00:04
Speaker 1
Hello and welcome to our very first episode of the Human and Machine podcast. My name is Jaco Markwat. I'm the co-host of the show and I'm here with Lenny Smith. Lenny, how are you?

00:15
Speaker 2
Well, thanks Jaco. Great to be here for our first podcast. I must say, I think we're in day 100 of lockdown with the whole Covid-19 story. It's great to actually be in a room together again, to see each other's faces full. I know it's a podcast, but we are actually seeing one another again in like 100 days. It's been quite tough. Obviously, we are doing our social distancing so people don't have to worry about that. We've got our masks and everything, but it's great to actually sit here and have a little bit of a conversation. I'm actually very interested to hear, don't want to give too much away what we're going to discuss, but to hear a little bit of how this whole situation we've got ourselves into here is shaping the industry that we're in. Obviously, we're in the automation space.

00:58
Speaker 2
We supply automation software to the manufacturing industry and environment. So yeah, it is a bit of a tough time, but I'm quite eager to see how people manage that and get around these challenging times. Because of challenges, there's always opportunities and prospects that can come from that.

01:15
Speaker 1
Absolutely, definitely. It feels quite strange to sit next to you. We haven't seen each other in quite a while and we obviously in Johannesburg in South Africa and I suppose like so many other places in the world, I think Lenny said we're over 100 days of lockdown. Very scary place for us in South Africa. We're nearing 2000 deaths as a result and just a terrible pandemic that has impacted so many people's lives directly and indirectly. So really good to be sitting next to each other and yeah, so the Human and Machine podcast, I suppose why we're at a pivotal moment in this evolution of human innovation and machine automation. And hopefully this podcast will make sense of the latest industrial tech out there, the challenges and opportunities impacting manufacturing today, as Lenny said, specifically here in South Africa.

02:07
Speaker 1
And we want to bring you stories and insights from the community of this industry that we love. Hopefully you'll find these interesting and valuable. We're definitely looking forward to your feedback and yeah, let us know. This is our first gig, our first episode, so hopefully it goes without incident. I'm sure it won't, but yeah, what do we have today?

02:31
Speaker 2
Well, part of my role at element eight is to support our. We're very strong around community, we're very strong about our SI partners.

02:39
Speaker 1
So SISR. Of course, we're probably going to have a lot of three letter acronyms and acronyms on this show, so we'll probably have to explain what some of these are.

02:48
Speaker 2
SI's is the system integrators. They take our software and they really do brilliant things with that. They integrate it, they design it. Part of my role is to assist integrators from a design perspective, architectures and stuff like that. I've actually been to a site again after 100 days of lockdown, and actually been on a site on Monday. And I can truly say that I've seen the impact that this is having on the manufacturing industry. I mean, from a site that normally employs about 400 people, only 45 people is currently active working on that site. And we're not talking about guys actually working on the line. This includes everything from security top management.

03:25

Speaker 1
That's terrible. Are you able to share the industry?

03:28
Speaker 2
I can. It's one thing that's obviously been hit hard in South Africa, and this is the tobacco industry. Part of lockdown is actually clamping down on cigarette sales and bans. So, it's really brought that industry completely to its knees, literally to standstill in effect. And yeah, it's interesting to see what their challenges are and what they do. And this is where our SI community comes in. And they're the real problem solvers, right? They take our software, they're the brilliant people who design it, to engineer it, implement it, and use this technology that we have to offer for industrial operations. And with the conversation that we're going to have today, we're very privileged to have Mister Braam Fenter from advances with us here on the podcast.

04:10
Speaker 2
And we really want to understand, from a system integrated perspective, how did Covid-19 and not just Covid-19 but the whole lockdown effect affected the manufacturing landscape. How do people remain safe? How do we actually connect people with the plant? How do we keep plants and people still being productive in this environment? And what type of technologies do people use to enable that and to improve the processes that we currently have? Some sites do carry on. I mean, the food industry is still up and rather kicking. So, it's not like everything can go completely standstill. So, life must go on. And this is not something that's going to stop tomorrow. I think it's something that's going to be there for quite a while still.

04:55
Speaker 2
And we need to gear up and we need to get ready for when this thing happens again or when such a pandemic or situation happens again in our industry. I think we need to be ready for this for not over the next few months, but potentially for another year or so. We'd love to understand how Advansys are adapting, what challenges do they see and how they're overcoming those challenges.

05:17
Speaker 1
Yeah. Fantastic. So that was your introduction, Brian, thanks for joining us. How are you?

05:24
Speaker 3
I'm good, thanks. Thanks for inviting me and for this very first podcast, Human Machine. I just wonder who's the humans and who's the machine? Yeah, it's okay. Yeah.

