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## Sharing skills: how to enhance the supplier-industrial baker relationship to address the baking industry challenges

*“The baking industry has a lot on its plate in 2022” said Robb MacKie, American Bakers Association (ABA)’s President and CEO. End 2021, he clearly emphasized five strategies that are imperatives in 2022 to address the current baking industry challenges. Among these challenges, two in particular caught the attention of Olivier SERGENT, MECATHERM’s President, a reference equipment supplier in the sector: **supply chain tension and labor shortages**. For him, the solution mainly lies in the creation of a more intimate relationship between industrial bakers and their suppliers and the extension of skills sharing. To support this proximity and enable anticipation, it becomes essential for industrial bakers to equip themselves with appropriate digital tools as well as to keep a “real” geographical proximity with their suppliers. This new way of working would allow to increase the value of the employees’ work in the field, thus contributing to further adapting workforce strategies for the future.*

### Supply chain and human resources in tension



Since the pandemic, industrial bakers are experiencing supply chain tension and difficulty in obtaining raw materials. But as the dust settles and the lessons begin to be learned in a meaningful way, everyone is reminded that employees remain the company's most valuable resource. In fact, in the U.S. alone, 12,000 positions are currently open in the industry. It would be easy to repeat like a mantra that companies need to hire, train and

retain talent. But for many, this would sound like wishful thinking or even a structural impossibility. Not everyone can afford to have specialized technicians on every piece of equipment and for every machine in their plant.

For Olivier SERGENT, the last months have revealed with great acuteness that two factors are essential for a company's growth: the supplier and the personnel. For him, these two levers can be mutually activated by the implementation of an increasingly intimate operational relationship between the supplier and the manufacturer. *“The border between the two must become porous so that the competencies can pass freely and quickly between the supplier and the industrial baker”* he explains.

“At MECATHERM, we believe that digital tools allowing this exchange of competencies and a geographical proximity are equally necessary to overcome the challenges that the baking industry is facing” he completes.

Another answer is robotics of course, and it has definitely gained relevance. Thanks to its partnership with ABI Inc, another subsidiary of the TMG group, MECATHERM is also in a position to provide solutions for the automation of certain tasks, in particular the most strenuous ones.

### **Anticipation for higher safety, efficiency and profitability**

When operating complex equipment, operators happen to face unexpected events. This can generate stress, losses, inefficiencies and potential physical risks. By anticipating these events (breakdown, quality issues, loss of performance), digital tools give the operator the possibility of preparing its intervention in the best conditions: calm, safety, efficiency.

How to anticipate? Adequate software solutions, developed by MaMaTa, delivers the right information at the right time to the right person in an intuitive way. Indeed, too much information might have a negative impact and generate stress and lack of understanding. By getting warnings in advance, the operator is given time to prepare its operations. Preparation is based on information available inside the digital tool but can as well be completed by the supplier who receives at the same time the exact same warning. At the end, the identified problem will be solved safely, efficiently, in a cost-effective way, to the benefit of the operator himself, and ultimately contributing to a better profitability.



However, it is important that the equipment supplier remains available, even remotely. “For over two years, companies were limited in their travels to their customers” explains Olivier SERGENT. “We therefore found necessary to speed up the development and implementation of digital tools that allow, despite the distance, precise support and interventions on the installed equipment.”



