

Report

MANUFACTURING: WHERE NEXT IN 2026?

Top trends, main challenges
and the pivotal role of ERP



Sage

 **EQUATION**
TECHNOLOGIES

Disruption; restructuring; new business models; uncertainty; volatility. This is the outlook for manufacturers across the world today.

Each manufacturing subsector has its own very specific challenges. Here, we concentrate on SME manufacturers – particularly those of you managing discrete manufacturing processes.

The era defined by the pursuit of lean efficiency has not ended. But it has now been joined by a strategic focus on localized supply chain robustness with increasing levels of resilience and deep technological integration¹. This transition mandates a fundamental overhaul of your business.

Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems play a pivotal role helping SME manufacturers meet those shared challenges. Modern ERP capabilities turn solid digital transformation foundations into flexible capabilities delivering consistent business value.

Many respected analysts and commentators testify to this fundamental shift . But it's quite a task to wade through all their valuable outputs. So, we've done the background reading for you!

In partnership with manufacturing ERP leader Sage Software, we have put together this digest of 2026 trends in manufacturing, with original sources clearly referenced.

We hope that you find this framework useful when assessing where powerful ERP – on premise or hosted in the Cloud – can help you achieve your strategic transformation objectives.



Powerful ERP for Manufacturing Transformation

Perdomo Cigars (Manufacturing and Distribution), implemented Sage 300 to manage orders, shipping, and financials. Perdomo added barcoding/scanning in to improve warehouse accuracy and efficiency. Additionally, they now perform multi-entity financial consolidations³ in a matter of clicks.

What the Experts Say

The consensus from experts is that the more digitalized you are, the more competitive you are⁴.

However, to harness the value of digital transformation and artificial intelligence (AI), you have to overcome significant data and governance challenges. It's estimated that manufacturers only use 5% of the data they generate. As new systems and Internet of Things (IoT) devices are introduced to the factory floor, industrial firms must recalibrate their data management processes⁵.

Realizing value is dependent on ensuring the underlying data flows, visibility, integration, security and operational strategy are in place. And modern ERP systems – especially those harnessing the power of AI – provide those fundamental capabilities⁶.



The collective views of experts on core trends in manufacturing for 2026 and beyond fall into six categories.

1. Sustainable growth with digital and AI

Digitising the manufacturing environment – production, supply chain, finance, sales – to provide high quality data flows for more agile company management.

2. Production optimization: digital twins & smart factories.

Developing products, workflows, production systems in the virtual world, speeding up innovation and efficiencies without interrupting core processes.

3. Decarbonization for operating efficiency

Pursuing sustainability goals to improve international competitiveness. Also align these activities to cost-savings.

4. Supply chain agility and resilience

Managing change, volatility, pressure and restructuring requirements across suppliers, sources, geographies and more.

5. Agile finance and regulatory management

Margin optimisation while managing customer, credit, geopolitical and regulatory risks. Forecasting and planning with scenarios.

6. Workforce transformation

Enabling the workforce to upskill into the new digitised world. Using automation to manage workflows, targets and permissions. Augmenting the human output with AI

Let's look at what the experts say in each of these areas, both the trends for manufacturing in 2026 and beyond, and how they link into enablement through powerful ERP solutions – whether hosted in the Cloud or deployed on-premises.



Powerful ERP for Manufacturing Transformation

Marathon Brake Systems (manufacturing and assembly components). Sage 300 improved component-level inventory tracking for assembly items. Custom SQL views enabled better production planning, and the solution also enhanced order processing and service level⁷.

1. Sustainable growth with digital and AI

Enterprise transformation must deliver measurable value from technological investments. It's certainly growing, with predictions that global spending on digital transformation in manufacturing will reach approximately **\$847 billion by 2030**, with a projected **CAGR of 13.83% from 2025**⁸.⁷The ultimate objective is achieving "extreme productivity" enabled by automation⁹.

There are hurdles, though. The greatest is not technological adoption, but the underlying data quality. AI cannot deliver value without quality data streams. One report reveals that 84% of data and analytics leaders say their data strategies need a complete overhaul before their ambitions can succeed¹⁰. Solving this requires focusing on the fundamentals: timely, context-rich data, stronger governance, and solutions such as ERP that unlock the value of trapped, distributed data.

Equally critical is the cultural dimension. The redefinition of employee mindsets and the upgrade of skills and capabilities are essential, as resistance due to lack of skill upgrades and redefined mindsets is a leading cause of failure in digital transformation initiatives¹¹.