05:36
Speaker 1
Thank you for joining us. And it's really, I think it's fantastic just to have some kind of human interaction and sit together with you guys, whether we have our face masks and our sort of hand disinfectant creams. This is really nice to be able to chat with you guys after so many months and days of not working from home. But living at work is more what it's been feeling like. We've been living at work and not working from home. So, Bob, tell us, how did you enter this world of industrial technology? How did it start for you? Is it something that was planned unplanned?

06:09
Speaker 3
I think like most of the things in life starts at young age. You get to a point where you realize, well, this is what I would like to do with my career, that could even start before school, especially with engineers. I don't know about other people. I've never been to other people. So that's just the way it is. And from there, you keep on building up and you keep focus up to a point where you finish with school and then you go and study, and you make a few choices in your study life. And at the end of the day, you get employed by a company.

06:46
Speaker 3
And I think I was very fortunate to be employed into this industry, if I can call it that, have been doing a lot of projects in this industry through those companies, and at the end of the day, started advances.

07:01
Speaker 1
So, Brian, where was home? Was at the hunting.

07:05
Speaker 3
No, no. Home was in Brits. Grew up in Brits.

07:10
Speaker 1
That's northwest province.

07:11
Speaker 3
That's correct, yeah. North of the boulevards curtain as they would sometimes.

07:16
Speaker 1
I think we got a key to explain that term to our international.

07:22
Speaker 3
But it's okay. I think the local ones will definitely understand it, but yeah. So, grew up on a dairy farm not far away from the school, so. And I think the farm life has taught me a lot. All the things that I had to figure out, you know, while kids in town had to, I don't know, just play on. On the farm. We had to work. And if something breaks, you can't just quickly find somebody and come and fix it. You have to figure out yourself. And hence, I think that just helps a lot with your problem solving ability, logical thinking and so forth. So that's definitely a huge benefit that I had in my life differently.

08:08
Speaker 1
Attributes that you use today, without a doubt.

08:11
Speaker 3
Oh, yes, absolutely.

08:12
Speaker 1
To make a plan and sort things out.

08:15
Speaker 3
Yeah, definitely.

08:16
Speaker 1
I think you also sort of more farm style background than city life.

08:21
Speaker 2
Exactly. Not north from the beautiful South.

08:25
Speaker 1
Yeah.

08:25
Speaker 2

From the free states. Let's not go into that one. But, yeah, I did. It is. It is quite. It is quite a. I think it's actually a privilege to grow up in a. You know, in the platterlands, if they call it in Afrikaans, a small community life. You do get that feeling of you know, stuff. Stuff becomes a commodity, rather than you can just quickly go and rip and replace you. You need to really be able to fix stuff, and it becomes a challenge, I think. Yeah, I think these small town guys make great engineers.

08:53
Speaker 1
And, I mean, the industry is not a. It's not a. A lot of people wouldn't think that it's necessarily a sexy industry for youngsters. That's very attractive for young people to get into. I mean, it's. I know it often is something that's highlighted that it's not typically in front of the line when young people look at industries that they want to potentially work in or going to. How did you find that? Braam and Linny, I suppose you as well. How did you find that industry? Is it something that was Braam? You said you always felt you were a born engineer, but the space of industrial technology and industrial automation, that wasn't something that was always something that you aim for, was it?

09:31
Speaker 3
No, but I think it's the only industry that gave me the opportunity where if I do something, I get a reaction out of it. So how can I explain this? If I. Even on a farm, when you. You've learned a lot of stuff, you do something, you get a reaction out of it. And sometimes that's not the reaction that you expected, but the joy of getting that out was great. And I think this is exactly what this industry does. When you start automating a plant and you apply software or logical thinking to that, and you can see how just automatically everything start working. That satisfaction is unbelievable. And I think that's what this industry gives us and that's why it is an exciting industry to work in. And.

10:25
Speaker 3
Yeah, so you build something, you develop something, and you can see the actions coming out of that against whatever the.

10:35
Speaker 1
Vision was of what was required. Yeah, that is definitely the rewarding aspect of it.

10:39
Speaker 3
Yeah, yeah.

10:40
Speaker 2
And I think. I think when I studied engineering, it was always, you think you're going to become an engineer and you're going to be in your little box. But I think the great thing about this automation industry is it throws you completely out of the box. It's almost like you learn everything. You learn from all the way down from the little instruments on the plant floor, all the way up to, you know, project management and everything in between. I think that's also great, is touch so many elements. It's not just engineering and taking to Braams point. Yes, sometimes you do screw up, sometimes you do break a piece of equipment, but the reward of getting something to work and actually all months, all that months of programming and commissioning and getting something to start up is a real kicker.

11:24
Speaker 2
Really an incredible rush when you start doing that stuff.

11:27
Speaker 1
So I'm the older one out. My father said I should become a doctor or something, so I became a something you guys are. Engineering is what it was. And that's a super nice calling and I suppose way of seeing it through.