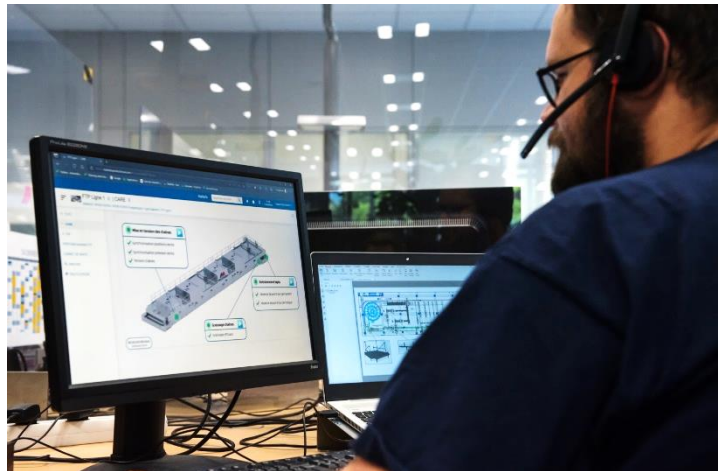
For instance, here is an industrial baker who received a notification indicating a lubrication problem on their production line. Firstly, digital tools have enabled the technician to identify the drift and provided guidance to easily and quickly make the first necessary checks. Then MECATHERM's technicians were able to guide the operators, step by step until the problem was solved. “All this remotely, within an hour and without stopping production” adds Olivier SERGENT. This

example, among many others, illustrates the importance for the supplier to be in the technician's toolbox. This is made possible by the immediate connection enabled by the digital technology put in the operator's hands by the supplier itself.

### **An intimate relationship at all levels**

Until now, in order to get information from the supplier, a technician had to go through several intermediaries, from his company to the level authorized to contact them. The supplier also had to go through two or three middlemen before obtaining the answer from the most capable technician. The information then had to go through the same path again to finally reach the person who needed it. The loss of time and efficiency is undeniable.

With precise digital tools that alert in real time the appropriate technician at the supplier's, the operator can grow in autonomy and efficiency by putting them in direct contact with the most qualified person on the supplier side.



*“This implies a relationship between the manufacturer and the supplier at all levels and not only from executive management to executive management. It is only on this condition that skills can be freely passed on from the supplier to the industrial baker”* insists Olivier SERGENT. *“I like to compare this relationship to a zipper. It holds together as long as all its teeth are interlocked, not just the top two!”* he adds.

However, a clarification must be made here. These digital tools should not make us forget a major principle that is equally true for any organization. It is absolutely necessary for people to be as close as possible to the problems they have to solve. This is crucial to the efficiency and quality of the work done. Remote work and automation, presented as the lone solution to labor shortages, is based on the notion that most human work is abstract or conceptual. This is far to be always the case. *“A technician must have his hands on his machine, he must sense the vibrations, feel the temperature, see the motions. Digital technology cannot and should not replace this”* insists Mr. SERGENT.

### **An optimized geographical proximity**

The geographical proximity of MECATHERM with its customers is thus a priority and its capacity to deploy competent personnel at their plants will only increase, in particular with its growing presence in North America. *“Let's remember that digital tools are not there to compensate for a geographical distance, but on the contrary to allow an even more intelligent and optimized use of this proximity to which MECATHERM is committed”* says Olivier SERGENT. Through technology, industrial bakers have the possibility to receive the right support, at the right place, at the right time. Thus, by giving more autonomy to their technicians and by putting intelligent tools in their hands, the industrial baker will considerably add value to the work of their employees.

## Autonomy to enhance the value of human work



The workforce issues must encourage the industry to value the work and make it more attractive, while compensating for the lack of personnel. Both of these requirements can be met with the use of the latest technology. Human work will be all the more human as these tools will give operators the time to perform tasks that only they can accomplish. Anticipation, strategy and decision are acts of human reason and they must remain so. In

addition, the direct relationship between the field worker and the equipment supplier enhances this autonomy and allows for the empowerment of personnel. In this way, they will be valued in their decision making.

The challenges facing industrial bakers are manifold. To face them, digital technology must be thought as a means to strengthen the relationship with their equipment supplier and thus value the labor of the workers in the plants all the more. *“At MECATHERM, our vision is that it is only by putting this technology at the service of human relations and labor, that it will have all its meaning and appeal”* Mr. SERGENT concludes.

Read more at : [Five Baking Industry Imperatives for 2022](#)