

Industry needs to take a longer-term view

The manufacturing sector could learn lessons from an architectural marvel in Spain, suggests Steve Brambley, director of public affairs at Gambica*.

I was lucky enough to be able to visit Barcelona recently and as many people do, I went to see the Sagrada Família, the very imposing and impressive basilica designed by the architect Antoni Gaudí. If you are not familiar with it, the building is of a very original “organic” design of stunning scale and artistry. Although it was started in 1882, it is still unfinished, with a planned completion in 2026 to coincide with

the 100th anniversary of Gaudí’s death.

I had been to visit the cathedral more than 20 years ago, and much progress has been made since then, but this time I was able to take a guided tour, which not only revealed many fascinating aspects of the design and the symbolism behind it, but made me appreciate the long-term vision and motivation of the architect.

In fact, Gaudí was not the original architect for the project. The first plans that were

contrast with the prevalent risk-averse nature and short-term strategies of many businesses. Of course, construction projects are now much quicker and architects will usually see their dreams turned to reality. But what about the investment decisions in industry and manufacturing? How often do senior executives approve budgets for machinery and automation that pay back after they may have moved on? How short are the payback criteria on capital

“Too often, investment that doesn’t pay back within one or two years is seen as a risk to avoid. I would argue that not investing can be an even greater risk.”

drawn up by Francisco de Paula del Villar were for a quite ordinary-looking church that probably would not have become a tourist attraction for future generations. When Gaudí took over the reins a year later, his vision was for a much more elaborate and significantly more complex design. What struck me most about this was that Gaudí was fully aware that his design was so grand that he would never see the completed building, that he would never have the satisfaction of seeing the end-result.

Yet he not only began this gargantuan challenge, but ensured that all of his plans and models were available to his team of architects to continue the work. Despite much of this material being destroyed during the Spanish Civil War, the team then recreated it all again from memory, as a legacy for future architects to continue the work.

I found it amazing that none of the stakeholders involved at the start would witness the final iconic landmark – not those funding it, not those building it and, strikingly, not the artist and visionary who conceived it in the first place. We can visit this (almost finished) masterpiece today because of the long-term outlook of those long gone.

Which, when compared to modern-day attitudes to investment, creates a sharp

expenditure to improve productivity or efficiency? How often are the costs compared to the lifetime savings, which may be significant over the 10, 15 or more years that the installation will run?

All too often, investment that doesn’t pay back within one or two years is seen as a risk to avoid. I would argue that not investing can be an even greater risk. Not taking the opportunity to install a longer-term legacy of improvements could limit the competitiveness, growth and longer-term security of a business. The foundations of the exemplars for future generations need to be laid today. ■

* Gambica is the trade association for the automation, control, instrumentation and laboratory technology sectors in the UK. For more information, please contact the director of public affairs, Steve Brambley, on 020 7642 8090 or via sbrambley@gambica.org.uk www.gambica.org.uk

