OPINION

We need vision!

René Meuleman, Global Glass Industry Technical Leader at Invensys, considers the glass industry's need for visionary leadership and benchmarks to secure meaningful energy efficiency gains.

René Meuleman.

I write this as I return to Europe from the 71st Conference on Glass Problems and the GMIC's Waste Heat Recovery Seminar in Columbus, Ohio. As a representative of Invensys Operations Management, I went to the conference to focus on innovation and new trends and of course, to look for new opportunities. Coming from a technical background, I was surprised by the amazing differences in thinking and objectives between the institutes, the industry and especially, the continents.

We all know that glassmaking is one of the most energy-intensive processes and I suppose nobody will disagree that it is also far from being efficient. During the conference, it was indicated that the glass industry would need to become 20% more efficient before 2020 and even 70% more efficient before 2050. Those are amazing figures and it could be argued whether or not they are achievable.

I also picked up some discussions about global warming and the necessity to reduce CO_2. While nobody at the meeting would bet his or her life on the fact that global warming is happening or not, one thing should be clear to us all: Those who remain conservative and averse to innovation will not survive in this industry.

VISIONARY LEADERSHIP

Twenty five years ago, many European container manufacturers, under the leadership of visionaries, committed to recycling a great part of their bottle production. Today, Europe is one of leaders in glass recycling and has several of the best-performing glass melting furnaces in the world. Within the global container manufacturing companies, nine European plants are in the top 10 best performing plants, energy wise.

That recycling vision turned out to be one of the biggest energy savers ever, as well as a great competitive advantage for those who followed suit. That might allow us to conclude that securing our business future requires vision and calculated risk, as well as a little competitive pressure.

One of the main tasks of our CEOs and CFOs is to secure the successful future of our companies by acting as visionaries. But if that is the case, why are ROIs for energy saving of more than 18 months still out of the question? If that is the case, why does a furnace, which is the most expensive asset in a glass plant, have an ROI of 10 to 15 years? Why is a waste heat recovery measure not installed because the payback time is six years? These measures are still not part of the plant's total ROI equation. They continue to be seen as a 'luxury' instead of being a part of the melting process's major efficiency improvements.

Perhaps it will only start to happen when energy prices really start to hurt but sophisticated corporate energy management tools are already available. These tools can provide information and show the results of measures already taken, alerting us to new or better ways to improve energy efficiency, cut costs and reduce waste. The technology is in place but if we don't use or apply it, only pressure from executive visionaries will force developments and solutions.

SETTING BENCHMARKS

The aforementioned leading container manufacturer recently came up with some very ambiguous targets that show guts and vision, following in the footsteps of another famous glassfibre producer. Now that industry benchmarks are being set, other manufacturers will need to follow suit or develop different, visionary measures of their own to secure their successful future. Competitively, that's the urgency because we need all the good ideas we can get to ensure 70% energy savings in 2050 across our industry. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

René Meuleman studied electrical engineering and has been with the Invensys group for three years. He started his career in the paper industry as a technical assistant before switching to the glass industry, becoming an employee of Vereenigde Glasfabrieken. During his early years there, he built broad knowledge and experience in design and development of container glass electronic quality equipment. He was involved in the implementation of the first generation PLC and DCS systems, as well as electronic timing systems for IS machines.

René conducted several model-based predictive control projects, as well as being involved in object-oriented engineering method developments. He became responsible for process control inside the BSN group and finally, was responsible for European plant process control and forming electronics within the Owens-Illinois group.

Today, René Meuleman is Invensys-Eurotherm global glass business technical manager, focusing on process and power control solutions, energy management and MPC for end users, OEMs and solution providers.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Invensys Operations Management,
Maastricht, the Netherlands
tel: +31 172 411752
email: rene.meuleman@invensys.com
web: www.invensys.com

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