



## Table of Contents

Exploring the value of Warehouse 5.0: A Literature Review Martina Farioli, and Martina Baglio . . . . .	1
Literature review on challenges and barriers for MES implementation Arianna Panerai, Fatine Knidla, Piers Barrios, Virginia Fani, Julien Le Duigou, Romeo Bandinelli, and Benoît Eynard. . . . .	11
Developing Regional Innovation Ecosystem for Industry 4.0 needs Katariina Karjalainen, and Jyri Vilko. . . . .	21
Automated derivation of MTM analyses from VR data using MTMmotion® – process evaluation and comparison with manual analysis Martin Benter, Maria Neumann, and Peter Kuhlant . . . . .	30
Deep Reinforcement Learning Based Parameter Optimization for Processing Curved Surfaces Jenish Thapa, Fabian Widmoser, Anish Pratheepkumar, Markus Ikeda, and Andreas Pichler . . . . .	40
From Prompt to Graph: Comparing LLM-Based Information Extraction Strategies in Domain-Specific Ontology Development Xuan Liu, Ziyu Li, Mu He, Ziyang Ma, Xiaoxu Wu, Gizem Yilmaz, Yiyuan Xia, Bingbing Li, He Tan, Jerry Ying Hsi Fuh, Wen Feng Lu, Anders E.W. Jarfors, and Per Jansson . . . . .	50
Intelligent Intralogistics in the context of Reconfigurable Material Handling Systems based on LLMs John Angelopoulos, Maria Papamarkaki, and Kosmas Alexopoulos. . . . .	61
Building Trust in AI: A Qualitative Study of Human-AI Interaction Viktoria Leutheuser, Felix Schäfer, Julian M. Müller, and Kai-Ingo Voigt. . . . .	71
Matching Industry 5.0 and Renewable Energy Integration: an optimization approach for robotic warehouses Simone Bellan, Edoardo Cuzzolin, Fabio Tardivo, and Antonella Meneghetti . . . . .	81
The use of Natural Language Processing (NLP) in aviation: A case study using BERT Mariana M. Lopes, Duarte Dinis, Roberto Sala, and Fabiana Pirola. . . . .	91
Toward Resilient and Digital Automotive Sourcing Process: A Blockchain and Smart Contracts-Based Solution Azz-eddine Meafa, Abia Chaouni Benabdellah, Kamar Zekhnini, and Basma Meziouni. . . . .	101
A conceptual framework for Zero-Error AI agents using Digital AI Passport approach Foivos Psarommatis, George Siaterlis, Dimitris Apostollou, Alexandros Bousdekis, John Soldatos, and Chrysostomos Stylios. . . . .	111
Practical Implementation of Binding Mechanisms in Asset Administration Shell for Real IIoT Platforms Mohamad Wael Khashfeh, Sebastian Linke, Ronny Stolze, Tobias Tute, Denes Schäfer, and Rüdiger Mecke. . . . .	121

Toward Explainable and Sustainable Manufacturing: Benchmarking Causal Discovery on Process Duration and Energy Use	
Merin Vinod Jacob, Tamas Fekete, and Hendro Wicaksono . . . . .	131
IMMERSIVE LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY: XR'S ROLE IN HYDROGEN TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION	
Manuel Labrador Ortega, Robert Obenaus-Emler, Mariaelena Murphy, and Corina Pacher . . . . .	140
Applied AI in Logistics: A YOLOv8 Case Study	
Fabian Behrendt, Eric Peuschel, and Daniel Menschulin . . . . .	149
Surface Roughness Prediction in Turning Stainless Steel Applying Deep Learning and LSTM Networks	
Christoph Lerez, Richard Petermann, Csaba Felhö, Tanuj Namboodri, Alexander Neu, Norbert Szűcs, Mortda Mohammed Sahib, Philipp Plänitz, and Matthias Hackert-Oschätzchen . . . . .	159
Digitalizing Quality Monitoring and Control for Increased Production Process Efficiency: A Case Study	
Adam Hamrol, Agnieszka Kujawińska, Krzysztof Żywicki, Artur Meller, and Magdalen Hryb . . . . .	169
Causally-Guided Pairwise Transformer - Towards Foundational Digital Twins in Process Industry	
Michael Mayr, and Georgios C. Chasparis . . . . .	175
Institutional Drivers of Green purchasing in Emerging Economies: A Framework for Sustainable Transportation in Nigeria	
John Michael Maxel Okoche, Christian Azuka Olele, Marcia Mkansi, and Anthea Amadi-Echendu . . . . .	185
Exploring Themes and Determinants of Industry 4.0 Adoption in Smart Manufacturing Sector: A Mixed-Methods Approach	
Rupali Saini, Sunil Sharma, and Vivek Soni . . . . .	197
Fermentation system in kefir production using fuzzy logic	
Honorato Ccalli Pacco . . . . .	207
A Smart Lean-IoT Framework for Advanced Medical Device Manufacturing	
Mario Di Nardo, Maryam Gallab, Valentina Popolo, Shatrudhan Pandey, and Lorian Ricciardi . . . . .	217
Assessing the Potential of the Digital Product Passport in the Regulated Biomedical Sector	
Nada Chagh, Stéphanie Glatard-Mahut, Jean-Matthieu Prot, and Benoît Eynard . . . . .	225
Development and Evaluation of a Semi-Automated Pilot System for Selective PCB Disassembly in Support of the Circular Economy	
Lorenzo Gandini, Paolo Rosa, and Sergio Terzi . . . . .	233
Enhancing Circularity through Product Lifecycle Management: a Framework proposal	
Vito Del Vecchio, Mariangela Lazoi, Francesco Otello Buccoliero, Giorgia Specchia, Fabiana Tornese, and Serena Andriulo . . . . .	243
Are research and practice in the future of warehousing aligned?	
Susana Relvas . . . . .	253
Integrating simulation and reinforcement learning for optimized working capital management in supply chains	
Ali Badakhshan, Ehsan Badakhshan, Sameh M Saad, and Ramin Bahadori . . . . .	263
Investigating the Interplay of Sustainability and Resilience of Austrian Manufacturing Supply Chains	
Barbara Fürthner, Patrick Dürnberger, Michael Kuttner, Herbert Jodlbauer, Isabell Bogner, Manuel Hann, and Julian M. Müller . . . . .	271
From Compliance to Circularity: Stakeholder Perspectives on Adopting Digital Product Passports in Technical Plastics	
Tassilo Pellegrini, Roman Wurz, Zahra Mesbahi, and Jamilya Nurgazina . . . . .	281

The Use of Generative AI in Foresight: A Model Comparison for Scenario Development Filippo Nicola Coppoletta, Laura Bechthold, and Luigino Filice . . . . .	291
Integrating ReMake DPP and Remanufacturing Decision Engine to enable the next wave of SME remanufacturers Syed Awais H Munawar, Moritz Hoffmann, Steffi Knorn, Scott Ronald Howie, and Stephen Fitzpatrick . . . . .	301
Digital Product Passport and Administrative Burden Reduction: Potential for Streamlining Cross-legislative and Cross-jurisdiction Compliance Kartik Chawla, Borianna Rukanova, Yao-Hua Tan, Anh Dao, and Carolynn Bernier . . . . .	311
Measuring sustainability in logistics: a GHG assessment model for intermodal logistics networks Cannava Luca, Perotti Sara, and Iuliano Andrea . . . . .	322
Assessment of the Impact of Human Factors on Decision-Making in Port Logistics: A Regression-Based Analysis Maurício Randolfo Flores, Diego de Castro Fettermann, Enzo Morosini Frazzon, and Vanina Macowski Durski Silva . . . . .	332
Realization of a Digital Process Chain Architecture: Rapid Reconfiguration of Production Machines for Product Changes Nico Schramm, Tim Richter, Kai Grunert, Ismail Can, Aaron Hoppe, Till Tschiltschke, Moritz Chemnitz, Matthias Stollenwerk, Thomas Cory, and Wolf Rieder . . . . .	342
Ontology Requirements for Digital Product Passports based on the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation Tarmo Robal, Riina Maigre, and Hele-Mai Haav . . . . .	356
Process Discovery in Industrial Valve Maintenance Using NFC Technology: A Scalable Business Process Mapping Approach for SMEs Alessandra Valeria Castruccio Castracani, Ferdinando Chiacchio, Diego D’Urso, Ludovica Oliveri, Natalia Trapani, and Mario Mirenda . . . . .	366
Smart Alerting: A Forecasting and Anomaly Detection System for Data-Driven Decision-Making Sabrina Luftensteiner, Johann Schrammel, Lisa Diamond, and Richard Degenfellner. . . . .	376
Human-Technology Relationship: AI Adoption in Manufacturing Felix Schäfer, Viktoria Leutheuser, and Kai-Ingo Voigt . . . . .	384
Architecting Circular Economy: Towards a Transdisciplinary Ontological Foundation Ali Asghar Bataleblu, John Poirier, and Erwin Rauch . . . . .	394
Bridging Institutional Pressures and Critical Raw Material Supply Risk: The Mediating Role of Green Supply Chain Practices Antonio Piepoli, Andrea Genovese, Roberta Pellegrino, and Pierpaolo Pontrandolfo . . . . .	404
E-service Quality and Customer E-satisfaction Nexus in the Industry 4.0: Evidence from Vietnam Phuong Mai Nguyen, Truong Thi My Hanh, Ngo Phuc Hanh, and Nguyen Lan Phuong. . . . .	414
Engineering Education and the role of Digital and Sustainable Competences in Operations Management: A Focus Group Discussion Tanja Sajko, Volker Koch, Adele Hössinger, and Bernd Markus Zunk . . . . .	424
The impact of supportive technologies on the human factor in warehousing: classification of assessment approaches in experimental studies Vittoria Tudisco, Sara Perotti, and Elena Tappia . . . . .	433
Energy-Efficient Shift Staffing and Machine Stopping: A Threshold-Driven Two-Level Heuristic Balwin Bokor, Wolfgang Seiringer, Klaus Altendorfer, and Roland Braune. . . . .	443

Do Green Motivations Matter in the Relationship Between Green Human Resource Management and Sustainable Performance? Insights from Logistic SMEs in an Emerging Economy Truong Thi Hue, Nguyen Thi Huyen, and Do Thi Thanh Le. . . . .	453
A Fuzzy Inference System for Early Detection of Unproductive Stock in Retail Supply Chains Pedro Espadinha-Cruz . . . . .	463
Numerical Modelling of Delamination of Crystalline Photovoltaic Modules to Enable Efficient Recycling Agata Sposato, Giovanni de Martino, Gianni Stigliano, Claudio Cignali, Michele Dassisti, and Domenico Umbrello. . . . .	473
A simulation-driven (r, Q) replenishment policy for perishable blood inventory management El Gharbi Douaa, Aboueljine Lina, and Lebbar Maria . . . . .	484
Development of Contour Variable Automated Guided Vehicles for Small Load Carriers Lothar Schulze, and Li Li. . . . .	494
From Urban-Industrial Symbiosis towards Smart Sustainable Cities, a Pathway for Circular and Carbon-neutral Cities Sergio Artimena, Victor Azamfirei-Ionita, and Radu Godina . . . . .	504
Competitive Advantage Through Operational Excellence in the Food and Beverage Industry: A Case Study Marufa Kgarose, Arnesh Telukdarie, Mpho Manenzhe, and Tatenda Hatidani Katsumbe . . . . .	514
AI Asset Management for Manufacturing (AIM4M): Development of a Process Model for Operationalization Lukas Rauh, Mel-Rick Süner, Daniel Schel, and Thomas Bauernhansl . . . . .	524
Enhancing Sustainability in the Food and Beverage Supply Chain through Blockchain Technology: Challenges and Opportunities Hajar Fatorachian, and Lawal Omowunmi . . . . .	534
Formalizing the Digital Thread: A Standards-Based MBSE Integration Framework Nikolett Körtvélyi, Thomas Schichl, and Mario Jungwirth. . . . .	545
Hypergraphs for disassembly processes: a comparison of approaches Rufus Fraanje, Abboy Verkuilen, and Jenny Coenen. . . . .	554
Energy-Aware Production Planning and Control in Container Glass Manufacturing with Hydrogen-Fueled Furnace Hossein Arshad, Giulia Fede, Chiara Caccamo, and Fabio Sgarbossa . . . . .	566
Managing complexity in manufacturing: highlights from autonomic computing applications Walter Quadrini, Simone Arena, Francesco Alessandro Cuzzola, and Marco Taisch . . . . .	576
Towards a digital factory twin: systematization of material flow simulation use cases Fiona Kattenstroth, Michael Kranz, Sebastian Hunger, Dennis Withot, Aschot Hovemann, and Roman Dumitrescu. . . . .	586
Trustworthy Digital Product Passports based on Distributed Ledgers- A Review and Guidelines Tiphaine Henry, Loik Assekour, Carolyn Bernier, Sara Tucci-Piergiovanni, and Nadège Troussier . . . . .	596
Impact of justice on Supply Chain performance in smart government Chaouni Benabdellah Ghita, and Chaouni Benabdellah Abla . . . . .	606
Is there an emerging path to brand equity in the digital age? The role of personalized Facebook advertising and brand experience Pham Minh Phuong, Truong Thi Hue, Hang Thi Thu Trinh, and Ninh Truong Thi Thuy. . . . .	617