11:41

Speaker 3
But I think also Jaco, exactly what Lenia said. Now, you've learned so much around automation, and it's, first of all, yes, we can automate a plant or we can automate a piece of machinery, but what's the value in it? So we start learning what the value is of that system and that's where we actually adding value to the industry. If that is the challenge. You can be an engineer and you can think about stuff that you can build and stuff, but is it really going to add value to the customer? What is the business sense behind it? And I think in any career that you have to end up at that point.

12:28
Speaker 3
You can play around with stuff, but if that is not going to be value added stuff, then you are actually wasting your time, unless you're playing around and you learn, which is not wasting time. So they never stop playing. Needs to happen. But it's. My point is just you have, you need to learn the business aspects around.

12:49
Speaker 1
This as well, 100%, because that's where the expected value is supposed to be coming from advancer. So advances been around for how many years? As a business, you have to think about that one.

13:06
Speaker 3
It's maybe not because it's old, it's maybe just not that great in maths today.

13:12
Speaker 1
Ten plus years?

13:15
Speaker 3
Yeah, no, we started in 2008, so that's twelve years. Twelve years.

13:20
Speaker 1
And Advansys of course recognized as one of the leading system integrators in South Africa as far as industrial technologies are concerned. Been going for twelve years. And some of the industries that you work in, Braam, I mean is it limited to certain industries? Is it just in South Africa? Where have you, where's your team been working at the last twelve years?

13:41
Speaker 3
Well, again, automation takes you to any industry and I think that's the beauty of it and that's the fun part of it as well. So we've been working from food and beverage, mining, chemical, cement, interesting materials handling and I'm sure there's some other industries which I can't even think about now. I remember we've even automated or helped automate a light show. One stage, you know, that's not even in the industry. So it is where the solutions need to be provided. I think we're pretty much there. So we're definitely not down to a specific industry.

14:24
Speaker 3
Yes, the main knowledge is very important in the different industries and so we do tend to get the team to focus on certain guys would focus on certain industries and so forth, but we also keep on rotating them, making sure that they do learn from the other industries and not stagnate within one industry. On the working only in South Africa? No, that's definitely not the case. We do have projects running across Africa as well as South America. So yeah, it's. We are not only working here.

15:04
Speaker 1
Cool.

15:04

Speaker 2
And I think even keeping to your roots, you even do some agricultural stuff in the automation space, so that's also quite cool.

15:10
Speaker 3
Yes, absolutely.

15:11
Speaker 1
Yeah, it seems like there's a lot happening in the agri space at the moment as far as automation is concerned.

15:16
Speaker 3
Yeah, it's always been a very difficult industry in terms of automating it. First of all, we need to look at what the value is that they would get out of it. And you know, some farmers just don't have the budgets as a typical big blue chip company to own it.

15:34
Speaker 1
Most of those kind of budgets.

15:35
Speaker 3
Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And, but we see that more and more that they would like to have that form of automation because it does give them less risk in their businesses. So, I think that's actually one of the things that element eight is going to be able to help with as well, is to break into that particular industry and help out those guys, because they need it. Absolutely. I've been there, been in that industry for quite a while knowing about it. We've got some automation stuff running on the dairy, but I know for a fact it could be improved a lot of. But the budget is a challenge.

16:14
Speaker 1
And is that almost more, that's more. Almost iiot, I suppose, industrial Iot kind of applications, where that's coming from. Right.

16:22
Speaker 3
Not just only that, there is. There's some of those applications, yes. If you look at your pivot points and those type of things, yes. Then that. That's a good opportunity. But you do have very small factories and stuff on the farms as well, small manufacturing, boxing, packaging type of things, which is not really an IIT application. But I think if you look at the farming industry, it is agricultural industry, the different type of small manufacturing businesses inside that is actually huge. What they need to do the supply chain is themselves, in a way, they grow their own crops to do something. So, it is to be able to automate across the board.

17:11
Speaker 1
And it is, of course, a massive industry in South Africa and really the stronghold of our economy in many ways, that, together with mining, has just played pivotal roles in our economy and our livelihoods of South Africans. So definitely an exciting industry at the moment.

17:26
Speaker 3
Absolutely.

17:28
Speaker 2
So, Brian, we're sitting in this pandemic, this global pandemic. It's not something that's just local to South Africa. And obviously the way that we do things have changed, pretty much not just for now. I think it's going

to change the way that we do things in the future as well. How did you and your team kind of adapt to this new way of work that we're currently sitting in? This environment that we're sitting in today.