The successful completion of enterprise transformation leads to the "Agentic Enterprise," a future operating model where human employees work collaboratively with intelligent automation¹²—increasingly AI-driven.



The future of manufacturing is not in the machines, but in the intelligent networks they create.

TCS Digital Twindex, 2025



The role of ERP

A modern manufacturing company like yours has to unify disparate functions - procurement, production, quality, finance, logistics - under a connected and secure digital architecture. ERP provides that unified backbone, integrating plant and enterprise-wide operations. Yet modern ERP solutions go further. They interface seamlessly into other line-of-business systems. They can scale pilots into full roll-outs. They deliver specific manufacturing sector capabilities ready-made through a community of partner add-on software developers. They streamline workflows with intelligent automation. Real-time insight is available via quick access dashboards and more in-depth customized reporting. and r. Additionally, users are guided through processes with visual workflows and easy access to help.

DocLink is a Sage ISV partner. The **DocLink program** provides extensive AI-enabled smart capture OCR, AI-driven insights and reasoning, and intelligent automation.

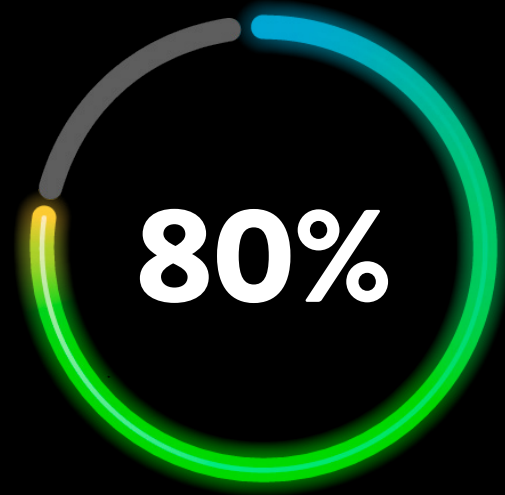
2. Production optimization: digital twins & smart factories

Manufacturing executives largely view smart manufacturing as the primary driver of competitiveness over the next three years, citing benefits such as increased employee productivity, improved production output, and unlocked capacity¹³.

Consequently, a 2025 Deloitte survey found that 80% of manufacturing executives plan to invest 20% or more of their improvement budgets in these initiatives, prioritizing foundational tools such as data analytics, automation hardware, and sensors^{14,1}.

Digital twins are seen as a key growth factor – virtual versions of the manufacturing environment where new systems can be installed and tested and where R&D can be accelerated – all without business interruption.

Digital twin adoption in manufacturing is expected to grow significantly by 2030, with a staggering annual growth rate between 34-41%¹⁵. This growth will be driven by the need for operational efficiency, predictive maintenance, and improved product innovation, supported by advancements in IoT, automation, and big data analytics.



Of manufacturing executives plan to invest 20% or more of their improvement budgets in these initiatives



Annual growth rate by 2030¹⁵



The smart factory of 2030 will be a dynamic, human-centric ecosystem where technology augments human ingenuity rather than replacing it.

Industrial Automation India, Predictions for the Smart Factory of 2030¹⁶



The role of ERP

Without real-time digital transparency into machines, feedstock, workflows, production, quality and outputs, smart factories and digital twins cannot function. A powerful core ERP solution – enhanced with specialist add-on apps developed by partner software companies – will feed reporting, data and analytics into production planning, inventory, maintenance and financial modules. The ERP’s ‘digital thread’ ensures digital twins have reliable, enterprise-wide input data. This ability to create a parallel, virtual copy of any aspect of the manufacturing environment, controlled and/or governed through your ERP, sits behind operations and R&D simulation/ testing and optimization initiatives across the factory.

Sage ISV partner **Nectari** has developed an AI-powered business intelligence tool – **Sage Enterprise Intelligence**. The application focuses on practical, real-world impact and dramatically reducing the time it takes to move from data to decision.



3. Decarbonization for operating efficiency

Decarbonization has cemented its position on every manufacturer's main board agenda, strategically linked with both cost reduction and operational resilience. Leading manufacturers are actively prioritizing **circular manufacturing to meet environmental and business goals**¹⁷, recognizing the necessity of transitioning organizations toward a net-zero future.

Just as importantly, these initiative also have to reduce waste and energy consumption/costs.