Low-cost sump pump monitoring for condition-based maintenance Juan C. Granda, Luis Magadán, Alonso Menéndez, and Francisco J. Suárez . . . . .	627
Assistive Device Selection for Operators with Disabilities in Industry 5.0 Manufacturing: A Kansei Engineering Approach Amberlynn Bonello, Emmanuel Francalanza, Paul Refalo, and Maria Victoria Gauci. . . . .	637
Opportunities and Challenges of 3D Scanning Technology in Quality Control and TPM Strategies for SMEs within Industry 4.0 Dorota Klimecka-Tatar, and Marek Krynce. . . . .	647
Designing Smart Services for Smart Factories through Continuum Computing Raffaele Gravina, Luca Greco, Antonio Guerrieri, and Claudio Savaglio. . . . .	657
Fabric in Flight: Highly Reconfigurable Fabric Testing Station Jonathan Dunlop, Nicholas Ganci, Phillip Crothers, Alireza Bab-Hadiashar, Ruwan Tennakoon, and Stuart Bateman. . . . .	667
A theoretical framework for vineyard irrigation management using AI-driven sensor systems Domenico Capone, Leonardo Agnusdei, Pier Paolo Miglietta, Amenallah Zouari, and Giulio Paolo Agnusdei . . . . .	677
Evaluating Industry 5.0 Adoption: Insights on Industrial IoT and Sustainability in Italian Manufacturing Camilla Scarpino, Angela Tumino, Giulio Salvadori, and Roberta Vadrucio . . . . .	685
Maintenance management of compressed air systems through digital twin integration Birkan Işık, Gülbahar Emir Işık, and Miroslav Zilka . . . . .	695
Navigating Contextual Complexity in Smart and Sustainable Production: A Comparative Study on the Selection and Integration of Digital Technologies Natalie Agerskans, Jessica Bruch, Mohammad Ashjaei, Nicolas Leberruyer, and Koteswar Chirumalla . . . . .	705
An Event-Streaming Architecture for Machine Learning in Dynamic Sensor Landscapes Philipp Neuhauser, Florian Holzinger, and Stefan Wagner . . . . .	718
A Value-Sensitive Design Approach for Embedded Systems in Industry 5.0 Thomas John Galea, Emmanuel Francalanza, Paul Refalo, and Andre Micallef . . . . .	728
The Influence of Preprocessing on Time Series Prediction Florian Grimm, Günter Bitsch, and Clemens van Dinther. . . . .	739
Twin Transformation in Manufacturing: A Maturity Model Blueprint Grounded in Organizational Design Theory Seyedehmehrsa Fatemi, Sanja Smiljic, and Behzad Behdani . . . . .	749
Human-Centered Industrial Transition: A Human-Technology-Organization Acceptance Model for Industry 5.0 — Conceptual Framework and Research Protocol Thomas Capet, Stephane Blanquart, Muhammad Ameer, and Luc Audibert . . . . .	762
Heat Pump Integration in Food Industry Pasteurization: A Bibliometric and Technical Review Giovanni Paolo Carlo Tancredi, and Giuseppe Vignali . . . . .	772
Interoperability in IoT-Integrated Smart Packaging for Inventory Tracking: Challenges, Opportunities, and Operational Impact Jawaher J. Alghawi, and Atidel B. Hadj-Alouane . . . . .	780
Optimisation of Cutting Tool Geometry and Operating Parameters based on Taguchi Method for Turning AISI D2: Surface Roughness Analysis Salah Gariani, Taher Dao, and Ahmed Lajili . . . . .	791

Performance Analysis of Ultra-Wideband Indoor Localization for Smart Factory Applications Chi-Min Liao, Kuo-Shen Chen, Yu-Chen Liang, Zi-Cheng Wang, and Stainslav Vechet. . . . .	801
The Role of Gender, Age, and Technology Affinity in Experiencing Techno-Distress and Techno-Eustress Louisa Marie Dauer, and Verena Nitsch . . . . .	811
From Service to Second Life: A Two-Tier Scoring Framework for Reuse, Remanufacturing, and Recycling of Multidomain Assemblies Patrick Bründl, Sophie Wagner, Albert Scheck, and Florian Risch. . . . .	821
Requirements Engineering for Data Spaces in Cross-Organizational Co-Design: A Case Study Approach Bernd Hader, Martin Schellander, Somin Jeon, Lukas Leitner, Alexandra Saliger, Zahra Safari Dehnavi, Manfred Grafinger, Franz Haas, and Sebastian Schlund . . . . .	831
Credit Portfolio Assessment Using Machine Learning: A Case Study of a Mexican Non-Bank Financial Institution. Solano Martínez Giovanni, Piña Silva Guillermo Azahel, and Flores De La Mota Idalia . . . . .	841
Industrial Data Marketplaces: Requirements and Potentials for Enabling Digital Twins Johannes Mayer, Martin Unterberg, Lucia Ortjohann, Marco Becker, Philipp Niemietz, and Thomas Bergs . . . . .	850
AI-Assisted Dismantling of Electric Vehicle Batteries – A Case Study on Technology Networking Gerald Bräunig, Dominik Hertel, Sara Menetrey, Kai Kaufmann, Thomas Reuter, Jonas Hummel, and Florian Richter . . . . .	860
Enhancing Flexibility and Resilience of Manufacturing Systems for Small-Batch Production through Simulation Modeling Maximilian Gey, Janis Menke, Gonsalves Grünert, Philipp Niemietz, and Thomas Bergs . . . . .	870
Management-level perceptions of occupational safety and health factors in the heavy machinery industry: Preliminary findings from Austria and Serbia Amila Omazic, Vesna Spasojević-Brkić, Vanessa Stadlober, Martina Perišić, Ivan Mihajlović, Emmanuel Francalanza, and Bernd Markus Zunk. . . . .	880
Characteristics of biofuel price uncertainty – A systematic literature review Annika Ahtiainen, and Jyri Vilko. . . . .	890
A dedicated fix-and-relax decomposition method for operating room scheduling problem Grégoire Gielly, Yassine Ouazene, and Nhan Quy Nguyen. . . . .	899
Bridging Warehousing 4.0 and 5.0: a DSR-based methodology to guide the shift towards Industry 5.0 principles Edoardo Cuzzolin, Matteo Cais, and Antonella Meneghetti . . . . .	909
Prompt Tuning and Retrieval in Open-Vocabulary Object Detection for Configurable Robot Vision Stefan Fix, Michael Hofmann, and Andreas Pichler . . . . .	919
Multivariate geospatial modelling of drought exposure using multi-year remote sensing data Alessandra Capolupo, and Eufemia Tarantino. . . . .	928
The Impact of the Level of Information Support for Technological Change Management on the Scope, Speed, and Effectiveness of Its Implementation in Enterprises Olexandr Yemelyanov, Tetyana Petrushka, Orest Koleshchuk, Kateryna Petrushka, and Mykola Mashkovskiy. . . . .	948
AI in Education for Smart Manufacturing: Assessing the Readiness and Needs of Students and Teachers in Developing Countries Bella Gabrielayn, Svetlana Ratner, Meri Manucharyan, and Tatevik Shahinyan . . . . .	958

Energy aware scheduling via tree-based search algorithms: A case study on lead plate curing Stefan Habringer, Florian Holzinger, Bernhard Werth, Stefan Wagner, and Alexander Zoubek . . . . .	968
DieHard: Human-Centric Responsible and Resilient Autonomy for Mission-Critical Smart Systems Vagan Terziyan, Ivo Bukovsky, Olena Kaikova, Florian Sobieczky, and Timo Tiihonen . . . . .	977
Corporate Resilience Management in the Context of Digital Transformation: Technology as a Driver of Resilience Niels Schmidtke, and Fabian Behrendt . . . . .	989
Design for Circularity in Commercial Vehicles: A Framework for Bridging Circular Economy Concepts and Design for X Carolin Escherich, Amelie Kübler, and Johannes Fottner . . . . .	999
Fault Diagnosis Framework for Mechatronics Systems Using Digital Model and Machine Learning Heni Belgacem, Mohammad Abuabiah, and Inès Chihi . . . . .	1009
Explainable and Scalable Job Recommendation System using Transformer-based Text Summarization, Cross-Encoder Semantic Similarity, and Ensemble Learning Reham Hesham El-Deeb, Walid Abdelmoez, and Nashwa El-Bendary . . . . .	1019
Designing a Simulation-Based Decision Support System for Managing Frost Risk in the Wine Supply Chain Benedetta Franco, Valentina De Simone, Marta Rinaldi, and Raffaele Iannone . . . . .	1031
Social Sustainability Assessment in Manufacturing: A Scoping Literature Review Valentina De Simone, Valentina Di Pasquale, Emmanuel Francalanza, Raffaele Iannone, and Salvatore Miranda . . . . .	1041
Enhancing Digital Product Passports with Material Fingerprinting and Decentralized Non-Conformity Signals: Application to Critical Raw Materials Rouwaida Abdallah, Doruk Şahinel, Oscar Ansotegui Adarve, and Daniel Montfort . . . . .	1051
A Conceptual Digital Twin Framework: Design Guidelines for a Smart Port Gate Context Raquel Gil Pereira, Rui Borges Lopes, and Leonor Teixeira . . . . .	1061
Lean-AI and Computer-Vision-Based Tool for Construction and Demolition Waste Management Asfar Nasir Khan, Muhammad Haris, Muhammad Talha, Salman Khan, Mohsin Iqbal, and Rafiq Ahmad. . . . .	1071
Evaluating the robustness of classical availability models in non-memoryless failure scenarios Alessandra Valeria Castruccio Castracani, Ferdinando Chiacchio, Diego D’Urso, Ludovica Maria Oliveri, and Natalia Trapani . . . . .	1081
Expert Judgment in Scenario Simulation for Container Terminals and Supply Chains Farshad Shamlua, Marco Gotelli, and Emilio Jimenez . . . . .	1089
Digital Transformation and Sustainable Manufacturing: Exploring Industry 4.0 Adoption in Nigeria O.F. Orikpete, M.O. Okwu, and L.K. Tartibu . . . . .	1099
Representing Executable Circular Economy R-Strategies using Behavior Trees Embedded in Digital Product Passports Mahdi Rezapour, Christiane Plociennik, Abdullah Farrukh, and Martin Ruskowski . . . . .	1108
Using Ecological Network Analysis to Assess an Automotive Eco-Industrial Park for Sustainable Manufacturing Bert Bras, Zach Morris, Stephen Malone, and Marc Weissburg . . . . .	1119
A Design Study on Integrating UNTP Semantics into AAS Submodels for Digital Product Passports Giray Havur, Tassilo Pellegrini, Gottfried Schenner, and Francesco Fusco . . . . .	1130

Digitizing ESG in HEIs: A Global and South African Perspective Arnesh Telukdarie, Megashnee Munsamy, and Musawenkosi H.L. Nyathi . . . . .	1140
Surrogate Case Identifier Rules for Construction Site Hoists Erjan Steenbergen, Rob Bemthuis, and Faiza Bukhsh. . . . .	1150
Audio-Driven Unsupervised Learning for Tool Wear Detection in Milling Operations Stefania Ferrisi, Michael Laucella, Emauele Perziano, Pietro Marinelli, Chiara Puricelli, and Giuseppina Ambrogio . . . . .	1161
Analysis of the Transformation of the Manufacturing Industry and Engineering Education due to Sustainability Agreements Karl Wolfsgruber, Volker Koch, and Bernd Markus Zunk. . . . .	1171
Artificial intelligence in the cold and food supply chains: a bibliometric analysis Alice Ronchei, Laura Monferdini, Barbara Bigliardi, and Eleonora Bottani . . . . .	1181
Extending Social Exchange Theory to Investigate Employee Innovative Work Behaviors in Vietnamese Manufacturing Firms Do Vu Phuong Anh, Bui Quang Tuyen, and Phuong Mai Nguyen . . . . .	1194
Adapting the DESI Framework to Assess Digital Readiness in Tire Manufacturing: A Case Study of Goodyear Plant Transformation Karen Nascimento, Thomas Capet, Muhammad Ameer, and Luc Audibert . . . . .	1204
Improving Project Risk Management processes: Applying Business Process Management to implement hybrid methodologies Matilde Simões, Tiago Bastos, and Leonor Teixeira . . . . .	1214
Ecosystem services and risks in viticulture: Mapping the literature through bibliometric, network, and meta-analysis Amenallah Zouari, Leonardo Agnusdei, Pier Paolo Miglietta, Marco Cataldo, and Giulio Paolo Agnusdei . . . . .	1224
Robust passive UHF RFID tag localisation by intersecting RSSI indexed antenna sensitivity regions Alireza Beheshti Shirazi, Rufus Fraanje, and Jenny Coenen. . . . .	1238
Scheduling challenges in multi-line garment production: Application to an Algerian case study Safa Fartas, Mohamed El Amine Sekai, Radhwane Boufellouh, Taha Arbaoui, and Fayçal Belkaid . . . . .	1248
Total Productive Maintenance for a new machinery: An Italian case study within the food plants industry Pavarani Irene, Brunelli Chiara, Bottani Eleonora, and Tebaldi Letizia . . . . .	1259
AI-based System for Road Surface Condition Forecasting Using Multi-Source Meteorological Data Shantall Cisneros Saldana, Sampat Acharya, Ali Fallah Tehrani, Rudolf Lehmann, and Heike Markus. . . . .	1269
Maturity Levels Evaluation of Smart Factories through Fuzzy Cognitive Maps Margherita Bernabei, Silvia Colabianchi, Francesco Costantino, Francesco Leotta, Massimo Mecella, Flavia Monti, and Lorenzo Musilli . . . . .	1279
Forecasting Without Fine-Tuning: Zero-Shot Foundation Models vs. Traditional Approaches Sina Mirsahi, Taha Falatouri, Patrick Brandtner, Mehran Nasser, and Zuzana Kominkova Oplatkova . . . . .	1289
Wellbeing in the Industry 4.0 to 5.0 transition: a study on Corporate Social Responsibility in manufacturing and service sectors Umile Magarò, Gabriele Zangara, Vincenzo Corvello, and Luigino Filice. . . . .	1296
Uncertainty-Aware Feature Importance in Deep-Drawing Using Entropy-PFI on Production Data Lea Wollschlaeger, Meno-Said Haddad, and Jens Heger. . . . .	1306

