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Adapting automation to your operation

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Our industry is composed of a diverse membership that has in common the purpose to cultivate ornamental plant products for use as landscape plants. Due to this diversity, the challenge of integrating automation can be problematic. In my role, I interact with a wide community of representatives of nurseries in an effort to improve the sustainability of each nursery operation. In order to succeed, we need to overcome barriers that may be related to financial constraints, limitations related to existing practices, and challenges associated with existing facilities. I view this opportunity to address this topic as an open door to share key aspects to address in relieving barriers to improve the efficiency of production systems.

KEY MESSAGES

1. Realize a need to automate. If the need is sufficient, there will likely be enough resources applied to the effort to result in a favorable outcome.
 - a. Labor can be a trigger to automate. Availability, cost, and ultimately the “quality” of labor is changing
 - b. Creating a more comfortable work environment can be a driver in this process.
 - c. Product quality and uniformity expectations apply pressure on growers to automate.
 - d. Pressure to increase revenue with a limited production area may require process adjustments.
 - e. Customer demands for product packaging, labeling, or unique product structure may encourage automation.
2. Be systematic about how you apply the automation resources. Go through a process to identify the areas of the annual growing operation that are likely to present the best rewards.
3. Consider buy-in for different members of the organization and seek support and commitment to succeed with this process in advance.
4. Consider the value proposition of automating. How will a prospective process impact the organization both positively and negatively.
5. Have the right perspective in mind when placing emphasis on the prospective purchase aspects of automation. For example, apply much more emphasis on the benefit side of the equation as compared to the cost side of the equation.
6. Part of the process is to anticipate prospective return on investment. I caution people not to get overly complicated with this step because there will always be variables, the key is to be realistic and apply reason and logic to the process.
7. Place emphasis on the pre-planning. Be considerate of traffic lanes, creating process buffers and reasonable work flow expectations.
8. Once committed, don’t look back. Apply resources necessary to make process adjustments to optimize the performance of the new system.

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