17:52
Speaker 3
We had to adapt very quickly. Let's start there. And I think the team and working with a mature team and understand all the challenges and also the risk around it was very quick for them to be able to do that. So, everybody moved to their home, obviously couldn't come into the office, set up a little home office space. I know that they came and collect some screens and things, whatever they could from the office, just to make it a little bit more comfortable. We've always provided the guys with data, so there's no limitations in that. They can carry on and they can execute their work. In this time, we managed to still commission plants, which I think I really take my hat off of the guys to be able to do that.

18:40
Speaker 3
Commission plans, carried on with projects, and I think one of the main things that was so important is that we could send guys home with work. And I think that we're very fortunate in that sense. We had projects that we could carry on with. They could work remotely. It wasn't projects that they have to do on site. And, yeah, that just helped. I guess that's also helping the guys from a motivation perspective, because they, if you've got work to do, you will carry on challenges. There is absolutely longer working hours. We've seen a lot, and I think that's just a general, and I don't think it's just ever in our industry. I think it's across the board. People were complaining about it.

19:30
Speaker 3
They said we are working longer hours, but it's a discipline and needs to be in place and everybody needs to actually adhere to it and it won't happen. But it's just, no, you're available now. So, let's talk. Let's do this. We're all guilty of that. I won't say we're not.

19:46
Speaker 1
That is a common theme. I mean, when you have conversations with different people, not just in our industry, that's definitely a common theme that you do work a lot more and a lot harder. You know, you are at home, as we said at the beginning, it almost feels like you're living at work, you are available. You know, you walk to the laptop, your workspace, wherever that may be in your home, and you just find that you are putting in a lot more hours than what you typically would do if you would be sort office bound, driving to the office, driving home. And so, it's also important to, I suppose, understand what those hours look like. And especially for you, Braam, as a leader of a team of people to understand is their restful time for everybody involved?

20:26
Speaker 1
Do they feel like they do have moments where they can relax a little bit and almost not live up to that almost expectation that's been created that you have to always be available.

20:36
Speaker 3
Yeah, I think one of the other challenges that we definitely have seen as well is that, you know, when you're stuck with a certain problem and you're in the office and the team is all around you can quickly stand up, you can go and ask somebody have solved this problem, and then you will spend maybe ten minutes and everything is resolved. Now it's either teams meeting or a phone call or somebody's not available because he's busy with another call or something like that. And what it means is that ten minutes that you would have spent, you actually spend now 2 hours on because you have to know self. And so, from an efficiency perspective, I think the efficiency has dropped, but the hours is more to make up for.

21:18
Speaker 2
That, I think on that point, Rom, I think what I've seen a lot during this time as well is the amount of, you know, Online courses, webinars and stuff that suppliers do offer. And I think to your point, yes, I think there's a lot more self learning that happened. Yes. Unfortunately, it does take away from the, from your actual work time, but I do feel out of that particular need of. Sure, I'm sitting with a problem. How do I solve it? I think one

positive spin off of that is that definitely the online webinars and the self learning aspect that Covid has brought to us, I think that at least we can take that positive.

21:54
Speaker 3
Spin out of it. Absolutely. That's a very good point. I'm very impressed with the team and how much of the, I mean, they all started with the ignition training the university, and that was. And I could see how they struggle when they were in the office to get that done.

22:15
Speaker 1
Absolutely.

22:16
Speaker 3
They spent hours, well, not on that, but on works related stuff. But as soon as the lockdown started, a lot of the guys much quicker got through their university. And so, which is great. And they even started with their certification. So in that sense, yes, absolutely. That learning that's there.

22:38
Speaker 1
But there is silver lining. As a result of lockdown, this is the time that we have available for training and education and self improvement, I suppose.

22:46
Speaker 3
Yeah, definitely. But it's still a challenge in terms of this. So the other experiences that you don't quickly google, you know that you have to. And I think that's where the efficiency does drop. But we are, we're getting through it and I think the team has done a great job and it's not going to stop now. This is going to continue, but I think everybody is getting more into the norm. It's more the new norm now.

23:16
Speaker 1
It is the new normal, as I think the buzzword that you read all over the news and social media is the new normal. And I suppose looking at the new normal, I want touch on something. You mentioned Braam, you set, you're able to do the commissioning and you're able to continue with the work. So how does looking after your customers? There's obviously in a face to face environment you can pick up on things like body language, maybe a rise in volume or tone of voice, a lot of those sort of little nuances that we had chatting to each other as human beings and not machine to machine. We're missing out a lot of that. Do you find that's impacted the way that you and your team are dealing with your customers and interacting with them?

24:01
Speaker 3
Yeah, I definitely do think so. I think, Jako, you're spot on. If you're not face to face with a customer, it's very difficult. It's very difficult to see the gauge what is happening. And I think that's where relationships are. So key, prior relationships and advances have always been a company that didn't go out and try to get as many customers as possible. We always try to have little customers and start growing within those customers and maintain those relationships. And I think that's also one of the reasons what helped us through this, because we know who we're dealing with on the other side of the Zoom call or the teams call or even just the telephone, and that is something that can't be learned in lockdown. We had to have that experience before.