Empirical Insights into Digitalization and Sustainability: A Study of Industrial Firms in Baden-Württemberg	
Abdul Rahman Abdel Razek, Katharina Schulze, Alexander Gorovoj, and Jürgen Müller . . . . .	1317
Real-Time Deep Learning-Based Object Detection for Walnut Processing	
Ivan Mihajlov, Zoran Ivanovski, and Dejan Pejchinoski. . . . .	1327
Conceptual modelling of a flexible simulation model for determining operator headcount	
Matthew Grech, Joseph P Zammit, and Emmanuel Francalanza. . . . .	1337
Descriptive Analytics to Diagnose Operational Efficiency of Finished Vehicle Transport in the Automotive Industry	
Erick Fernando Ruiz-Casas, Susana Casy Téllez-Ballesteros, and Ricardo Torres-Mendoza. . . . .	1347
A Systematic Bibliometric Review and Visualization of the Intersection between Lean Management and Industrial Revolutions	
Domicián Máté, Viktória Mannheim, and Norbert Mátrai. . . . .	1357
Design and proposal of a POS system as a digitalization strategy for small restaurants	
Manuel Velasco, Ximena Domínguez, Tomás A. Gamón, Maximiliano Macías, and Ricardo Torres . . . . .	1369
Digital Transformation Propagation in Supply Chains and Networks: An Analysis Across Supplier Tiers	
Josselyne Ricárdez-Estrada, Chiara Sammarco, David Romero, and Antonio Padovano. . . . .	1380
Analysis of User expectations for, Formats of and AI-assisted Generation of Step-by-Step Instructions for Industrial Maintenance	
Johannes H. Diedrich, Reza Mahboubfar, Svitlana Byba, Christoph Lerez, and Matthias Hackert-Oschätzchen . . . . .	1390
Community-Engaged Learning in Engineering Education 5.0: MOSA and SAFE Initiative	
Robert Obenaus-Emler, Corina Pachera, and Mariaelena Murphy . . . . .	1403
Real-Time Smart Optimization of Multimodal Node Operations: Toward Greener and More Efficient Logistics Networks	
Anaiz Gul Fareed, Fabio De Felice, Antonio Forcina, and Antonella Petrillo. . . . .	1413
Improving Off-Site Roof Construction through Lean Principles and Automation	
Parisa Mahdavi, Neda Rahimi, Parnia Mehranrad, Nafisa Shams, Afia Rasool, and Rafiq Ahmad . . . . .	1423
Life Cycle Costing of new generation of molds for microinjection molding process	
Francesco Borda, Vito Basile, Francesco Gagliardi, and Luigino Filice. . . . .	1433
Data-Driven Technologies For Enhancing Sustainability Performance In Digital Circular Supply Chain	
Chaimae Chrifi-Alaoui, Imane Bouhaddou, Abla Chaouni Benabdellah, and Kamar Zekhnini . . . . .	1443
A multi-criteria decision framework for selecting industrial and collaborative robots in smart manufacturing	
Magno Paiva Hippert, Anderson Luis Szejka, and Osiris Canciglieri Junior . . . . .	1452
Analyzing the Complexity of Sustainable Development Goals and Indicators	
Shailesh Tripathi, Ann-Kristin Thienemann, Manuel Brunner, Nadine Bachmann, Alican Tüzün, Judith Warnau, Sebastian Pöchtrager, and Herbert Jodlbauer . . . . .	1462
Perceived Complexity in Automation Systems: Sources, Impacts, and Perspectives from Industry	
Imad Berrouyne, Anupama Govindaraj, and Natalie Agerskans . . . . .	1476
Towards Standardized Manufacturing Event Logs for Process Mining using Open Manufacturing Model	
Rob Bemthuis, and Sabari Nathan Anbalagan . . . . .	1487

Towards sustainable consumption: Extending the Theory of Planned Behavior to explore green apparel purchase intentions Nguyen Thi Bich Ngoc, and Truong Thi Hue . . . . .	1498
IoT and Digital Twin Integration for Sustainable Textile Manufacturing towards industry 5.0: GrEen Network Fabio De Felice, Narinder Singh, Aniello Ferraro, Antonio Garofalo, Lucia Acampora, and Antonella Petrillo . . . . .	1508
Enhancing Port Logistics through Journey Mapping: Analysis of Road Gate Processes at the Port of Sines Raquel Gil-Pereira, Beatriz Almeida, Bernardo Ye, Pedro Teixeira, Juliana Basulo-Ribeiro, Bernardo Macedo, Ezequiel Dias, and Leonor Teixeira . . . . .	1518
From Intention To Implementation: A UTAUT-based Study on AI Adoption In Industry W. van den Eijnde, I. Voet, and K. Dijkstra . . . . .	1528
LLMOps for End-to-End Automation in Facility Layout Planning: Methodology and Application Da Ma, Sebastian Lang, Sanket Kute, Richard Reider, and Marcel Müller . . . . .	1538
Resin molds for improving thermal management in the injection molding process Giulia Zaniboni, Riccardo Pelaccia, Rossella Surace, Leonardo Orazi, Irene Fassi, and Vito Basile. . . . .	1548
Jin Tetsu-the Safety Assistant for Construction Sites Coltellacci Claudio, Proietti Serena, and Armando Stellato . . . . .	1558
A fuzzy AHP approach for assessing the sustainability of industrial shot blasting processes Sebastian Beiner. . . . .	1572
Challenges and Solutions in Predictive Maintenance of Machines in Industry 4.0: Signal Analysis under Variable Operating Conditions Orlando Peña, Ignacio Gutiérrez, Dammika Seneviratne, Antonio Rafael Selva, and Nerea Simón . . . . .	1582
Transfer Learning for Interpretable Prediction of HVOF Coating Properties Philipp Fleck, Christian Haider, Jan Zenisek, Wolfgang Rannetbauer, and Carina Hambrock. . . . .	1592
Sustainable 3D bioprinting: environmental evaluation of advanced polymers scaffold manufacturing for biomedical applications Borgia Carmine, Conte Romina, and Ambrogio Giuseppina. . . . .	1602
Redesigning HRM for the digital era: evidence from a systematic literature review Redar Hameed Ali, Alena Fedorova, and Maria Menshikova . . . . .	1610
Benchmarking AI-based visual inspection systems for aerospace quality control: A multi-vendor comparative evaluation Angelo Corallo, Vito Del Vecchio, Alberto Di Prizio, and Matteo Buscicchio . . . . .	1621
Time Series Classification in High-Pressure Die Casting Manufacturing using Dynamic Time Warping Sebastian Schmalzer, Roxana-Maria Holom, Dominik Falkner, Tomasz Piotr Michno, Urban Repanšek, Nejc Košir, and Peter Sifrer . . . . .	1631
Digitalizing public sector supply chains: a systematic and keyword-based review Barbara Bigliardi, Virginia Dolci, Alberto Petroni, and Benedetta Pini . . . . .	1641
Beyond Backpropagation: Smarter Neural Networks for Smart Manufacturing Vagan Terziyan, Oleksandra Vitko, and Oleksandr Terziyan. . . . .	1651
Prompt2CAD: A Lightweight LLM Framework for Conversational CAD Generation and Iterative Refinement Jiwei Zhou, Deepanshu Gupta, and Jorge D. Camba. . . . .	1663

Securing Smart Manufacturing IIoT Networks from Advanced Vampire Attack: A Statistical Learning Approach Kata Geethika, Pathipati Rishitha, Karnati Mani Gnanendra Reddy, Guthula Guna Vardhan, and Senthilkumar Mathi . . . . .	1673
Enhancing Industry 5.0 Assistance in Assembling Tasks with Large Language Models and Retrieval Augmented Generation: the DIA Framework Filippo Bianchini, Marco Calamo, Silvia Colabianchi, Francesco Costantino, Massimo Mecella, Jacopo Rossi, and Nicolò Sabetta . . . . .	1684
Ship hull form dataset generation using PyGeM to enable AI-based design Chiara Giovannini, and Abbas Dashtimanesh . . . . .	1694
Toward Circular Electromobility: Integrating Digital Product Passports into EV Battery Disassembly Processes Witold Statkiewicz, Katarzyna Ragin-Skorecka, Jacek Krzywy, and Filip Nowak. . . . .	1704
Empowering Circular Value Chains in the PV Manufacturing Industry: A Human-in-the-Loop Vision from the CIRCMAN5.0 Framework Angeliki Zacharaki, Alexandros Nizamis, Dimosthenis Ioannidis, and Dimitrios Tzovaras . . . . .	1714
Bridging Design Domains in Digital Shipbuilding: Virtual Prototypes and Immersive Workflows for System Integration Serena Bertagna, Luca Braidotti, Donato Padolecchia, Cristian Trombini, Simone Benvegno, Vittorio Bucci, and Alberto Marino . . . . .	1724
Evaluation of a passive exoskeleton influence on low-back muscle activity in industrial scenarios Erika Triviño-Tonato, Sarah De Marchi, and Angel Dacal-Nieto . . . . .	1734
Made2Verify: A Scalable GS1-Compliant Resolver and Fallback Dashboard for Digital Product Passports Scott Ronald Howie, Syed Munawar, Andreas Reimer, and Stephen Fitzpatrick . . . . .	1744
Towards Human-Centered Manufacturing Planning: An Integrated RL and DES Framework Applied to Job Rotation Scheduling in Paced Assembly Lines Michael Kranz, Florens Burgert, Josephine Imorde, Verena Nitsch, and Susanne Mütze-Niewöhner . . . . .	1752
COMMUNITY EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY: THE ROLE OF MOBILITY CAFÉS Katharina Kubelka, Corina Pacher, and Daniel Just . . . . .	1762
The role of culture in multi-industry innovation collaboration Riia Korhonen, and Jyri Vilko . . . . .	1770
Heuristic Approach for the Calibration of Manufacturing Simulation Models Michela Lanzini, Enzo M. Frazzon, and Simone Zanoni . . . . .	1779
Development of LSTM-Attention-Based Microelectronic systems for Enhanced Greenhouse Temperature Prediction Peter Onu, Nelson Madonsela, and Anup Pradhan . . . . .	1788
Work Smarter, Not Harder: How BPM and Human Factor Team Up in Industry 5.0 Ana Ferreira, Teresa Silva, Henrique Fernandes, Juliana Salvadorinho, and Leonor Teixeira . . . . .	1797
Virtual AI assistants in the manufacturing industry – innovation diffusion perspective Taru Hakanen, Vladimir Goriachev, and Petri Tikka . . . . .	1806
A Comparative Study of Social Sustainability and Startup Ecosystems in Italy and Silicon Valley Gabriele Zangara, Lucia Spinelli, Jacopo Naidi, Vincenzo Corvello, and Luigino Filice. . . . .	1818
Towards a Modular Testing Environment for Digital Battery Passports Patrick Gering, Thomas Knothe, and Huy Viet Schulz . . . . .	1828

Balancing Exploration and Exploitation for Efficient Black-Box Cloning in Smart Manufacturing Vagan Terziyan, Oleksandra Vitko, and Oleksandr Terziyan . . . . .	1838
A Collection-based Digital Product Passport Suitable for Tracking Parts With No ID Jonas Brozeit, Abdullah Farrukh, Peter Stein, Christiane Plociennik, and Martin Ruskowski . . . . .	1850
The Role of Information Sharing in Supply Chain Collaboration: Impacts and Emerging Opportunities Tamer Abdulghani, Oguzkan Tugra Yilmaz, and Herwig Winkler . . . . .	1859
Reinforcement Learning for Circular Manufacturing: A Proximal Policy Optimization Approach for Sustainable Production Planning Matias Mauricio Davila Alarcon, and Hendro Wicaksono . . . . .	1869
A Combined Function-Structure-Behaviour and Return on Investment Framework for Improved Decision-Making in Zero-Defect Manufacturing Victor Azamfirei-Ionita, Foivos Psarommatis, and Radu Godina . . . . .	1879
A Lightweight Open-Source Framework for Packaging Visualization and Data Automation Sampat Acharya, Shantall Cisneros Saldana, and Heike Markus . . . . .	1889
Gas flow rate and its influence on the porosity and dimensions of cylindrical specimens manufactured by CMT-WAAM Maria Helena Rodrigues Moreno, João Gabriel Nunes Rodrigues, Demostenes Ferreira Filho, Ana Carolina Finotti Azeredo, and João Vitor Rodrigues Araújo . . . . .	1899
A Systematic Literature Review on UAV-Assisted Path Planning for UGVs in Heterogeneous Multi-Robot Systems Maximilian Henes, Günter Bitsch, and Louis Louw . . . . .	1909
Digital Twin Framework for Integrated Factory and Production Planning (FPP) Abdul Raheem, Patrick Dallasega, and Hebert Alonso Medina Suni . . . . .	1919
Design of a Human-Centric Collaborative Robotic Workstation using Multimodal Sensing for Speed and Separation Monitoring Isaac Cutajar, Amberlynn Bonello, and Emmanuel Francalanza . . . . .	1931
Making AI understandable: Systematisation of AI demonstrators in the production context Jennifer Link, Nils Feggeler, Markus Harlacher, and Sascha Stowasser . . . . .	1941
Readiness for Change in Port Digitalisation: Applying ADKAR to Interorganisational Leadership among Transport Companies Juliana Basulo-Ribeiro, André Correia, Cátia Salgado, and Leonor Teixeira . . . . .	1953
Challenges in the Development of Cyber-Physical Systems – Insights from Research and Industrial Practice Lars Gesmann, Maximilian Fischer, Anna Lauff, Thomas Völk, Tobias Düser, and Albert Albers . . . . .	1963
Crisis and disaster management: international scientific and technological trends in maintenance projects Igor Polezi Munhoz, Alessandra Cristina Santos Akkari, Marly Monteiro de Carvalho, and Eduardo de Senzi Zancul . . . . .	1973
Enhancing recruitment process for early-graduate employees in business consulting: A BPMN case study with AI-driven To-Be solution Ana Ferreira, Juliana Salvadorinho, and Leonor Teixeira . . . . .	1983
Information Extraction And Knowledge Modeling For Disassembly Processes German Bluvstein, and Rüdiger Daub . . . . .	1992
Energy Neutral Production – A Modelling Approach of the Energy Consumption in Production Doris Bernroider, Fabian Spitzer, Jochen Giedenbacher, and Holger Groening . . . . .	2001

