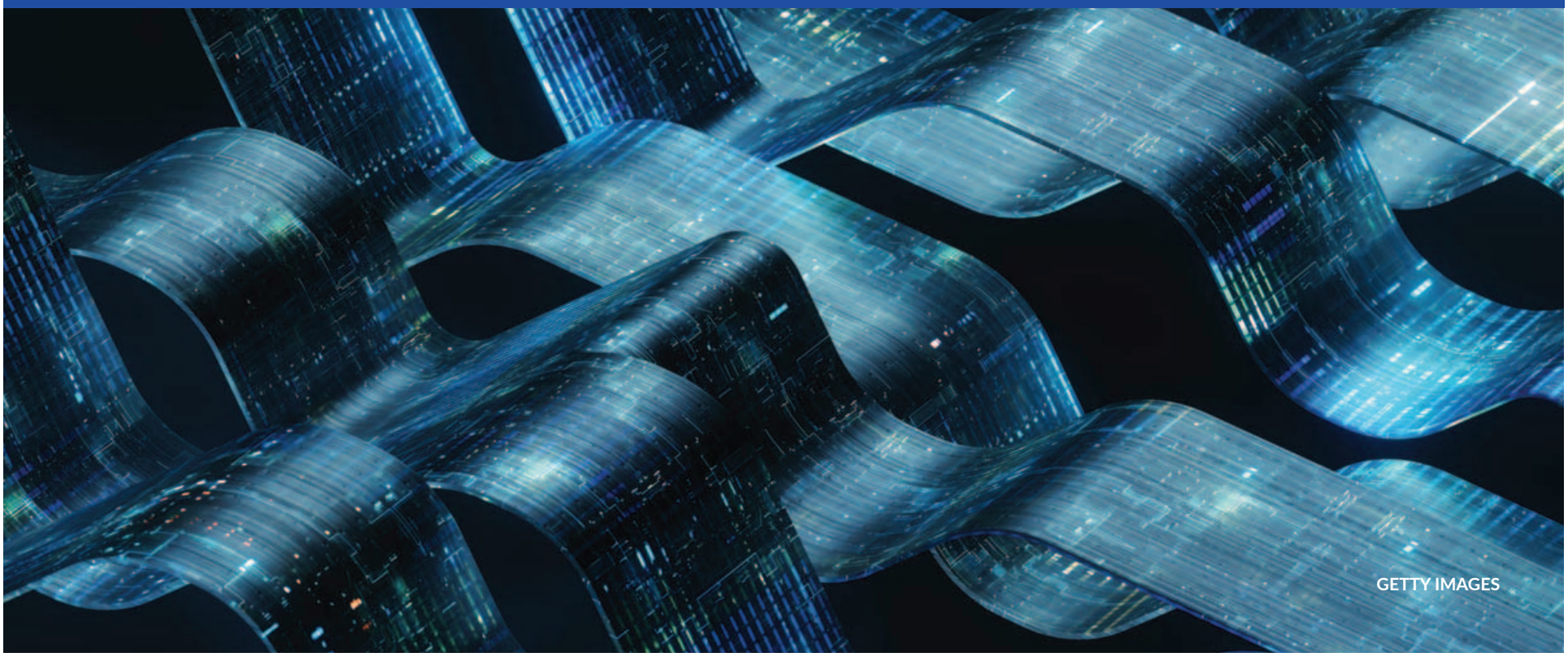
How AI, automation and data can be deployed to drive better decision-making

Artificial intelligence, automation and cybersecurity are being integrated into everyday workflow and operations in businesses across the board, especially in manufacturing. How organizations make use of their data from the back office to the production line to improve performance, reduce risk and stay competitive was the topic of a forum organized by the Cincinnati Business Courier. The event featured a panel of local experts in technology and performance:

JOE BROWN, Manufacturing and Distribution and Operational Excellence Leader, Clark Schaefer Consulting
MATT MCKEE, Vice President, Solutions Architect, DartPoints
GLENN PLUNKETT, Technology Leader, Clark Schaefer Consulting
ALICIA SNIDER, chief financial officer, Riley Decker Cos.