24:51
Speaker 3
And so, yeah, dealing with new customers, which we had to, it is very difficult. It is really difficult to figure out what do they really want? And it's a trust. You need to gain that trust again. You need to build up that trust with the customer because effectively, if you want to partner with that customer, he's going to have to trust you in all because he's going to ask you to make decisions for him, but he needs to trust you to take on those decisions.

25:20
Speaker 1

Exactly. Any specific tech that you. I don't know what. There's so many. We're talking about teams and Zoom and there's probably just a plethora of different options available. Any specific tech that you and the team that you had to implement to just to make life workable every day.

25:36
Speaker 3
Look, we've worked with teams and Zoom. That's. I think that would be the two main platforms that we. That we've worked with. But, yeah, we didn't have to go and do specific stuff like connectivity to.

25:49
Speaker 1
The site or anything specific that you needed for that.

25:52
Speaker 3
No, I think one of. We've been educating our customers for a while now that whenever we do a project, we would like a VPN access into the plant, of course, and that's from a support perspective and so forth. And that's always been in place. So it's not something that came out of lockdown. Now it's like, oh, we need to get all of this stuff in place. So what I do think what happened, though, is the it side really had to step up and they had to. It becomes now a real issue if somebody can't connect to the plant. So I think they've been under a lot of pressure to open up.

26:35
Speaker 3
I won't say security, because they always have to protect their plans, but they need to quickly figure out how they're going to do this to allow the access, but still within a secure way. That's a huge challenge.

26:48
Speaker 1
I think you experienced a little bit of that lady earlier this week. Seemingly the pressure that's on it teams at the moment.

26:55
Speaker 2
Exactly. And it opens up the debate about those whole ot it conversions, about security, about how do you secure your plant from malicious attacks from the outside. Because now you need to connect someone that's normally been in the plant environment to the outside world. And obviously there's risk and there's security around that. So, yeah, definitely it is something. And, Braam, do you think that connectivity kind of issue was that something? That there was a challenge? Obviously was a challenge even before lockdown. Do you think that was one of the most common challenges and needs that you've seen in manufacturing space? And it's obviously now being highlighted and been accelerated by the pandemic. But do you think that's one of the challenges that we see in the manufacturing space is this it to conversions and getting that gap closer? And how did.

27:42
Speaker 2
And I presume that the pandemic actually, you know, helped us in that space because that's how you had to do it, right?

27:49
Speaker 1
Yeah, I suppose. Do you find that you have to do more with less at the moment? And do you feel some of that pressure coming through with some of the customers you're speaking to?

27:57
Speaker 3
Yeah, no, definitely. I think that it definitely highlighted the OT IT conversions that needs to happen. And it forced the IT guys to understand the OT side. And it definitely forced the OT guys to understand the IT side.

28:13

Speaker 1
Forced working together.

28:15
Speaker 3
Exactly. And previously it's. I can still access the stuff when I'm on site, but now you're remote and now you normally those connections come from the IT side, and you need to have that. That capability. But I would still like to see what's happening on my plant. So the pandemic has definitely increased that need. I think that's definitely. We have to work and something that we have to work on and find out what would be the best technology and how do we help our customers and the IT and the OT side to get this working. I mean, if we look at the different technologies that came through, we would normally just looking at from a security perspective, you've got your domains and you've got the typical IT infrastructures that we try to work with.

29:08
Speaker 3
But I think the world outside there with the bigger Internet has opened up other opportunities as well. Other methods which never really were sitting in the industrial space, we didn't work with that. And I mean, if we just look at MQTT as a tech, I think it's a brilliant protocol that can be used to bridge that gap. So that is something that I think we need to educate our customers more on. And the it side will understand it as well as the IT side.

29:43
Speaker 2
And I think in South Africa, my experience is that some technologies that's been with us for so long, I mean, we've been talking about cloud technologies for so long in this industry, and it doesn't really seem in South Africa specific that caught on too much. But I think with MQTT, you know, Internet of Things, the pandemic, I think that cloud technology as well as, you know, moving your OT side into a cloud environment to provide access for everybody, I think people are now all of a sudden more open to that idea to actually now embrace cloud technology for the manufacturing environment. I think that's also good things that came from this whole story.

30:24
Speaker 3
Yeah, I agree. It's funny enough, you talk about cloud technology, it's more like a cloud concept. There's only technology now for the IIT space that supports that. And I think that's where the challenge is. It was a lot of talk, a lot of, oh, we can do this. And yeah, it's easy. You can just connect us and then push it up there and voila, done. It's not like that. We need to have the technology that supports it. With all the security protocols in place, with all the functionality that we, as in the industrial space, require. A simple thing like store and forward capability, time series data. There's so many technical things we can talk about. What was lacking in that cloud technology space. And I think that's at that. It's there now.

