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From left: Tim Kirby, Andrew Sims, Josh Tittensor, Phil Sims, and Fred Wray at Unilathe’s factory in Stoke

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Machining company ‘turns’ a corner after Made Smarter support

A top machining business in Stoke-on-Trent is taking its productivity to the next level after Made Smarter West Midlands helped it receive grant funding for a major data capture system.

Unilathe Ltd was founded in 1977 with just one turning lathe to its name and only Stoke-based customers to sell to.

Now, the company employs more than 130 staff at its HQ on Ford Green Road and manufactures parts and components for OEMs and tiered suppliers across aerospace, oil and gas, rail, construction, and more.

It counts the likes of Caterpillar, JCB, and Siemens among its clients across the UK and abroad.

Unilathe realised, however, that in order for it to improve as a business, it would need more accurate data from its dozens of machines.

Unilathe felt it needed to upgrade its existing systems to constantly capture data in real time, giving it a much more reliable picture of its capabilities.

After Managing Director Andrew Sims had linked up with Made Smarter previously, he thought the programme may be able to offer support in helping Unilathe make the right decisions.

He said: “I had met Made Smarter and Tim at business and manufacturing events in the past and had heard of their successes with other businesses in the area.

“The digitalisation of Unilathe, enabling us to have a business where all our machines and our systems are integrated, is crucial for the continued success of the company. Made Smarter has helped us start along that path and we’re excited for what the future holds.”

The Challenge

Unilathe’s dozens of machines, which produce all sorts of different components, all need to be monitored for overall equipment effectiveness (OEE), such as uptime and downtime, faults, and output.

Staff recorded OEE data on its existing Seiki system – software which allows staff to input machine data.

However, the system could be prone to occasional user error, such as if a machine was left running accidentally after an engineer inputted that it had been turned off.

This meant the data Unilathe had around machine performance was not especially accurate and could only really be used as a guide rather than as gospel.

Unilathe knew Seiki offered a more integrated system known as Seiki AIR, which could monitor machine OEE data simultaneously and display this data to engineers in real time.

Josh Tittensor, Production Manager at Unilathe, said: “Having genuinely accurate data from our machines was always going to be the next step in the evolution of our business.

“Our current system worked up to a point, but it wasn’t good enough for where we want to be in the next few years. Accurate data allows us to make far better decisions as to what projects we can take on for clients and how to manage them more effectively, enabling us to boost our productivity.

“Seiki AIR seemed like the obvious system for us to use as it would basically be an upgrade of what we already had, but we wanted reassurance that it would actually represent real value for money.”

The Solution

Unilathe contacted Made Smarter West Midlands to see if the programme could advise them on the best course of action, and potentially help with grant funding towards the upgrade.

Tim Kirby, Digital Transformation Specialist at Made Smarter West Midlands, met Unilathe to talk through the benefits of Seiki AIR and other data capture systems alongside Fred Wray, Senior Advisor at the Manufacturing Technology Centre (MTC).

They concluded that an upgrade was the right decision thanks to it being user-friendly and familiar to the business, the outlay they would need to purchase the software, and the return on investment it would bring.

Tim said: “What Unilathe needed was that extra pair of eyes to look at this upgrade, and advise if the grant money from Made Smarter could be spent in a better way.

“We found that a match-funded grant of £20,000 to contribute to the cost of the upgrade should represent excellent value for money.”

Made Smarter guided Unilathe through the application process and made it as seamless as possible.

Andrew added: “From us sitting down and talking about possible solutions to us having the money in our account took only a matter of months.

“Once it was decided that we needed the £20,000 of grant funding, Made Smarter could not have been more helpful with the application.

“I’d never heard of anything similar where money appeared in our account so quickly after receiving grant approval – it was fantastic. “It meant we could get Seiki AIR installed much more quickly than if we had decided to go about it ourselves.”

The Benefits

Seiki AIR is now installed on around 80 per cent of Unilathe’s machines, and the business is already seeing excellent results.

“The buy-in from our staff on the shop floor has been brilliant,” Andrew added.

“At first, they were a little sceptical, but when they realised it made their jobs easier rather than harder, the whole company is now on board with Seiki AIR.

“Now it is installed on the majority of our machines, the real-time data we are seeing is incredibly useful. Assumptions we had previously made about certain machines’ capabilities were proven wrong almost overnight, which allowed us to make more informed decisions about using them in more productive ways.”

Fred said: “Seiki AIR not only addressed the issues Unilathe was facing with inaccurate data capture, but will also allow it to focus on continuous improvement.

“The data it will gather will allow Unilathe to far better understand where it is performing well and where it is falling down, which will enable the team to make clear decisions on whether to take on new projects, look at improving, replacing or adding new machines, and much more.

“Accurate data that can be easily captured and analysed by a business allows it to make informed decisions about its future, and it’s great that Unilathe is already seeing the benefits.”

The Future

Seiki AIR is set to be installed across all machines in the next few months and Unilathe is optimistic about the effects it will have across the whole business.

Josh added: “We’re confident that once the system is up-and-running on all our machines the data it provides will allow us to take on more work and grow the business even further.

“We are also looking at going completely paperless, thanks to Seiki AIR, as the system allows us to produce digital route cards which enables engineers to seamlessly install job programmes into machines without having to enter them manually.”

And Andrew said: “Having Seiki AIR on all our machines and having digital route cards will only further boost our productivity and make our staff’s jobs that little bit easier.

“We’re really looking forward to reaping the benefits of Seiki AIR and we have to thank Made Smarter and the MTC for all their support in making this upgrade as easy as possible.

“Anyone in the manufacturing sector who needs advice like this should definitely get in touch with Made Smarter. We’ve been really impressed with their service and they’ve helped take Unilathe to another level.”

CASE STUDY