JETIR.ORG ISSN: 2349-5162 | ESTD Year : 2014 | Monthly Issue
JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)
An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

NEXT-GEN PLASTIC MANUFACTURING: LED BY OPERATIONS EXCELLENCE & LEAN TOOLS

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Abstract

The application of AI has made processes, production, and execution instant across all industries. To meet the fast-growing demand of customers, manufacturing efficiency must keep pace. One such Six Sigma project was conducted at a cosmetic packaging manufacturing plant to address the evolving demand for product quality excellence. The project, titled "Actuator Machine – Automation & Throughput," aimed to achieve operational excellence in capacity improvement, workflow integration, machine downtime reduction, and upgrading SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures). The Continuous Improvement (CI) initiative focused on operational excellence without compromising associate safety. A Six Sigma DMAIC methodology was used to streamline processes, eliminate non-value-added activities, and standardize operations through a data-centered approach. The stakeholders included the process engineer, manufacturing engineer, New Product Introduction (NPI) team, quality management team, vendor team, and operations associates. The project's outcome was transformative: scrap rates were reduced from over 15,000 parts per shift to fewer than 1,500; downtime dropped from 160 minutes to 60 minutes in an 8-hour shift; production exceeded the target of 23,000 units; and Overall Equipment Efficiency (OEE) increased by 35%. These improvements significantly enhanced efficiency, reduced waste, and enabled the system to consistently meet and surpass demand.

Keywords

Six Sigma, DMAIC, Operational Excellence, Manufacturing Efficiency, Continuous Improvement, Automation, Machine Downtime Reduction, Throughput Optimization, Overall Equipment Efficiency (OEE), Waste Reduction, Process Standardization, Data-Driven Manufacturing, Lean Manufacturing, Quality Improvement, Quality Improvement,

Introduction

In today's globalized and fast-paced manufacturing environment, companies in the Plastic Manufacturing sector are challenged to deliver consistent product quality while scaling production to meet rising demand. With global consumption projected to grow by over 5% annually, operational efficiency and throughput have become critical metrics for maintaining competitiveness and customer satisfaction.

At one Plastic manufacturing facility, Actuator Machine Line, consistently failed to meet daily production targets. This shortfall was primarily driven by excessive scrap rates, extended downtime, and workflow inefficiencies. Over 15,000 defective parts were being generated per shift, and unplanned downtime frequently exceeded 160 minutes, significantly below the expected throughput of 23,000 units per day. Additionally, outdated Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and inconsistent maintenance protocols led to machine wear, operational delays, and safety risks.

These issues not only caused production bottlenecks but also jeopardized on-time delivery, increased operational costs, and diminished customer trust. To address these critical challenges, a Six Sigma project was launched with the objective of restoring throughput, improving machine reliability, and reducing waste using a structured problem-solving methodology.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how the DMAIC framework—Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control—was employed to identify root causes, implement targeted improvements, and achieve sustained operational excellence. The outcomes of this project serve as a benchmark for applying data-driven process improvement strategies in high-volume, quality-critical manufacturing environments.

Literature Review

In recent decades, Lean and Six Sigma methodologies have been widely adopted across diverse manufacturing sectors to enhance quality, reduce waste, and drive operational excellence. Originating in the automotive and electronics industries, these approaches have evolved into comprehensive frameworks applicable to service and high-variability environments, including cosmetic and plastic manufacturing.

Six Sigma, introduced by Motorola and popularized by General Electric, is a data-driven methodology aimed at process improvement and defect reduction through structured phases known as DMAIC—Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, and Control. As Antony (2006) highlights, Six Sigma is not merely a set of statistical tools but a structured strategy for eliminating root causes of inefficiencies and enhancing customer satisfaction.

Building on this, Chakravorty (2009) proposed implementation models that integrate Six Sigma into broader operational systems, ensuring sustainability and scalability. These frameworks emphasize cross-functional collaboration, robust data collection, and the importance of top management support.

In parallel, Lean Manufacturing principles—popularized by Womack and Jones (2003)—focus on eliminating non-value-added activities and streamlining workflows. The integration of Lean and Six Sigma, often referred to as Lean Six Sigma, provides a balanced approach that enhances both efficiency and quality.