31:17
Speaker 3
It's been realized somebody has put the effort in, developed something, but that's literally.

31:23
Speaker 1
How long it's taken to reach that point and how many years it's been in development to get to a stage where we feel not only compelled because of circumstance, but also feel now is actually the right time because the tech is in place, it does come at the right price. Obviously, the economic pressure at the moment is severe on most companies, so that does come at the right price. And we feel that it's actually safe to do that now. And we feel that the teams are aligned and ready to do that.

31:51
Speaker 3
Yeah, I agree. The challenges, it's again, that thing about so who's going to make the first move? Who's going to make the first mistake? And are we all going to stand back and wait till we see something that looks tangible, something that we can take forward and build on? And I think that's exactly it. There was a lot of guys that's a jumped onto this, but no one had it precise or it was very closed. So it's only for this manufacturer. You can do this and only this manufacturer can do that. But I think now that it's more open, it's easier to take it forward.

32:29
Speaker 2
Yeah, Braam, I think you guys are in a very lucky position that you do kind of serve a very cross or wide range of industry. You had projects that was kind of before lockdown in place. So it's projects that you kind of take over into this lockdown phase. But is there some industries or some projects that you guys had that potentially fall through the mat? The industries that you see is really struggling at this point in time? And do you think that these industries are getting themselves ready when this all disappears and it's over to actually be able to rebound and start things up very quickly again?

33:10
Speaker 3
Yeah, we definitely. We had some orders being cancelled on us. Unfortunately, were about to start with those projects. So we actually employed guys to do that as well. And that was a big blow.

33:22
Speaker 1
These are obviously. Sorry to interrupt you. These are obviously very large manufacturing in South Africa. I mean, these are not small companies.

33:30
Speaker 3
Yeah, definitely. I mean, if you look at companies overall, Lenny, you said it earlier, food and beverage, they had to carry on. People still need to eat. That's a safe industry to work in. And I think it's the industry that's. Yes, it's not going to be. It's not easy for them, but they carried on and I'm sure they're going to be out the blocks much quicker when everything is done because they weren't really in the blocks. But the other industries, mining, material, handling those industries, which really does rely on an economy that's moving, that is the industry that's struggling. And those are the industries where we got all this cancelled earners as well. But luckily what we could do is we could use that and turn it into an educational phase for the guys. So it wasn't a complete loss.

34:24
Speaker 3
We accelerated the educational side and let the guys just learn so much more.

34:31
Speaker 1
Yeah, maybe a little bit of context for our listeners. We obviously, in South Africa it's now end of June. It is winter. Even though today is a beautiful sunny day, if you've been in Johannesburg in winter, it's about 20 something degrees, I think Celsius today, beautiful winter's day. But we're ending, nearing the end of June. As we said, we've been having over 100 days of lockdown. And definitely, if you read the news, pick up a newspaper, just follow a little bit of what's happening in the economy at the moment. They were predicting a negative eight or an 8% shrinking of the economy. There are some very large food and beverage manufacturers, for example, that are laying off people and just posting some quite scary revenue numbers. But we do also see some silver linings and we do also see some green spots coming out.

35:21
Speaker 1
And certain guys looking at, to your point, Bram, implementing and looking at stuff now that they've never had to do because they're almost forced to do it now and educate themselves on how to do it.

35:32
Speaker 3
Yeah.

35:35
Speaker 2
So based on that, on education and self learning, I also believe that you guys have achieved your gold certification on the ignition platform. So first of all, congratulations on that.

35:48
Speaker 1
Fantastic. You have to tell us what ignition is, though some people may not know what ignition is.

35:52
Speaker 2
So ignition is an industrial platform that you can utilize to other build SCADA solutions, or HMI. So human machine interfaces to your actual pieces of equipment on the plant. So they have a very brilliant online education process. They call it the inductive university where you can actually go and get certified. Obviously, training during this phase is how do you do training? It's very difficult. Face to face training, again, is so important because you get that human interaction. You can see a guy's expression on his face, you know, when someone needs help. But again, companies had to adapt. We're very fortunate with ignition that they had this brilliant platform already in place.

36:34
Speaker 1
Linux sounds like a punt. And maybe this disclaimer very early on in our podcast that Lenny and I are with element eight, obviously, which is a distributor, very proud distributor for ignition SCADA in South Africa. Scada. We probably don't want to explain too much in terms of what SCADA is now. Hopefully, if you know what a Scada is, you're listening to the right podcast. But yeah, we are a local distributor of ignition. Very exciting technology that's fairly new in South Africa.

37:06
Speaker 2
Yeah, it's new in South Africa. I mean, we've started element eight, what, Jaco two months ago. Three months ago. So we very.

