



YOU CAN'T MANAGE TODAY'S VOLATILITY WITH YESTERDAY'S THINKING

Manufacturers that identify and manage their true operational constraints are better positioned to handle disruption, says **Alan Lothian**, Director of 3A Business Excellence Limited (3ABEL).

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Alan Lothian – Director, 3ABEL

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What is the biggest disruptor you are seeing on UK factory floors right now?

Ongoing volatility and uncertainty, particularly around demand fluctuation, cost pressure and workforce stability. Many manufacturers are no longer operating in a predictable environment, yet a large number still rely on planning, systems and behaviours that assume stability.

This creates frequent firefighting: expediting, rescheduling, missed delivery promises and pressure on people. The challenge isn't just external disruption; it's the gap between reality and the skills required to manage that reality. Those with lean embedded in their operating model are coping far better in these uncertain times.

What is one quick win SMEs can implement to improve their operational resilience?

Identify and manage the true constraint in your business. Many companies attempt to improve everything at once, which usually leads to more work in progress, more firefighting and less control.

The key is to understand where flow is genuinely being limited. This is not always the busiest machine or department, but the point where work consistently queues, deadlines slip or management attention is repeatedly drawn. Following the work, observing where decisions are delayed and noting where expediting focuses will usually reveal the real constraint.

Once identified, protect it, prioritise work through it and stop releasing more work than it can handle. This focus alone often delivers immediate improvements in delivery performance and stability.

We hear a lot about AI and automation, but where do you believe the human element remains most critical in modern manufacturing?

The human element remains most critical in problem-solving, judgement and leadership behaviours. Technology can process data and automate tasks, but it cannot replace ownership, accountability or the

ability to think systemically.

The biggest gains still come from engaged teams who understand their processes and are encouraged to improve them.

AI can highlight issues, but people decide what matters

and how to act. Sustainable improvement is fundamentally human.

If you could give a subcontractor one piece of advice on how to remain a preferred partner for major OEMs, what would it be?

Become relentlessly reliable. OEMs value suppliers who consistently do what they say they will do, especially in uncertain conditions. That means focusing on delivery performance, transparency and early problem escalation rather than short-term price discussions. The most trusted subcontractors understand their processes, know their constraints and invest in developing their people. Trust, once built, is very hard to replace.

What is the one conversation you are most looking forward to having at Subcon 2026?

I'm most looking forward to conversations about what's genuinely getting in the way of improvement inside their businesses, beyond tools and buzzwords. Leaders often know what methods exist but struggle with execution, behaviour change and sustaining momentum. Open, practical conversations about real challenges – not theory – are where the most meaningful learning happens.

SEE THEM AT SUBCON

THE MANUFACTURING INSIGHTS THEATRE

WEDNESDAY 3RD JUNE | 1:40PM - 2:40PM
SESSION: PANEL DISCUSSION: Why Lean Goes Wrong... and How to Avoid It!

THURSDAY 4TH JUNE | 10:40AM - 11:20AM
SESSION: PANEL DISCUSSION: LinkedIn is telling me to go 'all in' on Digital Manufacturing, should I?