Montgomery (2013) stressed the importance of statistical process control and design of experiments in ensuring process stability, while Pyzdek and Keller (2014) offered comprehensive guidance for deploying Six Sigma at multiple organizational levels. George et al. (2005) contributed a practical toolkit that supports frontline implementation of Six Sigma methods, emphasizing tools like Pareto charts, control charts, and process maps.

As AI and machine learning gain momentum in manufacturing, their synergy with Six Sigma is becoming increasingly valuable. Predictive maintenance, real-time defect detection, and automated root cause analysis are now enabling faster and more accurate decision-making. Although research on AI-integrated Six Sigma systems is still emerging, early studies indicate strong potential for transforming traditional continuous improvement models.

This paper builds upon these foundational works by demonstrating the application of Six Sigma principles in a modern plastic packaging facility. The study shows how structured methodologies, combined with cross-functional teamwork and real-time data, can overcome complex production challenges and deliver sustained improvements.

Methodology

The Six Sigma DMAIC methodology was adopted as the framework for this improvement initiative. Each phase served a unique function in isolating issues and implementing corrective actions:

1. Define: Project charter development, team formation, problem scoping.
2. Measure: Baseline metrics collection including scrap, downtime, cycle time, throughput.
3. Analyze: Root cause identification using Fishbone diagrams, Pareto analysis, and 5 Whys.
4. Improve: Countermeasure implementation through SOP updates, mechanical fixes, and training.
5. Control: Sustaining gains through dashboards, Gemba walks, and visual performance tracking.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over a period of ten weeks on the actuator line within the plastic manufacturing facility. The objective was to establish a reliable baseline of performance metrics and collect sufficient evidence to support root cause analysis and solution validation. Measurements were gathered during both day and night shifts to account for operator variability and machine behavior under different production conditions.

Quantitative data included:

1. Scrap counts (defective parts per shift)
2. Machine downtime (in minutes per shift)
3. Production throughput (units produced per shift)
4. Overall Equipment Efficiency (OEE) components: availability, performance, and quality

These data points were manually recorded on shift logs and automatically extracted from machine logs and PLCs (Programmable Logic Controllers) when available. Real-time dashboards on the production floor provided visibility to team members and reinforced accountability during shift handovers.

Qualitative data were collected via operator interviews, maintenance reports, and floor observations. Operators provided insights into frequent machine jams, misaligned components, and unclear SOP steps. These observations were vital in identifying pain points that were not immediately apparent in the numeric data.

To validate the data's accuracy, the team employed Minitab and AI for statistical analysis and pattern recognition. Breakdown events were categorized using a downtime tracker to highlight the most frequent failure modes. Rejection logs were paired with product changeover schedules to identify correlations between equipment setups and quality issues.

Analysis

The data collected from the actuator production line revealed several critical inefficiencies affecting throughput and quality. Quantitative analysis identified that scrap rates and machine downtime were the most significant contributors to underperformance, while qualitative feedback from operators highlighted recurring mechanical and procedural issues.

Using Pareto analysis, the team identified that over 80% of failures originated from a small number of root causes. These included:

1. Punch and sleeve misalignment

2. Tool wear without scheduled replacement
3. Sensor and HMI feedback errors
4. Non-standardized changeover procedures
5. Inadequate operator training