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MEET THE EXPERTS

JOE BROWN
Manufacturing & Distribution and Operational Excellence Leader
Clark Schaefer Consulting

Joe is Managing Director at Clark Schaefer Consulting, leading the Operational Excellence practice with deep expertise in manufacturing and distribution. With a mechanical-engineering background and MBA, he specializes in Lean, Six Sigma, supply chain optimization and growth strategies for heavily-regulated industries including aerospace, medical devices and industrial tooling.

MATT MCKEE
Vice President, Solutions Architect
DartPoints

Matthew McKee is the Vice President of Solution Architects at DartPoints, where he leads the technical sales organization supporting the company's colocation and cloud portfolio. He helps clients connect business goals with the right infrastructure strategy, guiding them through decisions involving hybrid architectures, private cloud, and edge-ready data center deployments. With more than 20 years of experience in technology sales, advisory, and cross-functional leadership, Matthew has worked with organizations across many industries to adopt emerging technologies, modernize critical workloads, and reduce operational risk. His strength is translating complex technical needs into clear, practical plans that support growth and long-term resilience. Matthew's work centers on helping companies move with confidence—making infrastructure choices that improve performance, control cost, and set the foundation for future innovation.

GLENN PLUNKETT
Technology Leader
Clark Schaefer Consulting

Glenn is a seasoned technology leader at Clark Schaefer Consulting with over 35 years of experience bridging industrial R&D, manufacturing operations and IT. He draws on his electronic-engineering background and deep expertise in analytics, infrastructure and DevOps to guide manufacturers in leveraging data and AI for operational excellence.

ALICIA SNIDER
Chief Financial Officer
Riley Decker Cos.

Alicia Snider is the Chief Financial Officer at Riley Decker Companies, a leading staffing & HR organization. With over 15 years in accounting and finance and six years in staffing, she oversees shared services functions, including HR, payroll, accounting, data, and IT. A passionate advocate for data-driven decisions, Alicia has led the transformation from limited reporting to a culture where data drives strategy. Her team's Power BI tools deliver real-time visibility, streamline reporting, automate audit tracking, and empower leaders to act on facts. Alicia believes data integrity is non-negotiable—reminding teams that "bad data in equals bad data out." She champions clean, reliable data and the responsibility of being an impartial storyteller, knowing that with data comes power and accountability.

DAVID STEPHEN FOR ACBJ

The forum was moderated by Jamie Smith, market president and publisher of the Cincinnati Business Courier, and held Dec. 9 at the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber. He started by quoting up-to-date statistics on AI adoption: 35% of manufacturing firms have integrated AI technologies, primarily for predictive maintenance and quality control; 95% of manufacturers have invested in or plan to invest in either AI or machine learning within the next five years, signaling near universal adoption in the sector; and 80% of manufacturers are exploring AI for operational efficiency and strategic advantage, moving from pilot programs to more enterprise-wide deployment. Locally, the survey found that while some Cincinnati firms are excelling in specialized AI solutions, they lack the scale and integration depth of national leaders that are setting benchmarks with digital twins, robotic automation and AI-driven decision making across entire supply chains.

He asked Brown of Clark Schaefer if local manufacturers were using real-time data on the factory floor to improve efficiency and reduce waste. Brown said all or most of his clients are using it to track real-time safety, quality, delivery and cost data, and have been for a while. “But I think the impact at the floor level is still somewhat careful,” he said. Trust becomes a factor, he said, as leaders are cautious in implementing change in heavily controlled operations.

As organizations continue to collect more data, Smith asked, how do they balance accessibility of it with the need to keep it secure?

Matt McKee of DartPoints said organizations are concerned about controlling their data. “We see more and more evidence that some of the hyperscale platforms, whether they be Amazon or some of the new cloud providers, take speed to market as a preference over stability and security,” he said. The challenge is to create an environment where lots of data is generated and stored securely without being cost-prohibitive.

