

CONTRIBUTOR



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Where lean is now

From the factory floor to the digital age.

Lean started as a simple but powerful mindset: create value, reduce waste, make things flow and don't overstress processes. But in today's world of automation, AI, and shifting economies, where does Lean fit?

Having spent over 30 years in industry, starting in manufacturing and then shifting to change management, I've seen Lean evolve, flourish, fade, and quietly embed itself in surprising places.

Lean gave rise to Agile and Six Sigma, but many organisations turned these into industries full of frameworks, jargon, and certificates. The spirit of improvement often got buried under process.

In the UK, manufacturing now accounts for less than 9% of GDP, down from around 25% in the 1970s (ONS, 2024). Whole regions that once thrived on industry have been hollowed out.

By contrast, India is seeing explosive growth, with its manufacturing sector projected to double from \$500B to \$1T by 2030 (McKinsey, 2023). China, Vietnam, and Japan continue to lead globally, powered by integrated systems and investment in excellence.

From my experience I have noticed that where Lean is embedded in culture, not as a programme but as a habit, manufacturing remains resilient. Ironically, the companies that do Lean best, like Toyota, don't talk about it much. They just do it. It is built into how people think and work.

In Japan, 'gemba' means the place where value is created. It used to mean the factory floor. Today, it might also mean your review of your dashboards, embedded technology as well as getting insight from lived real world experience.

Digital transformation isn't just improving processes; it's replacing or reimagining them. Today, Lean is just as likely to happen in a codebase or dashboard as on a shop floor. Predictive analytics, AI, and automation are eliminating waste and balancing work before a human ever sees it. For example, Siemens uses AI in production systems to auto-adjust processes in real time, delivering quality at scale with minimal human intervention.

Lean isn't just about cutting visible waste; it's also about balancing work and avoiding overload. Only when you see all three together can true flow emerge.

If you're thinking about Lean, don't wait for a big project. Start by practising it, anywhere. At home. In your team. In your community. Ask yourself:

- What do people really value here?
- What's getting in the way?
- Where is mental energy lost and where is there waste of work?
- How can we improve flow?
- What small bits of tech/investment could remove waste?

Lean is still relevant. It just looks different now. And once you start thinking Lean, you'll start seeing opportunities everywhere. ☹



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