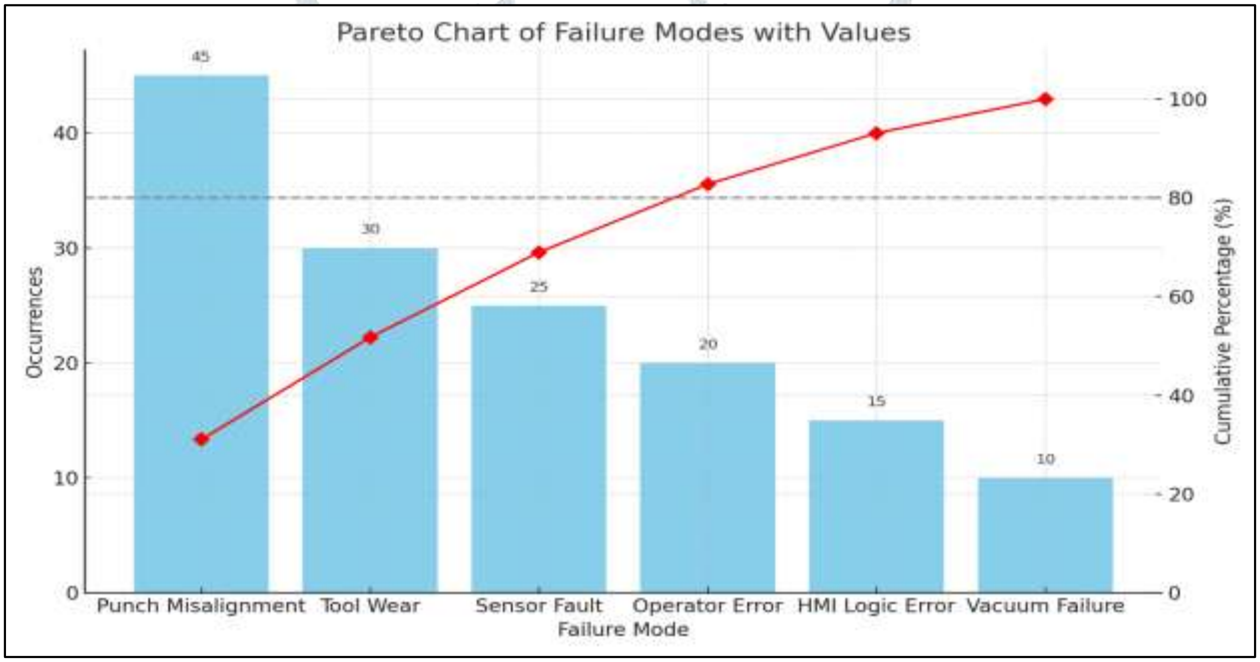
Exhibit 1 shows a Pareto chart highlighting the most frequent failure modes. Punch misalignment and tool wear alone accounted for nearly half of all breakdown incidents, aligning with operator feedback and maintenance logs.

Further analysis of rejection data in Minitab revealed strong correlations between unplanned changeovers and increased defect rates. Each unplanned changeover was followed by a spike in misaligned components, suggesting inadequate reset SOPs and tooling variation. Process capability analysis confirmed that the line was operating outside acceptable quality limits prior to intervention.

Time series plots of downtime data highlighted clusters of breakdowns occurring during specific shifts, indicating a need for shift-specific training or standardization. The team also analyzed machine logs to identify repeat failures at specific stations, confirming the need for mechanical upgrades.

Overall, this analysis stage quantified the performance gap and provided actionable insights, forming the foundation for improvement activities executed in the next phase of the DMAIC framework.

Exhibit 1. Pareto charts of Failure modes.



Pareto charts helped quantify the impact of each failure mode, enabling targeted corrective actions.

Results

The implementation of targeted improvements, guided by Six Sigma DMAIC principles, led to significant and measurable performance gains on the actuator manufacturing line.

Key results included:

1. Scrap Reduction: Scrap rates dropped from over 15,000 parts per shift to fewer than 1,500 representing a 90% improvement in product quality.
2. Downtime Reduction: Unplanned downtime was reduced from 160 minutes to 60 minutes per 8-hour shift—an improvement of 63%.
3. Throughput Increase: The line consistently exceeded the daily target of 23,000 units, reaching 24,500+ units per shift.
4. OEE Improvement: Overall Equipment Efficiency improved from 45% to 80%, delivering a 35% absolute gain and aligning with industry's best practices.