And it's not just about energy. Reducing lubricant use, minimizing packaging, optimizing waste treatment, repairing rather than replacing equipment, improving logistics and using eco-design techniques are all helping to boost sustainability across the industry¹⁸. All these goals are almost impossible without a digitized production environment which offers transparency on the business, rich data to analyze, and remote interventions.

In today's model, business objectives are being aligned with sustainability goals, so that digital management and control systems are able to deliver on both fronts.

This is important because regulatory regimes differ. Mandatory standards are in place in the EU¹⁹. China²⁰ and India²¹ now require mandatory emissions reporting from large publicly-listed companies. Yet these rules are not consistent worldwide. So companies need to make sure their investments in sustainability are also delivering commercial advantage at the same time.



Optimizing manufacturing networks requires balancing five key objectives that address the traditional issues of cost, service levels, and growth as well as a new focus on sustainability and resilience... EBITDA can be increased by 1 to 3 percentage points by combining savings from CO₂ reduction with cost improvements from traditional initiatives.

Boston Consulting Group²²



The role of ERP

You're probably not inclined to regard sustainability as a separate reporting exercise. It must also reduce waste, energy use, materials and emissions. A robust ERP system helps cover all these bases. It's the operational nerve-centre. It provides company-wide visibility, up-to-the-minute with real-time data, tracking resource consumption, modelling scenarios and strategies. It also links production and supply-chain data with emissions and other ESG metrics. In short, it allows you to align sustainability objectives with cost savings and efficiency gains.

Sage Data & Analytics, developed by Sage ISV partner **Zap** powers your Sage 300 ERP with web-based reporting, and deep Power BI integration. It automates your data warehouse, transforming scattered data into a single source of truth ready for AI. Achieve rapid results with pre-built data models backed by thousands of embedded expert hours.



4. Supply chain agility and resilience

Geopolitical shifts have fundamentally reshaped manufacturing supply chain strategies. That has meant a strategic pivot away from globalized, lean optimization toward localized robustness²³. A supermajority – **86%** – of US executives surveyed by PwC in 2026 said they expect tariffs to remain a “permanent planning assumption” for them²⁴.

The result? One recent study identifies “Agility as the New Currency,” confirming that 74% of executives are reshoring or planning to reshore operations, underscoring the need for resilient digital workflows²⁵. Capgemini reports that organizations are planning to reduce the global distribution of their Tier 1 suppliers²⁶. And dual sourcing is growing as a strategic buffer, moving away from purely just-in-time methodologies²⁷.

Companies that embrace digital traceability and forecasting (both of which are enabled by ERP systems) will lead in resilience and competitiveness²⁸. This integration of compliance precision with supply chain agility is necessary to turn complexity into a competitive advantage.



The impact of tariffs on supply chain agility is both challenging and transformative... [they] catalyze agile transformation, driving innovation in sourcing, logistics, and data management.

Capgemini Research Institute²⁹



The role of ERP

Manufacturing businesses like yours are facing peaks and troughs in demand, as well as raw-material price and availability shocks. ERP capabilities help finance, operations and logistics respond fast to disruptions. In fact, they also allow you to take proactive initiatives – not just react after the event. A powerful ERP gives real-time visibility across procurement, inventory, production, and shipping. That means you can collaborate more easily with suppliers and customers to make the supply chain perform better – rerouting/re-sourcing supplies, adjusting production schedules, and managing inventory proactively. Without the ERP ‘backbone’, there’s little agility and responses remain manual, slow and prone to error.

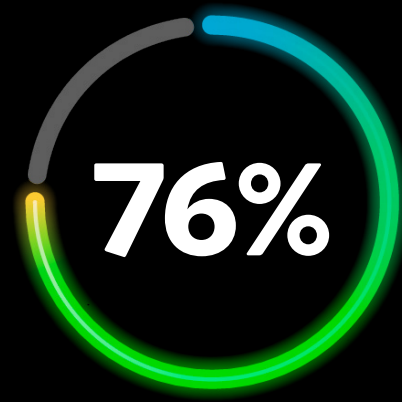
Sage ISV partner **Netstock** has developed its AI-enabled **Predictor Inventory Advisor** for inventory optimization, covering demand planning, forecasting, replenishment. The add-on is widely used in distribution and light manufacturing.