Following up, Smith asked how to determine what and how much information to gather and store. Matt McKee of DartPoints recommended erring on the side of keeping too much. “Find a way to keep as much data as you create,” he said. “That's part of your intellectual property, part of your company's assets.” AI can then help sift through massive amounts of data to create useful insights. “From an infrastructure perspective, store it all, keep it replicated, back it up, because you can't replace what you lose,” he said.

Alicia Snider of Riley Decker agreed, saying collecting raw data was important so the business can refine their reporting over time and benchmark future performance against historical data. “As your business is evolving, the insights you need from that raw data are also evolving,” she said. Brown differed on this, saying, “I think you definitely can have too much data.” Who sorts out and translates a massive data set and then converts it into action is a key question, he said.

Smith followed up, asking whether the panelists had experienced clients who were hesitant to believe what AI was inferring. Brown said he had, as the question of trust becomes critical. “From an engineering or quality perspective, you may not believe that until you can reproduce the error yourself,” he said.

Smith then asked how AI is transforming predictive maintenance and quality control in manufacturing. Plunkett said the use of digital twins, creating an AI model of machinery or parts that are produced, can digitally simulate the effect of years of wear on a piece of equipment. “That gives you the ability to get in front of your preventive maintenance and be able to more effectively predict what you need to do,” he said. Other options include deploying smart scanners to detect defects and other issues. “Start small and build and add those capabilities as you go,” he suggested. The “silver bullet” for using AI, he said, is smart and effective training. “The more data you have and the more effectively you can train those AI models, that's how you

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>
> **GLENN PLUNKETT**
> Clark Schaefer Consulting

will succeed," he said.

Smith asked Alicia Snider of Riley Decker how finance leaders like her can collaborate with the operations and IT teams to ensure that data investments drive long-term value. She said asking that question of team leaders early should be goal number one. "Then we can all start collaborating on the front end and define the key goals and the workflows needed to get there and figure out what are we actually trying to measure," she said. Plunkett agreed, adding that a common data language was essential for teams to analyze things together.

Smith then turned to the cultural challenges as organizations adopt AI and automation. Brown said changes should be met with a question: "Can I and my team explain this to an auditor? Can I defend it to audit or control internally or externally, and does my team understand it well enough to deploy it and get value from it?" He offered an example of where data-driven decision making significantly improved performance in a high-speed packaging operation, as it used a combination of vision systems and good production data to augment the high-speed lines with the ability to identify suspect material. "They saved a huge amount of time in terms of uptime, capacity and rework," he said.

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> **MATT MCKEE**
> DartPoints

Smith asked about cloud architecture and edge computing and the role they play in enabling faster, smarter decisions. McKee said a key issue is how cloud architecture plays into risk tolerance. "If I suddenly become blind because of a Cloudflare outage, how does that affect my ability to continue production, not just from a velocity perspective, but also from a quality perspective, an inventory perspective, a supply chain perspective," he said. That's one reason his company is investing in an AI-ready data center locally. "We believe the need for AI and high-density workloads locally in market is essential, especially for manufacturing and other real-time environments," he said.

Smith asked what technologies are most critical for integrating back-office data with production. Plunkett replied that data curation, data integration and data visualization products are critical. Some vendors are creating turnkey systems. "If you're not implementing SCADA (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition) on your factory floor in one form or another, you want to consider that," he said. "How do you consolidate data in a way that you can use it, and then how do you present it in a way that is useful to everyone? That's how you drive that back-office insight," he said.

Smith asked Snider about financial risks for companies that fail to properly govern and protect their data. She urged companies to know what data they have and to understand the security risks of not housing your own data. She also recommended understanding the vendors and knowing where their responsibility lies. Make sure internal data governance policies are clearly defined and documented, so teams understand how to responsibly access and use data. Data integrity is crucial, she said. "Understanding where exactly the data came from, and then make sure that you are getting true, unbiased data."

The discussion then turned to whether companies are willing to share data with the consultants. Brown said contractual safeguards prevent some data from being shared, but said he's experienced "turf protection," which holds back data owners from sharing it. It often comes down to trust, he said. "Most of the cultural resistance and change agency, which we

spend a huge amount of time on at our firm, boils down to that issue," he said.