On the use of Natural Language Processing for improving automatic maintenance report labelling in the aviation field	
Mattia Mauri, Roberto Sala, Duarte Dinis, and Fabiana Pirola . . . . .	2011
The Last Mile of Online Retail in the Age of Sustainability: Insights into Austrian Customer Priorities	
Robert Zimmermann, Evelyn Rezek, and Patrick Brandtner. . . . .	2021
Emerging Trends in Tire Manufacturing and their Impact on Plant Reconfiguration	
M. Ameer, L. Audibert, Y. Koutsawa, and G. Giunta . . . . .	2033
Discrete Event Simulation for Home Health Care: From Admission Decision to Patient Care Pathway	
Doha Saalaoui, Lina Aboueljinnane, and Maria Lebbar . . . . .	2043
Evaluating GraphRAG for industrial safety: a case study on LOTO procedure failures	
Sara Salvi, Nicolò Sabetta, and Francesco Costantino . . . . .	2055
Immersive Training for Operator 5.0: A VR Framework for Collaborative Assembly Upskilling	
Lourenço Gonçalves, Rui Pinto, Gil Gonçalves, and João A. Dias . . . . .	2065
Real-time Calibration of Li-Ion Battery Equivalent Circuit Model with Neural Networks and Reinforcement Learning for State of Charge Prediction	
Konstantinos Vasilakis, Afroditi Fouka, Alexandros Bousdekis, and Gregoris Mentzas . . . . .	2075
Smart Routing for Perishable Products: A Multi Objective BRKGA-Based Decoder Ensuring Quality and Sustainability	
Francesca Guerriero, Giusy Macrina, Veronica Mosca, Edoardo Scalzo, and Luigi Di Puglia Pugliese . . . . .	2085
An IIoT Architecture for an Industrial Plant: Case Study of the Learning Factory of an Industrial Engineering Laboratory	
Hader Alberto Madera-Bermeo, Juan Sebastián Parrado-Muñoz, and Eugenio Tamura . . . . .	2095
The revival of planning – Digital Product Passports as a legislative artefact	
Charlotte Ducuing . . . . .	2105
Application of Machine Learning for Geometric Alignment in Automotive Assembly	
Sonja Strasser, Michael Macsek, Shailesh Tripathi, and Herbert Jodlbauer . . . . .	2115
Low-Level Planner on Conflict-Based Search Efficiency in Multi-Agent Path Finding	
Marco Ricci, Riccardo Accorsi, Ilaria Battarra, Giacomo Lupi, and Riccardo Manzini . . . . .	2125
Enabling Complexity: A Systematic Literature Review on Task Allocation, Communication, Interaction, and Augmentation in Human-AI Teams	
Pascal Senjic, Günter Bitsch, and Anja Braun . . . . .	2135
Artificial intelligence in SME supply chains: a bibliometric and case study analysis	
Barbara Bigliardi, Virginia Dolci, Alberto Petroni, and Benedetta Pini . . . . .	2145
Digital Product Passports: Where Yesterday’s Product Informs Tomorrow’s Process	
Nikoletta Nikolova, Roderick van der Weerd, Zofia Pietka-Danilewicz, and Sjoerd Rongen . . . . .	2155
Development and Implementation of a Serial Production Cyber-Physical System: A Closed Quality Loop for Transportable Positioning Devices in an Automotive Body-in-White Process	
Michael Gfoellner, Stefan Koerner, Christoph Kribernegg, Dejan Verdnik, Michael Matzer, and Franz Haas . . . . .	2165
The future of IT consulting: Opportunities and challenges of the ITSM platforms paradigm	
Ivo Andias, Tiago Bastos, and Leonor Teixeira . . . . .	2175

Forecasting Industrial Production: A Comparative Study Based on Volatility and Seasonality of Time Series	
Judith Warnau, Sonja Straßer, Shailesh Tripathi, Nadine Bachmann, Ann-Kristin Thienemann, Alican Tüzün, Sebastian Pöchtrager, Manuel Brunner, and Herbert Jodlbauer. . . . .	2183
Enhancing Safety Management through Occurrence Reporting: Modelling and Predictive Analytics	
Victoria Grech, and Joseph Paul Zammit. . . . .	2193
The role of user demand in biofuel adaptation in heavy road transportation	
Tuomas Räikkönen, and Jyri Vilko . . . . .	2203
Proposal of a Simulation-Ready Framework for Integrating Digital Safety Passports using AutomationML-Based Engineering and Education	
Alexandra Saliger, Robert Fellner, and Horst Orsolits. . . . .	2214
Object-Centric Process Mining for Operational Traceability and Quality Optimization in Manufacturing: Genetic-Inductive Miner approach	
Michael Maiko Matonya, and István Budai. . . . .	2224
Semantic AI for Future Industries: Bridging Explainability and Integration in Black Box Models	
Vagan Terziyan, Oleksandra Vitko, and Oleksandr Terziyan. . . . .	2235
Detecting Degradation using Structure-Borne Sound in Flame Torch Cutting	
Dominik Falkner, Christoph Seiringer, Leo Savernik, Markus Steindl, Evans Doe Ocansey, Alexander Kinast, Florian Bachinger, and Michael Affenzeller . . . . .	2247
Optimization of Air Navigation Spare Parts Supply Chain	
Mohammed Dorgham, Majed Hadid, Laoucine Kerbache, and Roberto Baldacci . . . . .	2261
Managing a digital product passport for products with critical raw materials	
Leandro Navarro, Viola Gallina, Felix Freitag, Carla Mladek, Arko Steinwender, and Pedro Vilchez . . .	2271
Development of a UAV Surveillance System Using Deep Learning and Thermal Imaging for High-Risk Environments	
M.O. Okwu, I.S. Ojji, E. Akanyeno, N.P. Ijeh, O.F. Orikpete, and L.K. Tartibu. . . . .	2281
Anti-counterfeiting technologies for fashion luxury products: does the consumer care?	
Tebaldi Letizia, Bottani Eleonora, and Rizzi Antonio . . . . .	2293
A MILP formulation for insourcing and outsourcing decision with carbon tax consideration	
Olga Battaia, Narjes Kandil, and Ramzi Hammami . . . . .	2303
Designing a Framework for DataOps: Improving Data Quality and Pipeline Efficiency in Data Science	
Christian Haertel, Kunal Sanjay Sagavakar, Daniel Staegemann, Matthias Pohl, Matthias Volk, and Klaus Turowski . . . . .	2310
A data-driven decision framework for selecting the best location to establish a manufacturing centre based on Industry 5.0 dimensions	
Sameh Saad, Somayeh Hatami, Mohssen Ghanavati Nejad, and Sina Nayeri . . . . .	2320
Enabling Ergonomic Human-Robot Interaction Through Large Language Modeling	
L. Monica, M. Madonna, M. Di Nardo, S. Carra, and S. Anastasi . . . . .	2329
Process parameter development for the production of thin walls made of maraging steel X3NiCoMoTi18-9-5 processed by Laser Metal Deposition	
Michael Spreitzer, Norbert Wild, Jakob Ebner, Sara Halilovic, Jochen Giedenbacher, Marko Orsollic, and Aziz Huskic . . . . .	2339
Integrating ontology and discrete-event simulation for tire manufacturing analysis	
G. Giunta, J. Di Martino, M. Ameer, L. Audibert, and Y. Koutsawa . . . . .	2352

U3Design: a User-Centred Methodology for the Additive Manufacturing of Assistive Devices Ana Teresa Gabriel, Vanessa Coelho, Cláudia Quaresma, and Bruno Soares . . . . .	2362
Bridging the Gaps Towards a Unified Architecture for Digital Product Passports: A Data Space Perspective on Existing Standards and Initiatives Margit Kranner, Viola Gallina, and Astrid Al-Akrawi . . . . .	2374
Development of an AI Maturity Model for Human-Centric Manufacturing SMEs in Industry 5.0. Julia Nazarejova, Amberlynn Bonello, Edward Abela, and Emmanuel Francalanza . . . . .	2388
Interpretable Machine Learning for Predictive Maintenance of Electric Motors: A Comparative Study of Subspace kNN and Symbolic Classification Ayaz Ahmadov, Harald Hinterleitner, Mario Jungwirth, Jan Zenisek, Florian Bachinger, and Michael Affenzeller . . . . .	2398
The influence of individual characteristics on task execution time prediction under variable time constraints: A within-subject study Vito Grimaldi, Vito Modesto Manghisi, Alessandro Evangelista, Giorgio Mossa, and Francesco Facchini . . . . .	2408
Numerical Analysis of a Rotating Die Roughness in a FDM Impregnation Process of Continuous Fibres Simone Giovane, Francesco Borda, Giuseppe Serratore, and Francesco Gagliardi . . . . .	2418
Blockchain Ethics in Humanitarian Supply Chain Management Jemimah Maina, Sameh Saad, Terrence Perera, and Ramin Bahadori . . . . .	2428
Exploring the adoption of as-a-Service business models: Opportunities, Challenges and Enablers Federico Adrodegari, Laura Scalvini, Marco Ardolino, Roberto Sala, Mattia Galimberti, and Giuditta Pezzotta . . . . .	2437
Sustainability-oriented management: The role of green human resource management and innovation in driving sustainable performance, based on Delphi and Analytic Hierarchy Process Thi Minh Ngoc Luu, Truong Thi Hue, and Pham Thi Thanh Hang. . . . .	2447
Intelligent Predictive Failure Detection in Automated Guided Vehicle Operations Li Li, Ammir Rashid, and Lothar Schulze. . . . .	2457
Ensuring the quality of manual labour - flexible augmented-reality-based assistance for a rework process in the automobile assembly Matthias Hauptvogel, Tina Haase, and Dirk Berndt . . . . .	2465
KPI-based Framework for Digital Transformation in SME Supply Chains Sonia Avilés-Sacoto, Roberto Andrade, Naveen Tiruvengadam, and Diego Parra . . . . .	2475
Artificial Intelligence Supporting Human Intelligence: Impacts on Supply Chains of Small and Medium Enterprises Pedro O. Onorio, Enzo M. Frazzon, Matheus E. Leusin, Christian Cordes, and Vitor Azevedo. . . . .	2485
AI-Based Maintenance Order Planning and Control of Trains: Status Quo and Conceptual Considerations Mubashir Hayat, Moritz Rüster, and Herwig Winkler . . . . .	2495
AI-Driven Optimization of Laser Surface Texturing for Sustainable Manufacturing Maria Rosaria Saffioti, Serafino Caruso, Giovanna Rotella, and Domenico Umbrello. . . . .	2505
Enhancing Predictive Maintenance for Heavy Vehicles: A Multi-Stage Feature Selection and Preprocessing Framework on the Scania Dataset Stefania Ferrisi, Romina Conte, Rosita Guido, and Giuseppina Ambrogio. . . . .	2514
An optimization approach for Enhancing Customer Satisfaction with Blockchain-Enabled Trust and Transparency Houda Dahbi, Abla Chaouni Benabdellah, and Amine Belhadi . . . . .	2524

Pricing and demand in car rental market: an empirical study Martina Luzzi, and Francesca Guerriero . . . . .	2534
Investigating cost-effective strategies for energy efficiency and carbon reduction: the role of air conditioning systems in an industrial case study Lucia Fagotti, Luca Nassuato, Gian Pietro Bordoni, and Elisa Moretti . . . . .	2544
Rethinking Engineering Education in Light of Mixed Reality Opportunities – Results from a European Survey A. Bondin, J.P. Zammit, E. Francalanza, J. Borg, P. Dallasega, M. Lanzone, A. Maffei, F.M. Monettic, C.G. Amza, T.D. Chicioeanu, S. Ljubić, L. Batistić, and S. Abdoli . . . . .	2554
Digital Product Passports for Circular Transformation: Cross-Sectoral Review with Emphasis on Built Environment Habib Sadri, Peter Johansson, Rahel Kebede, and Annika Moscati . . . . .	2564
University-industry collaboration for industrial process innovation in small states. Claudio Suppini, Federico Solari, and Roberto Montanari . . . . .	2575
Online adaptation of an Echo State Network based Controller for Brushless-DC Motors via Modified FORCE Recursive Least Squares Mariorosario Prist, Lorenzo Longarini, Alessandro Di Biase, Andrea Monteriú, and Andrea Bonci . . . . .	2585
Enabling Circularity for Production System Design: The Convergence of DfX and R-Principles Malin Elvin, Daniel Åkerlind, Aldo Akhonen, Jessica Bruch, and Monica Bellgran . . . . .	2595
The design of ore sorting prototype within the transition from Mine 4.0 to Mine 5.0: human-centric approach Nasia Balakera, Tina Katika, Fotios K.Konstantinidis, Fotis Giariskanis, Georgios Tsimiklis, Giannis Karaseitanidis, and Angelos Amditis . . . . .	2606
Monitoring of the Cleaning In Place Process with Functional Data Analysis Valentina Tessonni, Mattia Crispino, Michele Amoretti, and Michele Ollari . . . . .	2612
Cybernetics and Behavioural Economics in Advancing Strategies for Supply Chain Disruption Management - Analysing Gaps and Charting Future Research Directions Hajar Fatorachian, and Chase Smith . . . . .	2622
AI-Based Pest Detection in Smart Agriculture: An Enhanced Tiny-YOLOV3 Approach Peter Onu, Anup Pradhan, and Nelson Madonsela . . . . .	2633
Comparative analysis of experimental and simulated temperature evolution during bidirectional surface polishing by laser remelting performed by means of a cyber-thermophysical system Evgueni V. Bordatchev, Anirejuoritse Coker, Adam Gorski, and O. Remus Tutunea-Fatan . . . . .	2641
Design of a clean energy portable generator for remote IoT applications León Miguel Roldán Zurabian, J. Carlos Rodríguez-Tenorio, and Adrielly Nahomee Ramos Alvarez . . . . .	2651
Sustainable Development of Packaging Material Manufacturing Processes Using Looping Method Viktoria Mannheim, Domicián Máté, and Klára Tóthné Szita . . . . .	2660
Development of an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) for Firefighting in Hazardous Environments M.O. Okwu, C.N. Okolie, O.P. Eruero, B.U. Oreko, O.F. Orikpete, and L.K. Tartibu . . . . .	2670
Industry 4.0 principles for AI-ready information systems in health contexts: A framework for digital strategy Soujanya Mantravadi . . . . .	2682
Enhanced Interpretability in Root Cause Analysis Using Structure-Template Symbolic Regression Christian Haider, Roman Kern, Jan Zenisek, and Florian Bachinger . . . . .	2689