5. Agile finance and regulatory management

The current geopolitical climate requires that scenario planning formalize highly disruptive events – such as the imposition of sudden, reciprocal tariffs – as principal uncertainties, rather than outlying possibilities. This process ensures that management teams have pre-approved contingencies for strategic shifts, allowing them to maintain financial and operational discipline even under high stress.

Similarly, the cost of building resilience – whether near-shoring, dual sourcing, maintaining flexible stock buffers, or navigating tariff complexities³⁰ – can't be entirely absorbed by manufacturers. One key survey tells us 76% of manufacturers are planning price increases in 2026 and beyond, rethinking their pricing models and supply chains to stay competitive³¹.

To manage both factors requires moving away from static cost calculations toward a dynamic model that accurately prices in operational risk and compliance costs. It affects both operating cost and capital expenditure management. And it requires real-time visibility on the business and its operations so that dynamic strategies can be implemented. This dynamic planning incorporates projections, cash flows, committed funding, liquidity positions, and key financial ratios.



of manufacturers are planning price increases in 2026 and beyond, rethinking their pricing models and supply chains to stay competitive³⁵.



Build the foundation through scenario planning and advanced approaches to planning, process execution, and budgeting.

Boston Consulting Group³⁶



The role of ERP

Manufacturers must manage margin erosion, raw-material price swings, regulatory compliance risk, and supply-chain disruption. A powerful ERP – connects production, cost-accounting, procurement and sales data. That enables scenario-based planning, dynamic pricing, risk modelling and margin optimization. Without that integrated view, pricing and risk management tend to be fragmented, slow and out-of-date, rather than agile, rapid and real-time.

Sage ISV partner **Avalara** has developed **Sage AvaTax**. This AI-enabled solution supports onboarding, product classification, and tax calculation and research. It provides real-time tax calculation, returns filing, exemption certificate management, and consumer use tax support, along with automation to streamline tax documentation and reporting processes across jurisdictions.

6. Workforce transformation

The increasing adoption of automation dictates that the manufacturing workforce must adapt rapidly, fundamentally reshaping traditional job roles. This continuous progress means investments in training and adaptive workforce strategies are critical to future competitiveness.

The main strategic objective is workforce augmentation – not necessarily replacement. Collaboration between machines and manufacturing employees is believed to increase productivity by up to 30%³³. This gain is achieved by strengthening human-machine collaboration through workflows that leverage the unique strengths of both, enhancing efficiency and innovation across operations. Automation is proving pivotal in defining this new collaboration, transforming how industrial systems operate by technology power in tandem with human skills and judgement³⁴.

A critical, immediate strategic concern is the retention and transfer of institutional knowledge, especially as knowledgeable seniors retire. Various outlook summaries confirms that XR (extended reality) and data-driven corporate memory may help meet ongoing needs like efficient workforce training, retaining the knowledge of retirees, and augmenting human capabilities³⁵.





The digital transformation of industries requires a workforce highly skilled in digital technologies to meet the growing demands of modern manufacturing.

World Economic Forum³⁶



The role of ERP

As you modernize your manufacturing company, you increasingly need a digitally-skilled workforce, capable of interacting with automation, analytics and smart machines. A powerful ERP integrates the underlying operational workflows, using automation to prompt staff actions and manage their access permissions. It helps capture institutional knowledge. This enables workers to concentrate on higher-value tasks (not manual work that can be automated) and supports new ways of working in a more collaborative, data-driven production environment.

Quadient, another Sage ISV partner, offers its **AP Automation**. It eliminates manual data entry and paper invoices with accounts payable automation that streamlines invoice processing from start to finish. Achieving 99% accuracy with AI-powered data capture, AP Automation ensures seamless approval workflows and faster processing times.



About Equation Technologies

Equation Technologies provides business management solutions for mid-sized companies in the USA and Canada. We make carefully crafted recommendations from among the industry's best-performing ERP software, including Sage Intacct and Sage 300. We help you **reduce the risk in choosing and implementing solutions** by:

- Listening closely to your challenges and exactly how your business works.
- Developing processes that match your business, not requiring you to conform to a software system.
- Mapping out efficiencies using technology to improve operations without adding staff.

Our main goal is simple: have a clear understanding of our clients' goals. We believe the only way to sufficiently grasp that information is by listening first, and offering valuable advice later. We also know that one single approach is not right for all businesses. We leverage our team's vast education and business experiences across industries to focus on our clients' unique needs. We understand the importance of your business. We know when you call on us, time is of the essence and we value & respect your time.

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