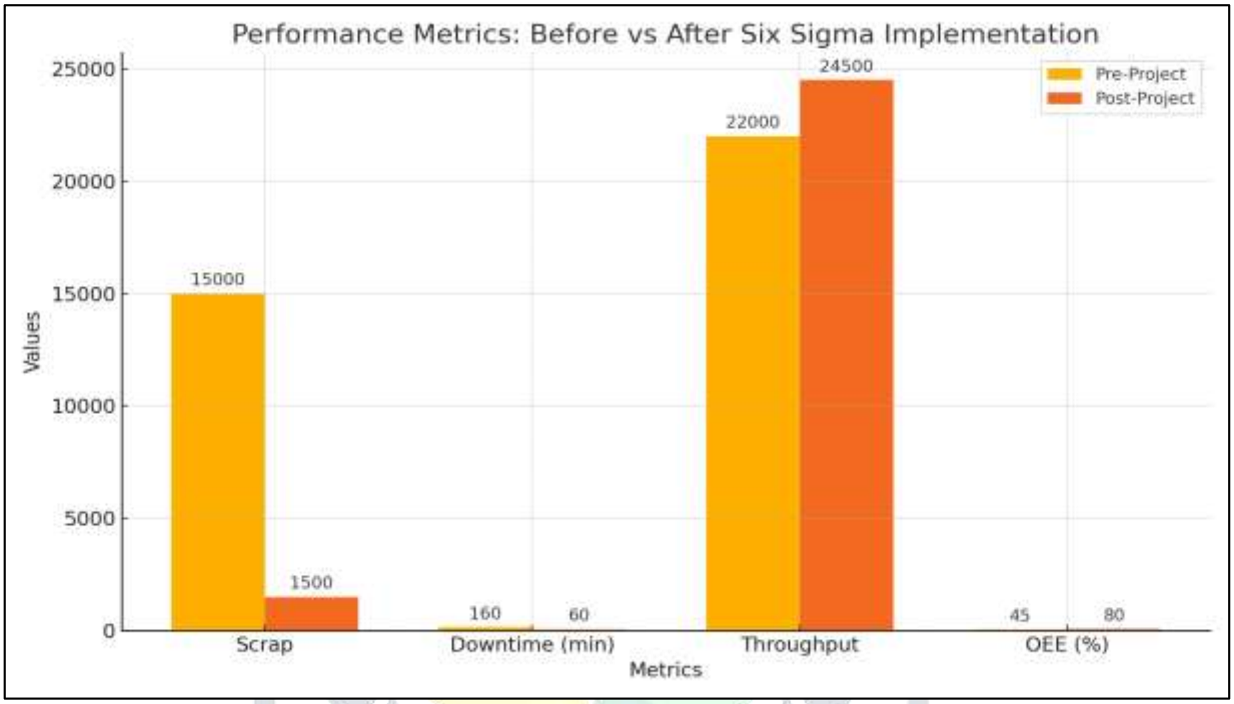
These improvements were validated using machine log data and shift-level KPI dashboards over multiple production runs across both day and night shifts. Figure 3 illustrates the comparison of key performance metrics before and after project implementation.

Beyond quantitative outcomes, the initiative fostered a culture of continuous improvement and operator empowerment. Real-time dashboards, Gemba walks, and visual management tools reinforced transparency and encouraged proactive problem-solving on the floor. Revised SOPs and preventive maintenance schedules standardized best practices and reduced variability.

Importantly, these gains were achieved without increasing labor input or compromising operator safety, indicating that the improvements were both effective and sustainable.

The success of this Six Sigma project demonstrates how data-driven decision-making and cross-functional collaboration can transform a chronically underperforming production line into a model of operational excellence.

Exhibit 2. **Annotated comparison of key performance indicators before and after Six Sigma implementation.**



Discussions

The results of this study validate the effectiveness of the Six Sigma DMAIC framework in resolving long-standing operational inefficiencies within a high-volume plastic manufacturing environment. By applying a structured, data-driven approach, the project team successfully addressed multiple root causes of underperformance and delivered improvements that were both substantial and sustainable.

A key driver of success was the integration of cross-functional collaboration into every phase of the project. Engineering, quality, operations, and maintenance teams worked together to analyze data, prioritize issues, and test solutions. This inclusive approach not only accelerated problem-solving but also promoted ownership and alignment across departments.

The use of visual tools such as Pareto charts and fishbone diagrams facilitated clearer communication and focused efforts on high-impact areas. The introduction of real-time dashboards enhanced operational transparency and allowed shift teams to respond quickly to deviations, creating a more responsive production environment.

One notable outcome was the alignment between quantitative findings and qualitative insights. Operator feedback accurately highlighted equipment wear and reset issues—concerns that were confirmed through root cause analysis and statistical validation. This alignment underscored the importance of frontline engagement in continuous improvement efforts.