Adding to that, McKee said he's experienced limited information from clients because the client is trying to prescribe the outcome versus collaborating and being a partner. "If you're trying to prescribe an outcome, dictate an outcome and keep it simple, you're probably going to miss the advantage of change," he said.

He then spoke to scaling data infrastructure to keep pace with AI and automation advances. He again recommended that companies find ways to make it economical to save as much data as possible. "The goal posts of what we consider AI are changing every day," he said. "But that base layer of data is always going to be part of it, because AI is always based on a foundational data set."

Smith asked Plunkett to share advice for organizations struggling to align their IT side with their operations side. He replied that it's not a technical problem but is about agreement. "The key is having the data governance structure and the

DAVID STEPHEN FOR ACBJ

agreement on how you're going to do this and then structuring your conversations and your operations around observing the data and measuring how you're doing," he said.

Smith then turned to Snider for a financial perspective, asking how to measure return on investment on data-driven initiatives. She said it's not easy, but it should be consistent. "First, figure out what the goal is," she said. "Why are you implementing AI or automation?" That may be reducing labor costs or improving product quality or quantity. Then take care in measuring the manual process versus the automated process. "I've seen many times where we'll blame technology, when in reality it's how we put it into the process and how we're using that technology that may be causing the result to not be what we want," she said.

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> Riley Decker Cos.

Smith shared some statistics on AI adoption by businesses: Only 21% of manufacturers say they are fully AI

ready. Although 68% of companies have started implementing AI, only 16% have achieved their AI-related targets. With that in mind, he asked the panel for advice for organizations just starting a data transformation journey. Plunkett said getting the organization's data ready for AI is the first key step. "And it's not just, do I have data? Do you have sufficient quantity and the data points that you need in order to represent what you're trying to represent?" he said. If you're not feeding the right data into the AI, how do you expect it to make the decision you're hoping to make?"

McKee doubted whether 21% of manufacturers were actually "AI ready." "The ones that say they've achieved their targets are probably limiting their scope," he said. "Don't be prescriptive," he said. "Look at AI as a holistic shift in your business, and don't limit yourself to improvements in one specific area."

Brown agreed, saying business leaders should ask some questions at the start: "What problem are we trying to solve? How well do I understand my current states of flows of material, manpower, and information? What opportunities do we see? What risks do we see?"

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> **JOE BROWN**
> Clark Schaefer Consulting

Snider recommended starting simple. "Start small, with something tangible, get a quick win and get your feet wet, then dream big," she said. "Too many times we want to start big and start investing now, and we don't necessarily have all of the infrastructure."

Smith asked the panelists to look ahead three to five years and forecast the biggest opportunities that lie ahead. Plunkett said AI agents, digital co-workers, offer a lot of promise, but they are still under development. He also sees advancements in seeing the entire landscape of data. "How do we source all that data? I'm hoping to see some kind of offering in that area that helps deploy that telemetry across organizations."

Snider said she sees advancements in predicting workforce behaviors and patterns. "We're looking at ways to match talent history with workforce requirements and ways to get good decision-making data into the hands of HR professionals," she said.

Brown said he believes it's a myth that AI will lead to mass job elimination. Over the next three to five years, companies will continue to de-risk their supply chains, which may change the job landscape. "It's not just going to wipe out entire segments or sectors," he said.

McKee said AI will create new job sectors that aren't fully understood today. Companies that simply want to reduce labor costs with AI will be following a failing strategy, he said. "It's really not artificial intelligence, it's augmented intelligence," McKee said. "We want to use this tool to augment human capital. It's an efficiency boost."

In response to an audience member's question about job insecurity among the workforce, McKee said jobs may change but the number of jobs will likely grow. "The net economy is growing and there are going to be substantive shifts in where people are working and how we retool and reskill," he said. "But it will also enable change within people's lives to be iteratively different than they are today." Younger generations will need to embrace a higher velocity and a higher volatility in their careers than in the past, he said. Plunkett agreed, saying "Roles will change, but we will still need people."