Online integration of a PLC-based application and a cloud-hosted automated planner Hiago Silva Motta, João Paulo da Silva Fonseca, David Benetti, and Hian Silva Motta . . . . .	2699
TranscribeSight: Redefining ASR Evaluation for Industry 4.0 Knowledge Capture Ali Alsayegh, Noor Ul Ain, Andrew Abel, Laibing Jia, and Tariq Masood. . . . .	2709
Data Interoperability in European Product Conformity Management for Circular Supply Chains: Digital Twins and a Legal Knowledge & Data Model for linking law making and product manufacturing Bernd Hilgarth, and Günter Schicker. . . . .	2723
Unpacking Strategic Thinking: Identifying the Various Types of Thinking for Management and Education Rudolf Gruenbichler. . . . .	2733
Integration of Blue and Green Hydrogen Supply Chains for Road Mobility: Utilization of Byproduct Oxygen for Efficient Operation Through Optimization Kumail Hassan Syed, Majed Hadid, Regina Padmanabhan, Mohamed Haouari, and Laoucine Kerbache. . . . .	2743
An Artificial Intelligence Supported Business Model Innovation Initiation and Ideation Phase Manuel Brunner, Ann-Kristin Thienemann, Shailesh Tripathi, Nadine Bachmann, Alican Tüzün, Sebastian Pöchtrager, Judith Warnau, and Herbert Jodlbauer . . . . .	2753
Industrial Symbiosis under the Macroscopic of current Knowledge Management System Constraints Ulrich Schmitt . . . . .	2763
Techno-Economic Assessment of Waste Heat Recovery from Data Centres for District Energy Integration Moza K. Alawadhi, Atidel B. Hadj-Alouane, and Zafar Said . . . . .	2775
Hybrid Distribution Strategies for Perishable Food Supply Chains: An Optimization Case Study Mona Al-Thani, Majed Hadid, Regina Padmanabhan, and Laoucine Kerbache . . . . .	2785
Inclusion of Disabled Workers in Production Environments through Industrial Collaborative Robots: a Company Case Study Matteo Manzardo, Gerold Sigmund, Manfred Hahl, Luca Gualtieri, and Renato Vidoni . . . . .	2796
Improving Flow Performance of Fire Fighter Jet Nozzle Through Internal Geometry Modification with ANSYS Fluent Simulation Himawan Hadi Sutrisno, Catur Setyawan Kusumohadi, and Thoriq Abdansyakuro . . . . .	2806
Exploring Enablers of Data-Driven Sustainable Business Model Innovation: A Systemic View of Innovation Ecosystems Nadine Bachmann, Alican Tüzün, Shailesh Tripathi, Manuel Brunner, Ann-Kristin Thienemann, Judith Warnau, and Herbert Jodlbauer . . . . .	2817
Evaluating Cognitive Workload in Industrial Tasks via Immersive VR and Human Digital Twin Frameworks: Development of Application and Design of Experiment Vito De Giglio, Alessandro Evangelista, Antonio E. Uva, and Vito M. Manghisi . . . . .	2828
Modeling and Validation of Heat Source Effects on Keyhole Formation in Single-Pass Laser Processing of Ti-6Al-4V Alloy Maria Rosaria Saffioti, Serafino Caruso, Agata Sposato, Domenico Umbrello, and Giovanna Rotella . . . . .	2838
From Specification to Compliance: A Semantic Approach to Validating Industrial Supply Chains Oskar Wintercorn, and Jan van Deventer. . . . .	2848
Towards automated work plan generation for the manufacturing of metal components Janis Menke, Maximilian Gey, Gonsalves Grünert, Philipp Niemiets, and Thomas Bergs . . . . .	2859
Retail Trends 2025 In Austria – A Case Study Andrea Massimiani, Sarah Pfoser, Robert Zimmermann, Thomas Fischer, and Oliver Schauer . . . . .	2869

Digital technologies and consumer behavior in supply chains: a bibliometric analysis of emerging trends and core concepts	
Virginia Dolci, Sara Guareschi, Benedetta Pini, and Alberto Petroni . . . . .	2881
Mechanical and dimensional assessment of threaded fasteners manufactured using 3D printing	
Vinícius Hiroshi Souza Miwa, Thiago Menezes do Prado, Rhander Viana, João Bosco da Cunha, and Daniel Fernandes da Cunha . . . . .	2891
A Mobile MQTT App for Remote Water Level Control in a Didactic Bench	
João Marcos Souza Ferreira, Lucas Farias Nogueira, José Jean-Paul, and Zanlucchi de Souza Tavares . . . . .	2901
Benchmarking of motion planning algorithms in the field of automatic vehicle disassembly with industrial robots	
Zheng Xiang, Hanchong Jiang, and Johannes Fottner . . . . .	2909
Enhancing Supply Chains with Distributed Ledger Technology: Expert Insights and Design Recommendations	
Christian Finke, Tamino Marahrens, and Matthias Schumann . . . . .	2919
Development of an analytical model for operator-task matching in maintenance 5.0	
Vito Grimaldi, Vito Centrone, Angelica Cotruvo, Andrea Lucchese, Luiz Fernando Rodrigues Pinto, and Francesco Facchini . . . . .	2933
A General-Purpose Tool to Convert Asset Administration Shell Templates to RDFS/OWL	
Jesper Kuiper, Theodor Chirvasuta, and Jeroen Breteler . . . . .	2943
Experimental investigation of the weld quality and strength during friction stir spot welding of PETG workpieces	
Nikolaos E. Karkalos, Nikolaos A. Fountas, and Nikolaos M. Vaxevanidis . . . . .	2953
Spare parts management in the aviation maintenance industry: A Literature Review	
Margarida Brito, Duarte Dinis, and Ana Barroso . . . . .	2961
Enhancing the processability of high-performance composite blends for injection molding and extrusion	
Rossella Surace, Vito Basile, Claudia Pagano, Roberto Terzi, and Irene Fassi . . . . .	2971
Achieving Semantic Interoperability for Digital Product Passports	
Elio Hbeich, Carolyn Bernier, Seth Van Hooland, Tarmo Robal, and Riina Maignre . . . . .	2981
Simulation of maintenance process improvements	
Guillermo Azahel Piña Silva, Solano Martínez Giovanni, and Idalia Flores De La Mota . . . . .	2993
Post-Pandemic Digital Health in Indonesia: A Dual-Model Study of Task–Technology Fit and UTAUT on Telemedicine Use	
Lianna Wijaya, Cheng Kin Meng, and Rudolf Gruenbichler . . . . .	3002
On the Utilization of Digital Product Passports for Intelligent Metal Sorting and Recycling	
Madhu Dasika, Roman Rainer, Klemens Winkler, Alexia Tischberger-Aldrian, and Felix Strohmeier . . . . .	3012
Can Artificial Intelligence Destroy Future Industry?	
Vagan Terziyan, Svitlana Gryshko, Olena Kaikova, and Mariia Golovianko . . . . .	3022
Investigating Barriers to Supply Chain Visibility and Implications for Transparency in Nigeria	
Funlade T. Sunmola, and Uje D. Apeji . . . . .	3034
Human-Centric Intralogistics: Integrating Mobile Applications into Operational Workflows	
Ishakor Ejechi, Minqi Zhang, Eric H. Grosse, and Christoph H. Glock . . . . .	3046
A multi-period analysis to minimize the total number of operators in labor-intensive production lines	
Takayuki Kataoka . . . . .	3056

Shared cobot for large-parts picking: balancing efficiency and ergonomics Irene Granata, Maurizio Faccio, and Alessandro Peris . . . . .	3064
Redefining Work: Benchmarking Employee Engagement Initiatives in Industry 5.0 Teresa Silva, Juliana Salvadorinho, and Leonor Teixeira . . . . .	3074
Bridging MBSE and MBSA through an Interoperability Framework Rolf Miemba Makita, Martin Kubic, François Troussel, and Greg Zacharewicz . . . . .	3083
Monte Carlo Simulation and Genetic Algorithm for Optimizing Hospital Medicine Inventory Management under Uncertainty Majda Mazzi, Lina Aboueljinane, and Maria Lebbar . . . . .	3093
The importance of enhancing safety in hospital waste supply chain André Ferreira, Ana L. Ramos, José V. Ferreira, Luís P. Ferreira, and Paulo Ávila . . . . .	3103
Software infrastructure for ready-to-use, data analytics-based Digital Twins utilising the Asset Administration Shell Mario Lubert, Lukas Wittmann, and Johannes Schilp . . . . .	3113
Integrating Circular Economy into Engineering Curricula: A Modular and Interdisciplinary Educational Concept Nada Ruzicic, Gernot Schullerus, and Anja Braun . . . . .	3123
The Role of Industry 4.0 Technologies in Improving the Health, Safety, and Well-Being (HSW) of Construction Workers John Smallwood, Benviolent Chigara, and Siphokazi Mkontwana. . . . .	3133
Alignment of Sustainable Development Goals and Environmental and Social Value Added as Sustainability Measurement Tools in Different Industries Ann-Kristin Thienemann, Nadine Bachmann, Judith Warnau, Shailesh Tripathi, Manuel Brunner, Alican Tüzün, Sebastian Pöchtrager, and Herbert Jodlbauer. . . . .	3140
Real-Time Acoustic Smart Monitoring of Lifter Wear in SAG Mills Mohamed Khalil Mannoubi, Eya Kharrat, and Hatem Mrad. . . . .	3153
Analysis and Improvement of the Evacuation Process of a High-Performance Sports Centre using Simulation Guilherme Campos, Luís Pinto Ferreira, André Ferreira, Ana Luísa Ramos, and Rui Terrível . . . . .	3163
Semantic Data Integration for Digital Product Passports Dietmar Glachs, Jonas Wohnig, and Felix Strohmeier . . . . .	3175
Reinforcement Learning in Virtual Environments for Education: Trends and Future Applications Athanasios Sypsas, Vasilis Zafeiropoulos, and Dimitris Kalles . . . . .	3185
Green Innovation: The Case Study of Innovative Portuguese SMEs Florinda Matos, Cláudia Vajão, and Carolina Marques. . . . .	3195
VISP: Using Virtual Reality to Teach Production Process Optimization through Gamified Simulation Daniel Niedermayr, Josef Wolfartsberger, Balwin Bokor, Wolfgang Seiringer, and Klaus Altendorfer . . .	3205
A Dual-Decoder Autoencoder for Detecting Delay Anomalies in Manufacturing Processes Hwanhee Park, Haejoong Kim, and Tai-Woo Chang. . . . .	3214
Hybrid MTSR–AMR warehouse system with class-based storage policies: modeling and performance evaluation Irene Granata, Maurizio Faccio, and Alessandro Persona . . . . .	3224
Machine Unlearning for Industrial AI Models Maryam Saadi, Vincent Bernier, Gregory Zacharewicz, and Nicolas Daclin . . . . .	3234

