

Are we prepared for the looming industrial storm?

As she was trapped at a motorway services by a recent snowstorm, Victoria Montag*, Gambica's sector head for industrial automation, got thinking. Although we are an innovative and resilient nation, we are often not sufficiently prepared for changes – either on our roads or in our factories.

When I left the Industry 4.0 Summit in Manchester a few weeks ago and started to drive to Somerset to visit my parents, this was precisely the thing that the travel news was telling me that I shouldn't be doing. Storm Emma was about to clash with the cold winds from Siberia – the "Beast from the East" – causing conditions on the West Country roads to be treacherous, and I was heading straight for it.

And indeed, somewhere in Gloucestershire, the tarmac and motorway lanes disappeared under the snow, lorries became stuck going up hills and I started to regret my decision to make the journey. I also became very annoyed. I became annoyed because by this point I had been on the road for hours and hadn't seen a single gritter or snowplough – in fact, I hadn't seen any evidence that the roads had been treated since I left the M6. I was also annoyed because when I had been in Norway a fortnight before, I could trudge through thigh-deep snow, get to my car, kick off the snow on my shoes and drive off on a clear and relatively safe road, whereas in the UK I was watching cars lose control on a major highway because of a couple of centimetres of snowfall.

At about midnight, having spent seven intense hours on the road, I pulled into the M5 Sedgemoor Services to decide what to do. I was only about 20 miles from my destination,

but I was tired, and those 20 miles would take well over an hour at the speed I had been averaging. I got myself a cup of coffee and half-prepared myself for the possibility of spending the night on a bench outside WH Smiths.

While I drank my coffee, too wired to sleep, too tired to move, I started to think about how, as a nation, we are really bad at being

But the industrial revolution that is happening now is more than simply new trends in technology being implemented into industry – the way in which business is performed is changing fundamentally and if we are playing catch-up with the rest of the world, the UK will see itself slip off the global supply chain.

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prepared. Of course Scandinavia and Canada and Russia are better equipped to deal with snow – they get lots of it, often. We, on the whole, do not. But this bad weather was no surprise. It had been the subject of multitudes of news reports for days, and the timing of the particularly severe conditions hitting the West Country was forecast with surprising accuracy. The roads could have been better.

Similarly, it occurred to me, that the topic of UK manufacturing – particularly SMEs being unprepared for the Fourth Industrial Revolution – had been the subject of much discussion at the Summit I had left a few hours before (although, at this point, it felt like an age ago).

We are a nation of innovators, world leaders in developing new technologies. However, all too often, we resist adopting new technologies into existing manufacturing processes. Britain is an intrepid nation. This is exemplified in the same chutzpah that made me think I could drive 200 miles through the snow my tiny toy car. Our resilience comes from being able to take what the world throws at us. It is a worthy quality.

Like the Beast from the East, we know the Fourth Industrial Revolution is happening and unless we, as a nation, get better at preparing, British manufacturing may well get metaphorically stuck at the M5 Sedgemoor Services at midnight. Believe me, no one wants that. ■

*** Gambica is the trade association for the automation, control, instrumentation and laboratory technology sectors in the UK. For more information, please contact Victoria Montag on 020 7642 8094 or via victoria.montag@gambica.org.uk**