37:14
Speaker 1
It feels like three years.

37:15
Speaker 2
It does. Especially with lockdown. You lose a little bit of sense of time. So, yeah, we still early in phases of the distribution ship, but ignition has been around internationally for more than 13 years now. So it's not an overnight developed solution. It's been proven in the industry. 45% of the top 100 blue chip companies use it in their manufacturing environment. It's been in South Africa for a while. There are some sites that's already running it, but, yeah, since January, we are the proud distributors of it.

37:50
Speaker 1
And advisors just became gold certified.

37:52
Speaker 2
Exactly. So, Braam, what does that mean to you? I mean, you must be thrilled.

37:57
Speaker 3
Yeah, I was actually very surprised, to be honest. It was quite a game as a. I wouldn't say it's a shock, but definitely a surprise. We've asked the team to go and whenever they get time, they.

38:11
Speaker 1
That's typically how it works, Braam. You tell certain members of your teams, listen, you've got to get onto this certification or that training, and they. They get onto it.

38:19
Speaker 3

Exactly. We've always believed that when you do any training, you should have a project because then you'll remember the stuff. I think that's one thing that Covid has changed now. It's like, okay, you've got time. Go do training. It's a completely different thing. But they've gone beyond that. They've done the training. After you've done the training, then you can do your certification.

38:38
Speaker 1
And that was all online?

38:39
Speaker 3
Yep. That was all online, yeah. So that the university, inductive university is videos, tutorials. And then you go and you answer a few questions and then you get your very simple.

38:52
Speaker 2
What?

38:52
Speaker 3
Well, not that simple, but it takes some time. Then you get a. What they call it. What do you call it? Lenny. Credential.

39:00
Speaker 1
Yeah.

39:00
Speaker 2
So if you're done with your university, your credential, and then you can do. Then there's different tests. So courses.

39:05
Speaker 3
That's right. And then you get it. Then you can do the test. And then you. You can download the test, which I believe there's two sections of the test. The diagnostic one, you have a little bit of bugs that you need to find or something like that. And then the other one is a actual project that you need to hand back to them. And then they will mark that. Once you succeeded in that, then you get certified, and then once you certify it, then you can go for gold. And I wasn't. I didn't even think that the guys would even try that, you know, I thought if they can just get certified, it would be. It would be good enough because I've seen the test. I haven't finished my certification because I just haven't had time to do that yet, to be honest.

39:49
Speaker 3
But I was surprised. And once they've got their certification, one of the members, Jeremy, just decided, that's it. He's going to go for gold. And it was funny, I had a conversation with another team member on the Friday, and I said to him, he then asked me, can he go for the gold? And I said, sure. And I think if you do gold and you get it, you will be the first one in Africa, not even South Africa, but Africa, that will be gold certified. So he was very impressed, and he was like, oh, okay, great, he's going to do it. And the Monday morning, I looked on the website and then I saw, but advances has got golden. And I'm like, but that can't because we only chatted about it on Friday. There's no way. I mean, it's a process.

40:38
Speaker 3
They need to, once you do the gold certification, it's. They need to mark the tests and things like that. It takes time to get it. And then I went in and I saw it was actually Jiren that also decided to gold. That's fantastic.

40:52
Speaker 1
Over a weekend. Well, almost. Nearly a weekend. Not quite, no.

40:56
Speaker 3
No. So it wasn't him. It was. So Jerin did his certification, then he started to do his gold in the same time, but it was one of the other team members that really, he wasn't too happy because he thought he was going to be the first one. But at the end of the day, the team did great.

41:14
Speaker 1
A little bit of internal competition.

41:15
Speaker 3
Yeah, it's a little bit of, it's never a bad thing.

41:17
Speaker 1
And that certification you obviously work with as a system integrator, you obviously work with many different kinds of technologies. Is that certification per. Technology is quite important. I suppose if I'm a manufacturing customer and I would want to work with somebody like advances, I would want to understand that the guys actually know what they're doing. They've worked with a product, they've done something with it. They are certified. It's almost like the stamp of approval from my end.

41:44
Speaker 3
Yeah, I want to turn it around a bit. I'm going to say I don't want to send an engineer into the field if I don't know that he knows what he's doing. And so we can't tell customers what they need to do and who they accept on their plans and so forth. But I don't want to do that. I don't want to send a guy out there and say, okay, you know what? Just go and figure out what is happening on that site and solve it with this piece of software. It doesn't work like that. We talked about it earlier. You need to know what you're doing. You need to know. You need to know your industry. You need to know what value you're going to add. It's not just writing software. It's much bigger than just that.

42:24
Speaker 3
And knowing the product is only a part of it. Not knowing the product is an absolute risk and that's definitely not what we want to do. So, yeah, it's to be certified, gold certified. I think it's awesome. It's brilliant. I'm so glad that the guys has done that, put us into that position and. Yeah, well, thanks. Thanks a lot.