Job Crafting when Dealing with Technology Adoption and Job Insecurity: Effects on Employees' Perceived Productivity Fabian Willemsen, Susanne Mütze-Niewöhner, and Verena Nitsch . . . . .	3240
Socially responsible digital innovation and its implications for large language models in AI development Soujanya Mantravadi, and Frank Tietze. . . . .	3248
Task Planning and Execution for Industrial Automation: A Comprehensive Analysis of Traditional and Emerging Methods Dario Antonelli, Primož Podržaj, and Antonio Maffei . . . . .	3257
Shaping a circular future for electronics: The role of Digital Product Passports Julia Ottoni Fernandes, and Cristina Sousa . . . . .	3267
From Conceptual Silos to a Circular Economy: The BFO-Based Framework for the Digital Product Passport Alican Tüzün, Judith Warnau, Shailesh Tripathi, Nadine Bachmann, Ann-Kristin Thienemann, Manuel Brunner, and Herbert Jodlbauer . . . . .	3277
Simulation-Based Evaluation of Agent-Driven Scheduling in Human-Robot Teams for Zero-Defect Manufacturing Alexander Hämmerle, Helmut Zörner, and Andreas Pichler . . . . .	3287
Integration of Product Circularity Indicators into the Digital Product Passport based on the Asset Administration Shell Monireh Pourjafarian, Abdullah Farrukh, Mahdi Rezapour, Christiane Plociennik, and Martin Ruskowski . . . . .	3297
The Demanded Skill Set of European B2B Salespeople: A Job Advertisement Analysis Marco Berger, Tanja Sajko, and Bernd Markus Zunk . . . . .	3307
Interpretable Machine Learning Framework for Quality Control in Resource-Constrained Industrial Settings Jose Cação, Jose Paulo Santos, and Mario Antunes. . . . .	3318
A BIM-Based Approach for Smart HVAC Design in Cruise Shipbuilding: Automation and Simulation Insights Donato Padolecchia, Serena Bertagna, Marco Pinzan, Natasha Taucer Marchesi, Samuele Utzeri, and Vittorio Bucci. . . . .	3331
Bridging Construction and Manufacturing: Digital Product Passports for Circular Timber Waste Remanufacturing Foivos Psarommatis, Gokan May, and Irina Kalb . . . . .	3341
A Cyber-Physical Twin Framework for Enhancing Packaging and Supply Chain Resilience in Agri-Food Systems Michele Ronzoni, Riccardo Accorsi, Ilaria Battarra, Mauro Gamberi, Marco Ricci, Riccardo Manzini, and Gabriele Sirri. . . . .	3351
AI-Driven Decision Support Using Digital Product Passports for End-of-Life Management in the Circular Built Environment Rahel Kebede, Johannes Oetsch, Peter Johansson, and Annika Moscati. . . . .	3361
Industry 4.0 and 5.0 core pillars and how they are redefining research paradigms of Logistics 4.0 and 5.0 Marco Rodigari, Eleonora Bottani, Eric H. Grosse, and Letizia Tebaldi. . . . .	3370
Grid-Based Multi-Camera Object Tracking Method for Manufacturing Processes Using Spatial Alignment Yunho Seo, Tai-Woo Chang, and Haejoong Kim. . . . .	3380

Artificial Intelligence for Energy Forecasting in Emerging Economies: A Machine Learning Case Study from Morocco	
Lamiae Benhayoun, and Samira Lakouismi . . . . .	3390
Digital Transformation and Industrial Symbiosis: A Path Towards Sustainable Manufacturing	
Angela Neves, Hugo Ferreira, and Radu Godina. . . . .	3400
Neural Networks with Malignant Neurons: Robust Models for Smart Manufacturing	
Vagan Terziyan, Oleksandr Terziyan, and Oleksandra Vitko. . . . .	3412
Projection-Based Augmented Reality for Lean Drone Assembly: Reducing Waste and Enhancing Learning Efficiency	
Wessam Hamid, José Miguel Figarola, Muhammad Afnan Khan, David Gee, and Rafiq Ahmad . . . . .	3424
Barriers to the simultaneous implementation of LARG paradigms in supply chains: a two-stage literature review approach	
Laura Monferdini, Andres Boza, and Eleonora Bottani. . . . .	3434
Towards Zero-Touch Network Provisioning for Embedded Industrial IoT: A Feasibility Study on Autonomous Guest Wi-Fi Access	
Fatih Cemil Demir, and Sabari Nathan Anbalagan . . . . .	3444
A Scalable V2X Architecture for Predictive Maintenance Utilizing Federated Learning in Smart Mobility	
Ega Rudy Graha, Parth Jitendra Vaya, Behshad Azizian, and Hendro Wicaksono . . . . .	3453
Planning and Scheduling in Flexible and Adaptive Microfactories Using Reinforcement Learning	
Fabrizio Albertetti, Thibault Barthelet, Stéphane Beurret, Luca Laissue, Damien Chappatte, and Nabil Ouerhani. . . . .	3463
Handling Authorization and Access Control for Asset Administration Shells in Dataspaces	
F. Zink, B. Wallner, and T. Trautner. . . . .	3473
AI-Driven Financial Risk Prevention: the Role of HR Analytics in Corporate Crisis Management Under Industry 5.0	
Alfonso Laudonia, Francesco Avolio, Nunzia Cosmo, Ida Giannetti, Paola Liberanome, Franco Maciariello, and Vittorio Stile . . . . .	3483
A Multi-Stage Classification Approach for Predictive Maintenance of a Cyclonic Bag Filter	
Claudio Suppini, Michele Bocelli, Natalya Lysova, Andrea Volpi, Federico Solari, and Roberto Montanari. . . . .	3497
Surrogate ROM Modeling Under Varying Operating Conditions for a Mine Ventilation System	
Saif Eddine Ben Youssef, Hatem Mrad, Haykel Marouani, and Jesser Mastouri . . . . .	3509
Data Platforms in Biointelligent Value Creation Systems - Towards a Biointelligence Metaverse	
Arber Shoshi, Peter Reimann, Daniel Schel, Thomas Bauernhansl, and Robert Mieke . . . . .	3521
Simulation-Based Assessment of Warehouse Logistics: A Case Study in Beverage Distribution	
Tsega Y. Melesse, Jacopo Sanna, Mattia Braggio, Mohamed Shameer Peer, and Pier Francesco Orrù . . . . .	3531
Engineering Education 5.0: Navigating Pedagogy and Technology in the Age of Generative AI	
Monica I. Ciolacu, Konrad E.R. Boetcher, Gustavo R. Alves, Andreas Pester, and Abdallah Y. Zoubi . . . . .	3540
Navigating CSDDD in Procurement: A Systematic Literature Review on Implementation Challenges	
Vanessa Stadlober, Severin Schreiber, and Bernd Markus Zunk. . . . .	3550
Green-Fuzzy-MOSAR ‘G-F-MOSAR’ a new method for Occupational Hazards Assessment in Pharmaceutical industry	
Maryam Gallab, Hafida Bouloiz, Mario Di Nardo, and Sara Jebbor. . . . .	3561

Towards automated quality control system for additive manufacturing post-processing Simo Huhtanen, Simo Häkkinen, Kari Naakka, Ville Jouppila, and Katri Salminen . . . . .	3574
Analysing the Operational Performance of Static and Dynamic Charging Solutions and the Sustainability Impact of Drone Enabled Last-Mile Delivery Bek Nurzhanovich Tashkul, and Omid Fatahi Valilai . . . . .	3584
Evaluation the Time Effort of Resources/Partners Selection for Agile and Virtual Enterprises Paulo Ávila, Alzira Mota, João Bastos, Hélio Castro, Luís Pinto Ferreira, João Pinho, Nuno O. Fernandes, and Manuela Cruz Cunha . . . . .	3594
Venture Builders for Smart Manufacturing Tech Startups: A Comprehensive Literature Survey of an Emerging Trend Andrea de Giorgio, and Antonio Maffei . . . . .	3606
Harnessing knowledge management in the industrial metaverse: opportunities and challenges Juliana Salvadorinho, and Leonor Teixeira . . . . .	3616
The Role of NGOs in Food Supply Chains: Case of Supporting Mechanisms for Dutch SFSC Stakeholders Jochem Groothuisink, Patrick Burgess, and Funlade Sunmola . . . . .	3624
Evaluating the Transparency and Traceability of Carbon Tokens: Blockchain's Role in Circular Economy Certification Reyan Abbas, and Omid Fatahi Valilai . . . . .	3634
Workplace Safety Enhancement through Industry 4.0 Adoption Tsega Y. Melesse, Mattia Braggio, Mohamed Shameer Peer, Marco Mosca, Ilaria Sacchi, Simone Arena, and Federico Briatore . . . . .	3645
OCCF - Leveraging Lagged Correlation Analysis for Enhanced Insights in Continuous Industrial Data Sabrina Luftensteiner, Kilian Krikova, and Roman Rainer . . . . .	3655
Residual Stress Evaluation in GMAW Welding: Influence of Torch Angle via Numerical and Experimental Models. Rodríguez Izquierdo David, Borgia Carmine, Gagliardi Francesco, Ambrogio Giuseppina, and Filice Luigino . . . . .	3663
5G Advantages in Manufacturing: A Vision Beyond the Speed and Latency Advantages António Almeida, Pedro Senna, Américo Azevedo, and Ricardo Dinis . . . . .	3673
Effect of Filler Type and Gate Design on EMI Shielding Performance of PA6 and PC-Based Polymer Composites Kudret Irem Deniz, Luca Giorleo, and Elisabetta Ceretti . . . . .	3680
Optimal deployment of IoT-based measurement instruments for mine ventilation systems Seyyed Mojtaba Fakhari, Sana Khalifa, and Hatem Mrad. . . . .	3690
A Review of Applications and Design Space Exploration of Image and Video Analytics in Manufacturing Based on Neural Networks Christian Daase, Abdulrahman Nahhas, Christian Haertel, and Klaus Turowski . . . . .	3700
A Mathematical Framework for Assessing Disruptions in Maritime Logistics Operations Ali Raza, Eugénio M. Rocha, Ângela F. Brochado, and Muhammad Mohsin . . . . .	3710
Logistical Disruptions and Advanced Technologies: Strategies for Managing Geopolitical Challenges Rui Almeida, André M. Carvalho, and Lúgia Conceição . . . . .	3721
Scalable and Interoperable Hybrid Blockchain Framework: Architectural Layers and Consensus Mechanism Design Gurunath R, Debabrata Samanta, and Blerta Prevalla Etemi. . . . .	3731

High-performance VAT Photopolymerization Processes for the Fabrication of Micro-channels and Stubs in sub-THz devices	
Alessandro Guida, Francesco Modica, Vito Basile, Valeria Marrocco, and Irene Fassi . . . . .	3741
Consumer Adoption of Digital Product Passports for Electric Vehicle Batteries: Insights from an Extended UTAUT2 Model	
Nehal Anand Gamangatti, and Hendro Wicaksono . . . . .	3751
A Fuzzy Inference System for Quantitative Evaluation of Viable Supplier Performance	
Kamar Zekhnini, Abba Chaouni Benabdellah, and Zakaria Fattah . . . . .	3761
Streamlining AI Model Development and Evaluation in Industrial Settings by means of an Application	
Sabrina Luftensteiner, Johann Schrammel, Lisa Diamond, and Richard Degenfellner. . . . .	3771
Stakeholder needs and perceptions for metaverse-driven engineering education	
Andrea Bezzina, and Joseph Paul Zammit. . . . .	3781
Numerical and Experimental Validation of Microstructural Alterations and Hardness Variation During Laser Impact Welding for Ni/Ni Joining	
Serafino Caruso, Giuseppe Serratore, Michela Sanguedolce, Marco Magro, Carmine De Bartolo, and Luigino Filice. . . . .	3790
SETTE: A Human-Centric Framework for Operator Safety Monitoring in Industry 5.0	
Filippo Bianchini, Marco Calamo, Matteo Marinacci, Jacopo Rossi, and Massimo Mecella. . . . .	3800
A Performance Indicator Ontology for Predictive Maintenance in Smart Manufacturing	
Matthias Pohl, Daniel Staegemann, Christian Haertel, and Klaus Turowski. . . . .	3810
Perceptions of Blockchain’s Role in Food Supply Chain Quality Management: A Comparative Analysis Across Global, Alternative, and Mixed Structures	
Patrick Burgess, Funlade Sunmola, and Sigrid Wertheim-Heck . . . . .	3817
Comparative Evaluation of Wagner-Whitin and Silver-Meal Lot Sizing Methods for Inventory Optimization in a Paper-Based Manufacturing Case Study	
Gabriel Emiliano Martinez-Luna, and Susana Casy Téllez-Ballesteros . . . . .	3827
Human-Centric Warehousing with XR Technologies: Opportunities and Research Gaps for Industry 5.0	
Francesco Longo, Giovanni Mirabelli, Letizia Nicoletti, Melania Pellegrino, Vittorio Solina, and Simone Talarico . . . . .	3835
Supporting Custom Prosthetics Manufacturing Decisions in Fab Labs through Automated Simulation	
Lucia Gazzaneo, Francesco Longo, Giovanni Mirabelli, Letizia Nicoletti, Chiara Sammarco, Vittorio Solina, and Pierpaolo Veltri . . . . .	3846
Cascaded Machine Learning and Deep Learning Models for Reliable Predictive Maintenance in Industry 4.0	
Alessandro Chiurco, Antonio Cimino, Mohaiad Elbasheer, Francesco Longo, Karen Althea Manfredi, Letizia Nicoletti, Antonio Padovano, and Luigi Maria Tridico . . . . .	3858
Human-Centric Interfaces for Digital Twin as a Service: A Framework for Managerial Decision Support	
Antonio Cimino, Francesco Longo, Karen Althea Manfredi, Giovanni Mirabelli, Letizia Mortara, and Vittorio Solina . . . . .	3868
Discrete Event Simulation of Emergency Department Operations: A Case Study in an Italian Hospital	
Alessio Baratta, Antonio Cimino, Virginia D’Augusta, Giuseppe Emanuele Ferro, Caterina Fusto, Lucia Gazzaneo, Lorenzo Lopez, and Giovanni Mirabelli . . . . .	3879
An Integrated AnyLogic Simulation Model for Chocolate Production and Cocoa Husk Valorization	
Alessio Baratta, Alessia Bubba, Martina Cardamone, Martina Perri, Vittorio Solina, Alexia Verduci, Angelo Algieri, and Orlando Corigliano . . . . .	3889

Modeling Hydrogen Integration in Port Logistics Alessio Baratta, Petronilla Fragiaco, Matteo Genovese, Francesco Longo, Karen Althea Manfredi, Leonardo Pagnotta, Francesco Piraino, and Vittorio Solina .....	3899
Assessing Data Efficiency and Scalability of Ensemble Learning Models for Real End-of-Life Battery Health Prediction Raffaele Cali, Martina Cardamone, Matteo Cuomo, Francesco Longo, Antonio Padovano, and Felice Tauro .....	3905
Exploring Human-AI trust in Industry 5.0: Insights from a Virtual Reality Intelligent Tutoring Case Study Giovanni Mirabelli, Antonio Padovano, Giovanna Rocca, Chiara Sammarco, Vittorio Solina, and Javier Ernesto Suárez Savigne .....	3915
From Digital Lag to Contractual Frugality: Rethinking Governance of Artisanal SMEs in Peripheral Regions Lucia Gazzaneo, Francesco Longo, Mariafederica Martire, and Letizia Nicoletti .....	3925
Layout of a Warehouse: a real case study Gianluca Fratta, Stefano Saetta, and Lorenzo Alberati .....	3934



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# The use of Natural Language Processing (NLP) in aviation: A case study using BERT

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## Abstract

In the aircraft Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) industry the high uncertainty of resources needed for a given operation is a very recurrent problem. This implies that being able to collect and analyse data from past events to forecast future ones provides a company with more stability of outcomes and a competitive advantage in the industry. However, the heterogeneous manner in which data is collected and stored causes it to be often disregarded or at least not used in all its potential. This paper presents the development and evaluation of a BERT-based Natural Language Processing (NLP) model designed to classify aircraft zones from free-text maintenance reports. Using maintenance reports of 372 maintenance projects from a Portuguese MRO, the model achieved an accuracy of 85.69%. While developing the model a sensitivity analysis was performed to examine the impact of learning rate, warm-up period, and dropout probability on performance, allowing considerations for future model development in this area. In addition, the added value of this paper includes recommendations for maintenance management in companies intending to implement such model.