1. Despite these gains, the project faced several challenges:
2. Initial resistance to change, particularly regarding SOP modifications
3. Skill gaps in root cause analysis tools among frontline staff
4. Variation in results between day and night shifts, driven by differences in training and experience

These challenges were mitigated through targeted interventions such as operator coaching, visual SOPs, and floor-based knowledge sharing. However, they highlight the ongoing need for workforce development and change management as integral components of any process improvement initiative.

Looking forward, the partial integration of AI tools demonstrated additional opportunities for predictive maintenance and performance forecasting. These technologies, when fully deployed, could further enhance decision-making and prevent the recurrence of equipment failures.

In summary, the discussion affirms that sustained operational excellence requires more than technical fixes; it demands cultural shifts, structured methodologies, and the strategic use of data at every level of the organization.

Implications to Engineering Management

This project offers several key insights for engineering managers seeking to drive operational excellence through structured methodologies like Six Sigma:

1. **Data-Driven Decision-Making Is Non-Negotiable**
   The success of this initiative was rooted in robust data collection, analysis, and validation. Engineering managers must foster environments where decisions are guided by real-time metrics and statistically significant evidence, rather than anecdotal inputs or assumptions.
2. **Cross-Functional Collaboration Accelerates Improvement**
   The project underscored the importance of breaking down silos between production, maintenance, engineering, and quality assurance. Cross-functional engagement was critical in identifying root causes, co-developing solutions, and sustaining improvements. Engineering leaders should institutionalize cross-functional teams for all major CI (Continuous Improvement) efforts.
3. **Visual Management Reinforces Accountability**
   Tools such as real-time dashboards and color-coded KPI boards empowered operators and supervisors to take immediate corrective actions. Visual management should be championed by engineering leadership as a standard for transparency and performance monitoring.
4. **Standardization Reduces Variability and Risk**
   Revised SOPs, changeover protocols, and preventive maintenance schedules were instrumental in stabilizing the process. Engineering managers must emphasize documentation and adherence to standards as a risk mitigation strategy, especially in high-mix or high-speed manufacturing environments.
5. **Change Management Is as Critical as Technical Intervention**
   Operator resistance and skill gaps initially slowed adoption. Addressing these through structured training, coaching, and feedback loops was essential for sustained success. Engineering leaders must view cultural readiness and workforce engagement as strategic levers in any process transformation.
6. **AI and Predictive Tools Represent the Next Frontier**
   While only partially deployed in this study, AI-based insights showed promise in identifying recurring failure modes and forecasting performance trends. Engineering management should begin exploring and investing in digital technologies that enhance traditional Lean Six Sigma toolsets.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated how using a structured Six Sigma approach significantly improved the performance of an underperforming actuator manufacturing line in a plastic packaging facility. By identifying and fixing root causes—such as equipment misalignment, tool wear, and inconsistent procedures, the project team was able to reduce waste, improve uptime, and exceed daily production targets.

The results were dramatic: scrap was reduced by 90%, downtime was cut by more than half, and output consistently exceeded 24,500 parts per shift. These improvements were achieved without additional labor or compromising safety, proving that process optimization can go hand-in-hand with operational stability and quality.

Just as importantly, the project created a more engaged workforce and a culture of continuous improvement. Operators became active participants in identifying problems and testing solutions, supported by real-time dashboards and clear standard operating procedures.

In simple terms, this project showed that when teams use data to understand what's going wrong and work together across departments, big improvements can happen—quickly and sustainably. The tools and methods used here can be applied across other lines and facilities to drive similar success in both quality and efficiency.

Recommendations

1. Extend the Six Sigma DMAIC framework to additional production lines experiencing similar inefficiencies to replicate success and standardize improvements across the facility.
2. Institutionalize Six Sigma training for operators, technicians, and engineers to build internal capability for continuous improvement and data-driven problem-solving.
3. Integrate AI-powered predictive maintenance tools to proactively identify equipment wear and reduce unplanned downtime.
4. Enhance collaboration with vendors to develop smarter tooling solutions and optimize machine reliability.
5. Incorporate sustainability metrics—such as energy consumption and waste reduction—into future Continuous Improvement (CI) projects to align with environmental goals.
6. Leverage real-time dashboards and visual management systems to maintain process transparency, track KPIs, and reinforce accountability across shifts.

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