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Providing the "perfect touch" user interface
Plant iT and brewmaxx ensure greater transparency at control centres

At the end of 2012, ProLeiT presented the V9 system generation of its Plant iT and brewmaxx process control systems. Now, after almost three years of development, the German company can offer a user interface which, according to COO Manfred Czepl, "meets cutting-edge demands". In an interview with Lebensmitteltechnik, he explains the new „look-and-feel" and reveals: "Full release will take place at drinktec 2013 in Munich."

LT: Mr Czepl, you initially announced the new V9 system generation of the Plant iT and brewmaxx process control systems at Brau Beviale 2012. Did you actually take user wishes into account during the development stage?

MCZ: Definitely, as customer feedback is still a key factor in our decision-making process. Prior to the development of the V9 system generation, we basically focused on the further technical development of system functions. However, during the development of V9, top priority was given to the wishes and requirements of users in terms of user friendliness.

LT: How close is the cooperation between your support and actual users?

MCZ: Through our support service, hotline and project managers, who engage with users in the field, numerous suggestions and wishes are brought to our attention and then meticulously documented, analysed and discussed. The majority of customer feedback flows directly into the further development of our process control systems. Sometimes we are able to react directly to a customer's wish and turn it into reality within a relatively short period of time. This is also the major advantage of being a medium-sized company with a highly flexible and flat organisational structure. We launch a new main version of our process control system every three to four years. There's hardly any competitor out there that can keep up with us.

LT: The biggest changes in V9 refer to the Operation Manager, the core application for operating staff…

MCZ: Working in collaboration with external design agencies, our developers, who underwent specific training in usability and UX design at the Fraunhofer Institute for Applied Technology, have managed to create an interactive user interface. Similar to Microsoft, the dynamic menu bar of V9 displays the content in a more structured manner.

LT: Which advantages does the new user interface offer users?

MCZ: The individually configurable sidebar with its interactive dialogues reduces the click rate and ensures greater clarity. In spite of the system's complexity, it still guarantees intuitive user guidance. Moreover, all the basic systems, modules and add-ons can now be operated centrally from the Operation Manager with a standard "look-and-feel". The familiar "swipe functionality" from Windows 8 is also supported.

LT: A new function of the Operation Manager is the dashboard…

MCZ: …which allows you to effortlessly add and remove content, for example via drag & drop. The view and layout can be individually configured and saved. After logging into the control system, users can access "their own individual" dashboard view. For instance, information on the last batch or the recipe, but also content of the message archive can be displayed quickly and efficiently – according to what the user requires.

LT: Your control system has always offered extensive libraries for graphic objects. A technical innovation of V9 is the Process Screen Designer and the conversion of the graphic formats. Why are vector files now used instead of bitmap?

MCZ: Up to now the creation and connection of new graphic objects was relatively awkward and time consuming. But with our new Process Screen Designer users can modify the graphic objects directly at the workstation simply

Manfred Czepl, COO ProLeiT and responsible for sales and marketing, is sure ProLeiT will meet the demand for easier to use control systems with the new V9 system generation: "Our goal is to ensure that users can work with our process control systems in the most flexible manner possible in the future."

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and quickly – without having to start an external application.

LT: What are the benefits of the vector format?

MCZ: Thanks to the vector format, it is possible to scale all process images and graphic objects to any screen resolution. Furthermore, V9 supports the latest multi-touchscreens with multi-finger operation, including full compatibility with Windows 8.

LT: What are the benefits of the integrated and web-based Report Management System?

MCZ: The V9 system generation ensures that batch and production reports are now accessible online anytime, anywhere via an Internet browser.

LT: Does this mean the user does not necessarily have to be directly in the production environment and have a full Plant iT licence?

MCZ: Not in order to display the reports. This provides shift, plant and company managers with unrestricted access to all current reports. The only requirement is Internet access. The fact that all the reports are now available in real time via a web browser to users outside the control room and without a full Plant iT licence means that the management has full insight into current production processes and key production parameters.

LT: Which opportunities does Plant iT offer to monitor and optimise processes and procedures?

MCZ: If the product quality is not what it should be, the Plant Direct iT Visu-Recorder can help to carry out quality checks and process optimisation. The user therefore has the opportunity to display the entire production process, after specifying the time and date, in a separate screen. The display occurs within any selected process image of the control system. The Plant Direct iT Visu-Recorder is a central tool for assuring the quality of production processes. We have therefore created a unique selling point with this product, since there is no other process control system in the world that offers this function as an integral part of the control system.

LT: Up to now we have spoken about Plant iT. What is the difference between Plant iT and brewmaxx?

MCZ: Plant iT and brewmaxx offer the same basic functions. The applications for recording production data as well as controlling the process and recipe are almost identical. However, Plant iT provides an additional basic system, Plant Batch iT. This is used for typical batch processes in the food, chemicals and pharmaceutical industry. In contrast, the brewmaxx process control system is particularly tailored to the requirements of breweries. And it also offers extended, brewery-specific functions, for instance the brewmaxx equipment modules.
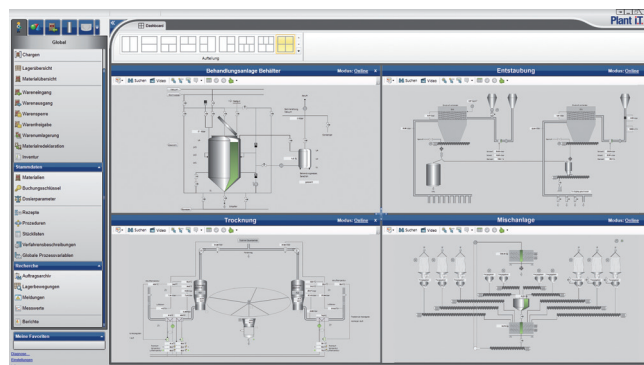
LT: The new version was showcased at Brau Beviale. When will users finally be able to get their hands on the system?

MCZ: Before we release a new main version for productive operation it has to be thoroughly tested in pilot projects.

This test phase under real production conditions with selected core customers usually lasts between six and nine months. Full release only occurs if all the pilot projects have been successful.

LT: And in this case it's just in time for drinktec 2013?

MCZ: That's true. Luckily, the test phase has now been completed. The full release will definitely be available in time for drinktec in Munich. Our customers and system partners will be able to implement V9 after respective training from 15 September onwards.

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