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*Keywords:* Aircraft Maintenance; Maintenance Management; Natural Language Processing; BERT

## 1. Introduction

The unpredictable nature of maintenance demand poses significant challenges for capacity planning and resource allocation of Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) activities organizations. Companies pursue the ability to use past data to forecast future events. In maintenance, past data is stored in maintenance reports referring to performed tasks. In these reports, several types of fields are found, namely Numeric, Date/Time, Free Text, Boolean,

Dropdown/Select Fields, among others. The data from the numeric/dropdown/Boolean fields can be used for forecasting, but are often found filled incorrectly, or not filled at all, which makes it impossible to use without treatment. Unstructured free-text fields in maintenance reports often contain valuable insights about the tasks performed and, among other things, are the key to correct these mistakes. However, they remain underutilized due to the impracticality of manually processing them. Recent advances in Natural Language Processing (NLP), particularly transformer-based models, offer a promising solution by automating text classification tasks with state-of-the-art accuracy.

In the context of Industry 4.0 (and recently 5.0), these data-driven approaches play a central role in advancing smart manufacturing systems. Specifically, NLP-based classification of maintenance reports can act as a key enabler of predictive maintenance pipelines, where structured insights from historical data are essential to anticipating future failures. By situating this study in the smart manufacturing ecosystem, the contribution extends beyond aviation maintenance to demonstrate how NLP can accelerate the transition of the paradigms of Industry 4.0 and 5.0. This study focuses on the following: 1) the practical use case of zone classification in aviation maintenance; 2) the fine-tuning and hyperparameter optimization of BERT; and 3) the analysis of results and recommendations for industrial implementation.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 is a quick overview of related work found; Section 3 explains the use case, dataset and development of the model; Section 4 presents results and sensitivity analysis; and Section 5 presents the conclusion and recommendations.

## 2. Related Work

### 2.1. BERT

BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers) is a pre-trained model that reads text in both directions, which develops a deeper context understanding. Built on Transformer encoder layers, it replaces sequential processing of recurrent neural networks (and other similar models) with parallel self-attention, the mechanism to focus and relate different parts of the same sequence [1]. It has two training phases, pre-training and fine-tuning. When pre-training the model is introduced to large text corpora and learns patterns in language, during it, BERT uses Masked Language Model (MLM), randomly hiding tokens to predict them, and Next Sentence Prediction (NSP) to learn inter-sentence relationships. Whereas in fine-tuning the model is presented with task-specific data further increasing its capacities.

### 2.2. NLP in Aviation Maintenance

In the maintenance field, the skills required to understand and solve a problem are still regarded as a valuable resource gained through a great deal of experience. Following this principle, and especially in aviation, the information coming from data of previous maintenance work should be considered a valuable asset to tackle the uncertainties in workload prediction, among other problems. Experts are aware of this, and references already exist in the literature [2] [3]. Jing et al. [4] present BERT as a "powerful tool for understanding contextual information" that achieved "impressive results in numerous language understanding tasks" and this is a general sentiment in literature about NLP tools. With such tool, the problem of initial treatment of data can be tackled, incorrect or inexistent numeric/dropdown/Boolean fields can be corrected, and historical data-driven forecasting tools can be developed.

NLP is the specific branch of AI "concerned with processing natural languages such as English or Mandarin. This processing generally involves translating natural language into data (numbers) that a computer can use" Amin et al. [5] present a review about previous research on the application of NLP in aviation. In it, three main focus areas in NLP research for aviation are identified: Aviation maintenance; safety reports analyses; and air traffic control. The paper includes literature from 2010 to 2022 and eleven "NLP Software Products in the Aviation Industry" are catalogued. These software products are described as NLP solutions which automate the process of text analysis, specifically for the aviation industry. The paper concludes that the offers for software in the field is still limited, but they are growing in number. From the eleven software products found, 7 are for maintenance, 2 for safety reports, and 5 for air traffic control. When stating the areas for the tools, an additional area is catalogued, named "customer

interactions”, with 4 NLP software tools available. From the 7 found for aviation maintenance, 6 are intended for text classification, the same as the model developed in this work. This is more than half of the software found, which indicates that there is interest in the topic. Other functions found in literature for NLP software are: natural language understanding; natural language generation; topic modelling; information retrieval; semantic similarity assessment; document summarization; speech recognition; and machine translation. For the maintenance field, Amin et al. [5] found 2 applications of NLP: support for switching to predictive maintenance; and assisting MRO technicians in the maintenance procedures themselves. The use of NLP in aviation maintenance helps decrease the time for text analysis, making it more time efficient. This allows for the exploitation of important historical data and helps in future decision making driven by actual past records, which is more reliable and more accurate than simulation, for example.

However, Brundage et al. [2], refers that exploring the potential of NLP to increase maintenance and maintenance management know-how is falling behind compared to other fields. The authors explain that the use of NLP in maintenance is not an extremely innovative action, but, on the contrary, a bit of a copy of other use cases, like the healthcare field, for example, and something to catch up on. This is a general sentiment in literature expressed in [4] or [6] among others. Amin et al. [5] also refer that application of NLP in maintenance is far from its full potential. The development of such tools is delayed because of the complexity of domain-specific vocabulary or abbreviations [2] [5] [7]. This problem is very well presented in [2], which argues that researchers develop NLP pipelines with non-technical language in mind, and there is a lack of adaptation of NLP for a technical and specific environment. Since day-to-day language is too different from the technical one, and the industrial systems currently developed are based on non-technical language processing pipelines, this fact can undermine results and delay implementation.

In some cases, however, it is already possible to see domain experts, analysts and researchers teaming up to create adequate pipelines. One such case is [8], where the effort is in the creation of a collaborative open-source library of technical and domain-specific language datasets, including aviation. Other similar works include Tikayat Ray et al. [9], which developed an annotated aerospace requirements corpus for requirements classification. Another promising effort is the work of Chandra et al. [10] which develops Aviation-BERT, a BERT model with a domain specific pipeline, and that of Sala et al. [11].

### 3. Use Case and Model Development

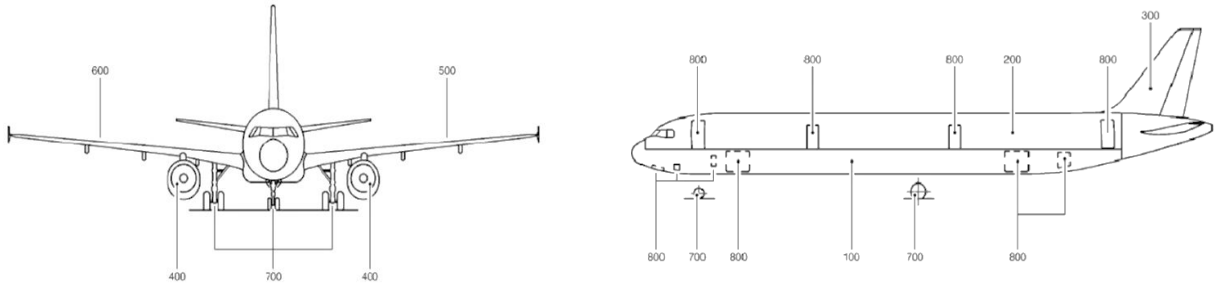
#### 3.1. Use Case

The host MRO organization intends to develop a tool for forecasting based on previous maintenance reports. Data-driven forecasting tools use statistics obtained from clear numerical/dropdown/Boolean data. However, to ensure accurate predictions of future workload, data inputs should be correct, which is not always the case. For this work, the goal was the accurate classification of the aircraft zone to be maintained. This specific field had previously been manually corrected by a field expert and only 6.37% were found to be totally correct. The result of the corrections made by the expert was available in the used dataset, hence the model could learn in a supervised manner. BERT is fine-tuned to the free text fields of said reports according to each correct zone as labels in order to obtain a model capable of classifying aircraft zones. Zone classification is an industry standard, enforced in Europe through the European Union Aviation Safety Agency's (EASA) continuing airworthiness regulations and comprises a three-digit code with each consecutive number being a smaller, more specific area of aircraft [12]. Fig. 1 shows the Major Zones described by the first digit.

#### 3.2. Dataset

Due to field requirements, aircraft maintenance is extensively documented. Every maintenance project is divided in tasks, and each of those tasks is documented in its own report, which means specific and useful information can be retrieved from historical data. The used dataset was received in an Excel file containing a column for each of the report's fields and a row for each maintenance task from each maintenance project. The dataset contained reports for 372 maintenance projects, as they are called in the data, collected between September 2002 and December 2015 in an MRO company [12]. These 372 projects translate into 62508 tasks reported and 62508 rows of the dataset.

Furthermore, thirteen queries/report fields make thirteen columns of data. The dataset had the shape of 62508x13, but it was further treated before being fed into the model.



Major Zone Code	Description
100	Lower fuselage (below the floor line)
200	Upper fuselage (above the floor line)
300	Tail cone and empennage group
400	Powerplant and nacelles
500	Left half-wing
600	Right half-wing
700	Landing gear wheel well
800	Doors (main, service, cargo, emergency)

Fig. 1. Major zone codes identified in the dataset

### 3.3. Model Development

This step is summarized in the scheme of Fig. 2.

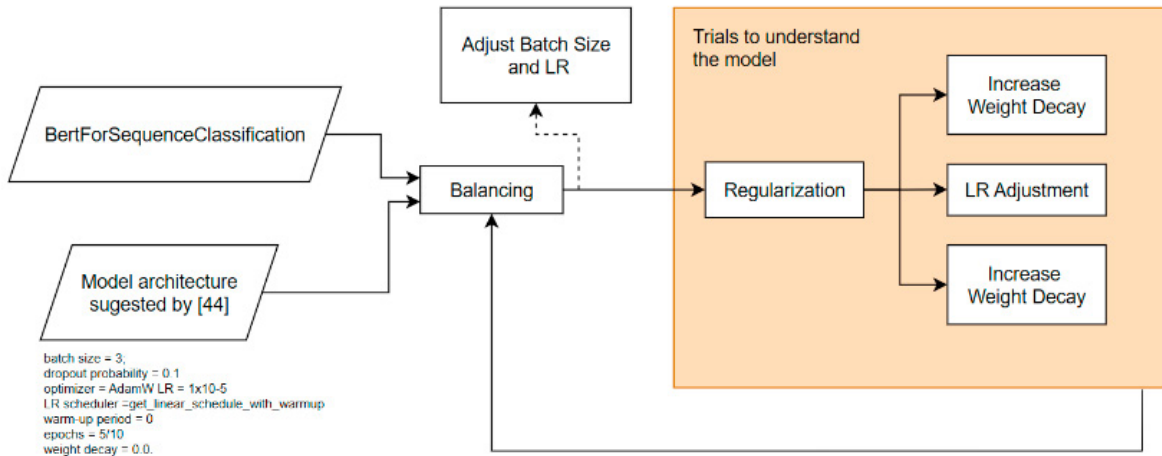


Fig. 2. Model changes in the exploring stage

From the whole dataset only four columns and 11567 lines are used, so the input for the model is a 11567 x 4 matrix. Furthermore, these 11567 free text entries were randomly split into training and validation datasets in a 80-20 ratio. During pre-processing, a decision was made to classify tasks only until the second digit of the zone code, in order to avoid unbalance in number of samples between labels, leaving the third digit to further studies. The chosen

tokenizer and encoder is *BertTokenizer* from the *Transformers* library developed by *HuggingFace*. For model implementation, an initial good set of hyperparameters was found to be:

- Batch size = 16
- LR =  $1 \times 10^{-5}$
- LR curve: Warm-up of 10% and a decay phase at the end
- Weight Decay = 0.01
- Dropout probability = 0.1
- Optimizer = AdamW
- LR scheduler

#### 4. Results and Sensitivity Analysis

The sensitivity analysis was performed according to Fig. 3.