42:50
Speaker 2
Now, we don't have a crystal ball, unfortunately, but things are starting to get a little bit, I wouldn't say back to normal in South Africa, but at least we can travel domestically for work so we can actually go on domestic flights again. Schools are almost starting to be fully operational again. So it's a. We're getting very slow and to the next phase of the lockdown process. But from an integrated perspective. Brom, I know three to six months is probably a short term to look at this, but what do you feel is the most exciting?

43:23
Speaker 1
It's probably forever.

43:24
Speaker 2
It's probably forever. But when all of this is done or in the next three or six months, what do you feel is the most exciting thing as an integrator after. After this whole pandemic?

43:40
Speaker 3
I think the unknown is the most exciting. It could also be the most difficult, but it's definitely exciting. I think there's a lot of innovation that's going to happen in the next three to six months, even maybe longer than that.

Companies are going to realize they need to make some changes. There's a pool of people out there, which sits between all our companies that is going to try to solve something. And to be able to solve something, somebody needs to innovate time for innovation and I think that's going to happen. There's a lot of innovation that's going to have to happen and I think we would love to be part of that innovation.

44:20
Speaker 3
At this stage, we are heads down coding, writing, not really coding, but writing software for solutions that we still had to implement and making sure that we still get the cash flow gain. But the exciting part is, I think it's going to be the innovation. I think that's it. What is going to come out of this? We don't know yet. We're still going to go into a tough period, no doubt. I think that's going to happen. Customers are not just going to start spending money, but they will. There should be innovation. I think that's more the thing. There should be innovation not only to.

45:02
Speaker 2
Get ready for, well, potentially the next pandemic, but as you said, provide more value, streamline your operations. Cost cutting, because obviously there will be cost cutting after this. There's no doubt about it. And it's right that what can you offer that's going to be. That's going to do something extra so that your internal investment is going to be greater at the end today from innovation perspective?

45:23
Speaker 3
Yeah, absolutely.

45:25
Speaker 1
Cool. Braam. Thank you very much. That was great insight from what it's like being a system integrator in South Africa at the moment, especially during the times that we sing at the moment. It was lovely chatting to you, bro. Great guy. Thank you very much for your time. Lenny, is there anything else for Brian?

45:42
Speaker 2
No, I think that's it. Thanks, bro. Great.

45:44
Speaker 3
Oh, thanks, guys. It's great to be sitting next to you as well. It's definitely not been the norm in the last few days, but thanks for the invite. Thanks for us. Yeah, good luck. Thanks a lot.

46:00
Speaker 1
Good luck for the next few months. We're looking forward to that innovation and really coming from the system integrators, the people that take some of these tech and implements it in a way that it adds value to the way that people interact with processes. So thank you for all your hard work, Braam, and good luck the next little while. So, next week, Lenny, what do we have coming up? Next week? We're chatting with Graham Walton from Flow Software.

46:21
Speaker 2
Yes.

46:21
Speaker 1
Awesome. I don't know if you knew that.

46:23
Speaker 2
No, actually.

46:26
Speaker 1
So next week we're chatting with Brom. I believe you know Graham as well.

46:29
Speaker 3
I bet you just innovated that.

46:32
Speaker 1
No, it's planned. So, in the back end of this podcast, we have Clarice. Clarice is working really hard to identify people that we think would be valuable to chat with and get some insights from in this sort of human and machine industry in South Africa. So Graeme is the MD at flow software. Leni knows flow very well and quite well. And were chatting to Graeme next week a little bit about understanding what it was like to start flow as a business. It's of course, a proudly south African homegrown software. What it was like conceptualizing, productizing flow and. Yeah, that's our episode for next week. Lenny, I think you're looking forward to that one.

47:10
Speaker 2
Definitely. I think not only connectivity issues as we discussed today and the webinar from what this pandemic has told us, but I think a massive improvement and a massive thing that again, big words is being thrown around about AI and machine learning and turning data and information. And I think again, this pandemic has forced us to start really looking at those technologies into in our industrial space. So I'm very excited to hear what grams have to say about taking data, massive amount of data that our manufacturing plants do generate on the plant floor every day and really turning that into actionable information with the flow information platform to help people during this time to make better decisions, smarter decisions.

47:52
Speaker 2
And again, just making sure that we get the return of investment back of this millions of rands of manufacturing equipment that we install in our industries every day.

48:02
Speaker 1
That's actually the flow tagline, making better decisions more often. So that's who our guest is next week and we look forward to chatting with you then, Ram, thanks again for joining us. Thanks everyone.

48:14
Speaker 3
Thanks. Thanks, Jaco. Thanks Lenny.

48:16
Speaker 2
Awesome.