

LEAN & MEAN

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Lean manufacturing has boosted productivity, profitability, and minimised waste. We speak to Russell Watkins, co-founder of Sempai, and Alan Lothian, director of 3A Business Excellence, about the evolution of lean practices – and share insights from their podcast, The Rest is Lean

A cultural shift in business operations

Russell Watkins' journey into lean manufacturing began 30 years ago, long before he co-founded Sempai 20 years ago. Originally focused on consultancy, Sempai has evolved into a training and coaching company dedicated to helping manufacturers, from small businesses to large enterprises, make lean practices a daily part of their operations. With the launch of their online platform, Sempai Guide, Russell and his team have helped businesses optimise their processes.

Alan Lothian, on the other hand, brings over 30 years of experience in the manufacturing sector. After holding senior leadership roles and managing business improvement projects, Lothian founded 3A Business Excellence in 2010. His company offers a variety of services, including lean manufacturing training, interim recruitment, and lean accounting. Lothian emphasises the need for businesses to focus on the future, helping them not only improve their operations but also create a resilient, forward-thinking culture. Both Watkins and Lothian were trained by the same Japanese master engineer from Toyota Japan who, in turn, was trained by Taiichi Ohno himself, the father of the Toyota production system.

Watkins and Lothian agree on the importance of shifting the mindset of businesses to embrace lean practices for long-term success. As Lothian puts it, "It's about getting the right thing from A to B as quickly as you can without hurting anybody. It's not just about moving physical products; it's about optimising any flow, whether it's a product or information meaning

that lean can be successfully applied in both manufacturing and non-manufacturing environments such as project management, customer services, or even new product introduction!"

The power of lean tools and techniques

A common challenge in implementing lean practices is identifying the right tools for the job. Watkins explains that the most effective lean tool is the one that directly addresses the specific problem a business is facing. While some companies may rush into applying popular techniques like 5S or standardised work processes, these may not always be the most appropriate solution. "The first question you ask is: what problem are you trying to solve?" Watkins notes. "Lean is not about applying a one-size-fits-all solution." Building on that, Lothian adds, "The application of 1dxean should be seen as a model not a script!"

Lothian highlights the importance of recognising and eliminating waste – what lean practitioners call the "seven wastes." In some circles, this has expanded to the "eight wastes," adding the ineffective

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3A Business Excellence

utilisation of skills and talent to the list. For Lothian, it's not just about identifying inefficiencies, but also about changing mindsets – helping employees develop the ability to spot waste, solve problems, and seize opportunities in their everyday work. "It's about teaching people to spot waste and create a culture where they can solve problems and capitalise on opportunities," Lothian explains.

Watkins adds that his favourite lean technique is SMED (Single-Minute Exchange of Die), a method used to reduce machine setup times. "I love doing SMED activities. It's a great way to reduce inventory and improve flow through the factory he says.

Overcoming common pitfalls in lean transformations

While lean manufacturing offers substantial benefits, the road to successful implementation is fraught with challenges. One of the most common pitfalls, according to Lothian, is the tendency for businesses to apply lean principles without understanding the underlying need. "Some companies just want to implement 5S because it's a buzzword," he says. "But without understanding why you're doing it and how it links to the business strategy, it's unlikely to stick."

Watkins echoes this sentiment, emphasising that leadership commitment is crucial for a successful lean transformation. "Leadership has to be hands-on, involved, and committed to making lean work," he says. "It's not enough to just hire consultants and expect change. Leaders need to be engaged in the process and actively work with their teams."

A common mistake businesses make is measuring the wrong things. Lothian points out that if companies use traditional accounting methods, they may inadvertently drive behaviours that are counterproductive to lean principles. "Measuring efficiency in terms of unit costs without considering the flow of value can lead to poor operational decisions," he explains.

The role of podcasting in lean education

In an age of digital content, Watkins and Lothian have embraced podcasting as a way to share their expertise and engage with a wider audience. Their podcast The Rest is Lean, hosted along with their fellow expert John Dee of Dee Enterprise Excellence, provides a platform for discussing the real-world challenges and successes of implementing lean practices. The podcast is not just for seasoned professionals but also caters to those

new to the concept of lean manufacturing.

Watkins explains that the goal of the podcast is to offer an informal, accessible space where listeners can learn from their experiences. "We try to keep it simple and honest," he says. "We're not academics. We talk about what we've done, the mistakes we've made, and how we've solved problems. It's not about being formal or scripted. It's about being real."

The podcast also addresses common concerns, such as how to make lean work when it hasn't been successful in the past. As Lothian puts it, "We get a lot of listeners who have tried lean before and failed. They ask us, 'How do we make it stick?' and we try to offer practical advice based on our experiences."

Lean in the age of uncertainty

One area where lean can have a significant impact is in workforce development. Watkins notes that there is a growing need to recruit talent from diverse pools, including former offenders, ex-military personnel, and women returning to the workforce after a career break. "There are so many untapped resources that could bring valuable skills to the manufacturing sector," he says.

Lothian, meanwhile, highlights the need for more support for SMEs. "SMEs are the backbone of the UK economy, but they often don't get the recognition or support they deserve," he says. "There needs to be more balance in the way financial and skill development support is currently distributed between SMEs and large blue-chip companies."

Both agree that lean manufacturing has the potential to strengthen supply chains, making them more resilient in the face of global challenges. "Lean is about creating a supply chain that's strong and efficient," Lothian explains. "It's not just about the OEMs; it's about the strength of the entire supply chain, and that's something we need to focus on more in the UK."



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4 JUNE | 10:45 – 11:05

SESSION: Eyes on the prize – how eye tracking is a digital manufacturing game changer for SOPs

4 JUNE | 13:40 – 14:00

SESSION: Building a strong manufacturing team – stop focusing on the wrong things

ALAN LOTHIAN & RUSSELL WATKINS

5 JUNE | 10:25 – 11:10

SESSION: Sustaining growth through people & process (and how to make it stick!) (panel)

ALAN LOTHIAN

5 JUNE | 15:45 – 16:30

SESSION: Lean manufacturing – improvements and the transformation of processes (panel)