

AUTOMOTIVE SMEs WARM UP TO AUTOMATION, DIGITISATION

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Sandeep Belsare is president of the Pimpri Chinchwad Small Industries Association, based in the eponymous Pimpri-Chinchwad suburb in north-western Pune, one of the largest automotive components manufacturing hubs in the country, largely made up of small- and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs). Over the past few years, he says, medium scale units in the hub have been investing significantly in automation. Small units too, he says, are trying to automate parts of their manufacturing process.

"Work that would earlier take us a few days and had to be done by hand, is now being done in a matter of minutes. If automation technology was more affordable, more industries

would go for it," he says. Continuous welding processes, and boring and drilling functions on metal are some of the areas being automated, including using technologies like AI, robotics, and laser cutting.

All of these have got a major filip from the pandemic lockdowns. "Since the pandemic, MSMEs have realised that they cannot survive without leveraging technology and need to be part of the digital ecosystem," says Siddesh Naik, data, AI and automation

have the capex capabilities to invest in automation, and most of the tech players have been focused on IT exports, and have not been able to come up with products ideal for MSMEs," he says.

Automation service providers say that new models of payment and licensing, as also software-as-a-service solutions, are helping automotive SMEs. But Girbane believes more needs to be done to make the solutions affordable, and thinks the government should step in to fund startups that can create such solutions.

Some auto experts say digitisation is becoming critical for SMEs with electric vehicles gathering momentum. "EVs will turn auto manufacturing on its head, especially in aspects such as cell and battery pack manufacturing," says Dilip Sawhney, India managing director of Rockwell Automation. The role of the suppliers, he says, will get revolutionised as part of the process. "While it is an adverse situation for many SMEs now, it is also their time to seize the moment, as a lot of sophistication has to come in to start producing at the scale of India. Something like a battery pack assembly cannot be a normal process, and requires a lot of flexibility and scale," he says.

Sanjeev Arora, the India president of motion business at the Swiss-Swedish automation provider ABB, says SMEs can benefit from automation and robotics across the entire production process – sourcing, packaging, managing inventory, planning produc-

DIGITAL INDIA



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MD - INDIA, ROCKWELL
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Siddesh Naik |
SALES LEADER - DATA, AI,
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sales leader at IBM India's technology sales division. "They have seen their hourly production and productivity go up, they have seen quality checks impacting the product, and all of these have prompted them to adopt AI-powered automation really fast," he says.

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