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Education Key to Succeeding in New Automotive World

by Jim Stickford

In an era of rapidly changing technology, smart companies can learn something from the past.

That was the message given by Jeff Lowinger, president of eMobility at Eaton in Southfield, when he spoke at the recent Center for Advanced Automotive Technology (CAAT) conference held at Macomb Community College.

Lowinger said that today's international companies, automakers included, have to design technology on a global scale. That's quite different from the way things were done in the past.

In 1960, it took just 39 months to complete a new airplane design, Lowinger said.

"This is an era where they didn't have computers," he said. "They still used slide rules and did everything on paper. What's different between then and now was that they made decisions faster. People all tended to be in the same building. Now designers are spread across the globe in different time zones."

That physical separation can result in the slowing down of the decision-making process, Lowinger said. And then there are cultural and educational differences. Designers from different countries have different cultural approaches, and they have different languages and education levels.

These differences can cost time. So what's the solution?

"I think most companies get that they have to be able to make decisions quickly," Lowinger said. "Look at electric vehicles. At first there were just a couple of companies producing EVs, but now we see companies like VW and Audi entering the market.

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Jeff Lowinger

OEMs Need Education to Adapt to Times

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"That tells us that things are accelerating. These OEMs are looking for suppliers who can keep up with them. So when I am asked what the solution is, I say that it starts with education."

Lowinger is working with universities to help them design a curriculum that takes into account the way the world operates today.

That includes getting students and scientists out of their comfort zones.

"We like to rotate our engineers between specialties," Lowinger said. "As they move between different disciplines, they learn to see things from a different point of view, and learn how people in different disciplines operate."

This knowledge gives bosses and managers the broad perspective they need to make decisions in a more timely fashion, Lowinger said.

"We want our people to be able to go to table talks about design and engineering and be able to contribute in every category, not just their specialty," he said.

By having designers and engineers who have been exposed to the different disciplines, they'll be able to promote a more efficient design and engineering process.

"The companies that can do this will have a much better chance of prospering in an era when products are now being designed globally for a global market.

"For today's companies, it's adapt or die, and the adaptation process starts at school."