bring back its employees. Conversely, a diverse company that supports several manufacturing disciplines from PCB/A to turn-key and branded product solutions may sense a surge in demand and decide to “go all-in” and invite its entire workforce back as soon as it was allowed.

In doing so, however, HR teams had to overcome multiple challenges. With local schools and some area daycare centers still closed, it made it difficult—even impossible—for some parents of young children to come back, even when they wanted to. Some were brought back on adjusted shift schedules. There were others that simply refused to come back out of concern for their health and well-being and/or because they are making more on unemployment (at least through July).

Recruiting new employees presented its own set of challenges as well. We prefer to recruit directly versus using an agency and typically conduct in-person first interviews. The natural alternative would be to move to virtual interviews, but not all candidates have the necessary computer skills or equipment to participate in a virtual interview.

HR and operations are not the only departments that have had to deal with the fallout of the lockdown. Many sales and marketing initiatives have been left in limbo or have been adjusted to comply with various travel and visitor restrictions that, again, differ from state to state and customer to customer. Improv-

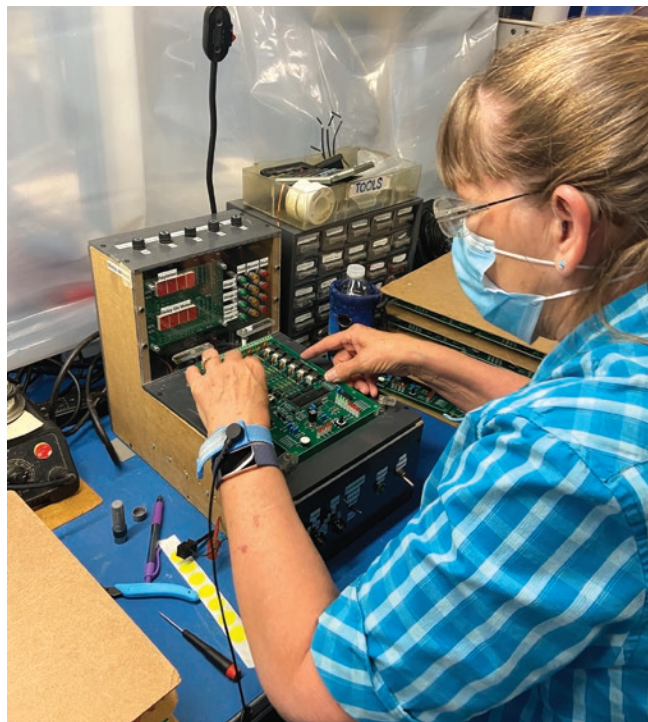
ing guidelines and restrictions remains fluid, keeping would-be business travelers in a state of flux. This, in turn, makes budgeting decisions that much more difficult. How long does a company wait before it decides to redirect monies to a certainty?

As noted previously, we made a conscious decision earlier this year to enter the world of contract manufacturing. The decision had little to do with—but was definitely sped up by—the onset of the pandemic, as the company advertised its services to other manufacturers in need. Among some of the sales and marketing strategies planned to promote its new initiative, our company registered to attend/exhibit at several trade shows. As the pandemic widened, these trade shows were either canceled or postponed and have remained that way today.

In the early days of the pandemic, it was the Biogen Leadership Conference held at the Boston Marriott Long Wharf Hotel that led to 77 of the first 95 reported COVID-19 cases in Massachusetts. There were a sparse 175 registered attendees at the event. Some of the shows we planned to attend draw 60,000+ attendees annually.

Additionally, we're getting ready to launch several new branded products later this summer and early fall. In keeping to schedule, ICM Controls has had to resort to less effective video conferencing and virtual training strategies to educate its sales force on the new product offerings. Sales and marketing have essentially had to rethink and retool its product roll-out strategies overnight.

Of even greater concern are the lingering questions over the health of the supply chain. Will OEMs that pushed out orders at the height of the pandemic suddenly request to expedite those orders upon their reopening? For us, in some cases, it has been yes, but not in other cases. This can result in scheduling nightmares to ensure timely deliveries of components, as well as getting machine time on the production floor. Do companies override their ERP models to purchase excess material to build up inventory at the risk of the country falling into a prolonged economic slump?



Worker tests a control board on the final assembly line.

You'll notice the plastic sheet that divides/protects/shelters her workspace from the person who sits across from her. ICM Controls now has plastic dividers like this throughout the final assembly area.

Pulling the trigger too fast could put too many unwanted products on the shelf. Wait too long to order parts, and you might run into a component shortage from everyone else trying to buy at once, resulting in exceptionally long lead times that might force your customers to turn elsewhere for products.

Throughout the lockdown, we worked closely with our key suppliers and OEM customers on forecasting and scheduling. In many cases, OEMs struggled and could only guestimate demand and how quickly their production lines would ramp back up to full capacity. Everyone remains optimistic as they try to gain visibility several extra steps down the supply chain, but no one is certain.

Compounding the issue is whether there will be a change in consumer confidence when states fully reopen. Prior to the lockdown, consumer confidence was strong. Unemployment was low. Families were spending money freely and buying new to replace the old. Consumer confidence plummeted in April but appeared



to steady itself in May. Today, many key economic indicators remain strong, bolstered by the May jobs report, but is this a “head fake” devoid of realism?

We are of the mindset of “going bold” because there might not be a tomorrow. This strategy recently paid off on multiple occasions, as the company was able to secure new business when competitors were unable to deliver products due to supply chain issues stemming from the pandemic. In another instance, a major OEM brought ICM Controls into their fold to comply with a strategic shift in their supply chain philosophy that now mandates all purchased components to be multi-sourced, with at least one source being domestic. Other OEMs are considering following suit.

The reopening of the country is going to be a long process that will consist of many stages and subplots. It is estimated that 70–80% of the nation’s small businesses and services are already operational to some degree. Even so, many companies—especially manufacturers—will be required to completely rethink their short- and long-term business plans. We are only at the beginning of stage one of reopening, which addresses immediate concerns in order to help shore up the bottom line.

Stage two won’t be for another 6–12 months when companies begin to take a long, hard look at where and how they purchase goods and adjust their policies in order to mitigate risk to their supply chain. We went through this exercise a year or two before amidst the trade war with China, as we did not want to be overexposed to any one region. We started working with major OEMs to qualify critical components from a variety of sources all over the world. This forward-thinking has the company operating today from a position of strength.

Further out, stage three will be largely based on the decisions made in stage two and be tied to a company’s 3–5 year business plan, but could very well shape the way manufac-



turing looks in the future. This decision will be especially critical for larger companies that not only outsource work to China but have also invested monies and resources in facilities in China to capitalize on cheaper labor rates.

The accelerating political discord between the United States and China may wind up playing a major role in this decision-making process. Both countries have been at odds over the past two years due to the trade war, Hong Kong, and now the pandemic. Businesses with exposure to China must already contend with supply chain

disruptions due to the Chinese New Year, but planning around a single annual annoyance is far easier than dealing with a constant array of unexpected policy shifts and shutdowns. At some point, companies must ask themselves if it is worth it.

As we move forward, economic success will depend on how companies are able to maintain compliance and respond to ever-changing guidelines and executive orders from each state and each country. Smaller or vertically integrated companies can adopt internal policies that tend to be more fluid because they can pivot more easily and react faster to change.

Large conglomerates, on the other hand, must prepare themselves with multiple action plans to handle almost any scenario in order to enact policy change over their entire enterprise in a timely manner, which is not an easy task. Then again, nothing in the post-COVID-19 business world is.

The one certainty, however, is that domestic contract manufacturers will be ready to help with their transition should these companies decide to bring the work back home. **PCB007**



**Kevin Jobsky** is senior marketing manager at ICM Controls.