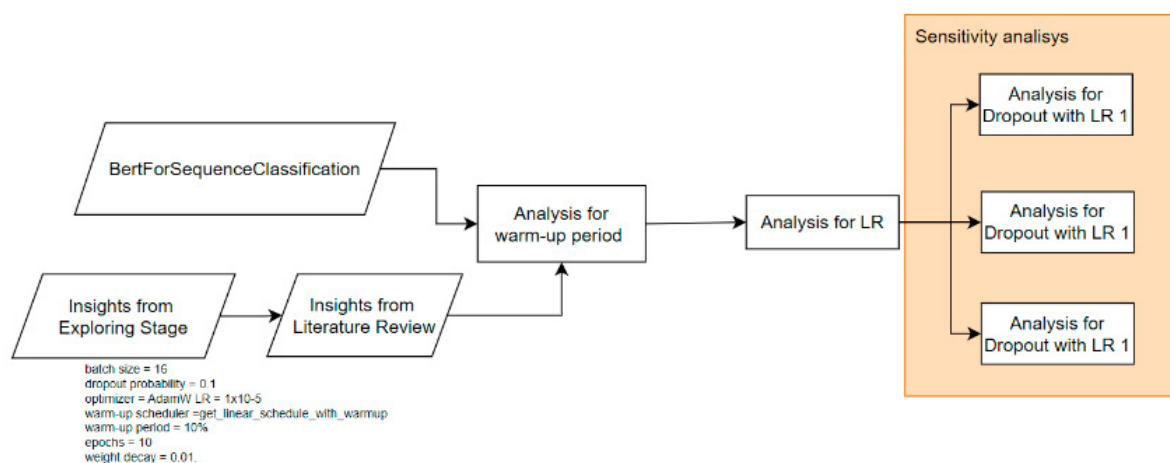


Fig. 3. Model changes in the hyper-parameter search stage

Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 represent the curves of progression of loss throughout epochs when training the model and validating results. They are useful to understand how the model reacted to the various levels chosen for each parameter. In each graph, same colour curves represent same levels of parameter and dark shades represent training loss, whereas lighter shades the validation loss. This facilitates comparisons between the same metrics and between different parameter setups.

The initial setup of parameters was the one found in Section 3.3. After those initial values, some parameters and their levels were chosen to the study based on previous works, with BERT, both in and out of the field of aviation maintenance, found in a literature review. The first parameter chosen was the Learning Rate (LR) warm-up period. As one can see in Fig. 4 (a), both warm-up periods showed similar progression throughout epochs, which implies that in this range, model and number of epochs, the length of the warm-up period is not relevant. Nevertheless, the accuracy in the best epoch was slightly higher for the 20% warm-up period, with 84.36% and 85.69%, for 10% and 20%, respectively. Second, a study on different LR was conducted to understand what range would be of interest. In Fig. 4 (b) it is noticeable how different LR values affect the model much more than the warm-up periods. Not only do they start and end at different levels, but also their patterns are different. For the lower LR, losses start at higher values and never reach the same as other levels of LR, making it not ideal. LRs  $3 \times 10^{-5}$  and  $5 \times 10^{-5}$  reached a very low training

loss, but the validation loss curve had its minimum early, in third and fourth epochs, respectively. This can be observed in Figure 4b, which can indicate their adequateness since they reached a peak within or training time. Lastly, LR of  $1 \times 10^{-5}$  reached low levels on both curves and did not have any instability, i.e., both curves decreased normally. The accuracies for those setups were 82.54%, 85.69%, 82.80% and 84.40%, in ascending order of LR.

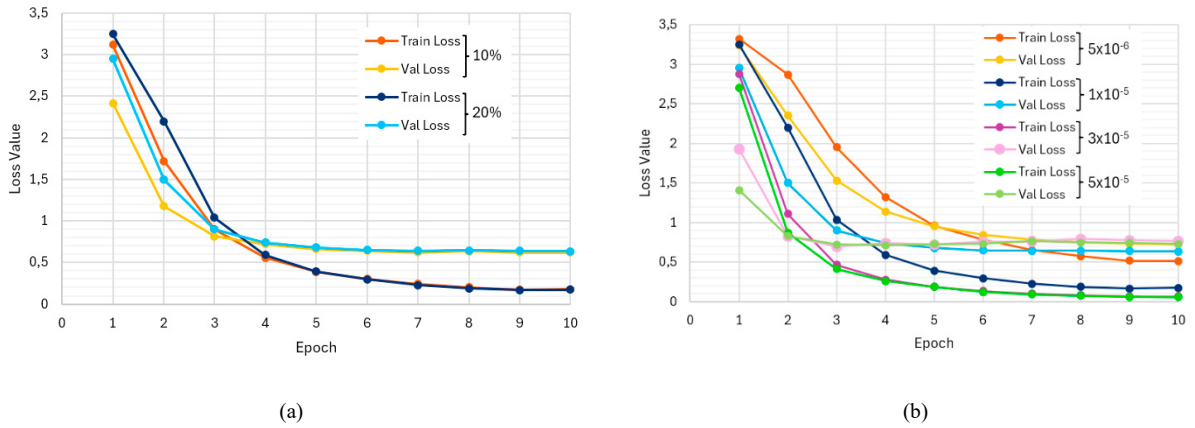


Fig. 4. (a) Training and Validation losses with different Learning Rate (LR) warm-up periods; (b) Training and Validation losses with different LRs.

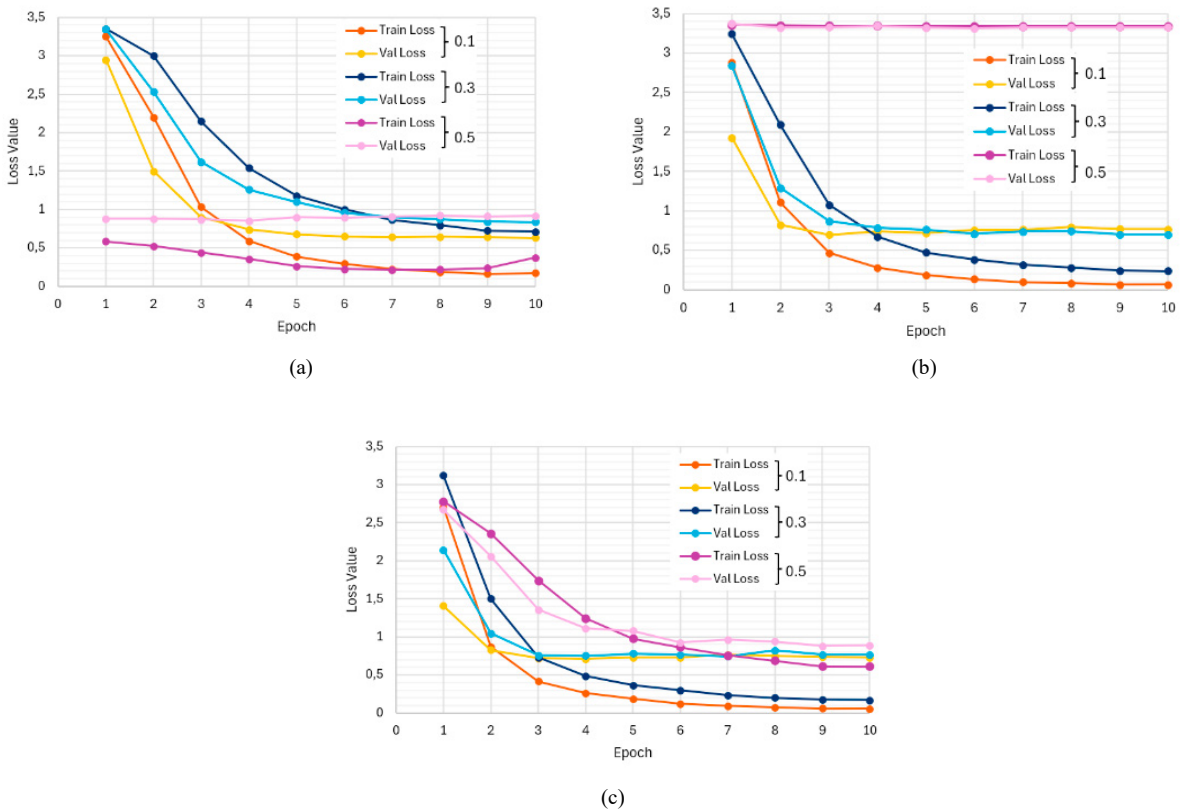


Fig. 5. Training and Validation losses with different dropout levels and a LR of: (a)  $1 \times 10^{-5}$ ; (b)  $3 \times 10^{-5}$ ; and (c)  $5 \times 10^{-5}$

Next, a sensitivity analysis was performed with three values for both dropout and LR (the lower LR of  $5 \times 10^{-6}$  was disregarded). Loss curve graphs can be seen in Fig. 5 and accuracy for the best epoch in Table 1. In Fig. 5 (a), the LR is the same as the previous configuration,  $1 \times 10^{-5}$ , which included the dropout at 0.1. There were no signs of overfitting, so it was not expected that the higher dropout levels would yield a better performance and that was, in fact, the case. In fact, for all levels, the model behaved mostly as expected: with the two lower LR, Fig. 5 (a) and Fig. 5 (b), the higher dropouts cause instability since low LR does not call for much compensation in “forgetting” some nodes. The highest LR, Fig. 5 (c), has a more aggressive learning pattern, being prone to wrong extrapolations. This means that a higher dropout causes less severe instability and higher accuracy.

Table 1. Accuracy for all levels of sensitivity analysis with three different Learning Rate values.

		Learning Rate		
		$1 \times 10^{-5}$	$3 \times 10^{-5}$	$5 \times 10^{-5}$
Dropout probability	0.1	85.69	82.62	84.40
	0.3	78.13	85.09	84.52
	0.5	80.25	11.66	77.09

The most notorious conclusion is that the 0.5 dropout, the highest, is not favorable in any level of LR. The best performances were the combinations: low LR plus low dropout; medium and high LR plus medium dropout. Both the medium and high fitting well with the same dropout may be associated with the fact that  $5 \times 10^{-5}$  LR is still inside what is commonly considered a "normal" range for the LR and may still not be high enough for a high level.

For the best performing model the best setup is then a 20% warm-up rate paired with  $1 \times 10^{-5}$  LR and 0.1 dropout. With an accuracy of 85.69% and an F1-score of 85.79% the confusion matrix for the validation dataset is in Fig. 6. From it labels with low individual accuracy and pairs of labels with high absolute number of wrong predictions were discovered.

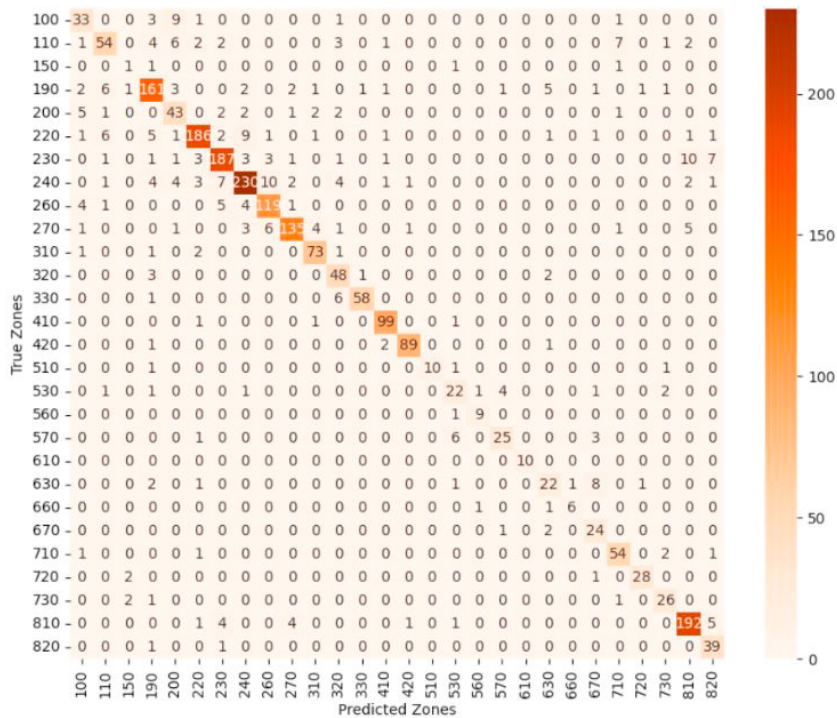


Fig. 6. Confusion Matrix of chosen model configuration with predicted zones vs true zones

## 5. Discussion and Recommendations

### 5.1. Low Accuracy Zones

The computation of accuracy values per class revealed that several zones had considerably lower performance. In particular, zones under the major fuselage labels—100 (Lower Fuselage), 110 (Fuselage Forward Section I), 150 (Fuselage Centre Section III), and 200 (Upper Fuselage)—displayed significant confusion. This can be attributed to the fact that they are all subparts of the fuselage, meaning text descriptions will use similar words and they all share structural similarities, so the model struggles to identify unique features. Also, since these zones describe both interior and exterior areas, the model could struggle to find patterns.

The issue is further complicated by the presence of only two major zones, 100 and 200, in the training data. These zones represent aggregate categories, while their subzones (e.g., 110–190 for 100) offer more detail. The lack of distinct boundaries in description between major zones and their subzones introduces noise into the classification task.

Additionally, zones 530 and 630, which refer to the left and right wings, respectively, comprehensibly share identical descriptions, further confusing the model. Other zones with a relatively low-class accuracy included subzones 570, 660 and 510 which could have the same problem, although since their counterparts did not show the same pattern, it is not possible to generalize the conclusion.

### 5.2. Pairs with High Number of Errors

Beyond individual zone accuracy, certain zone pairs consistently yielded a high number of absolute misclassifications. For example, the model frequently confused zone 230 (Fuselage Center Section I) with 810 (Fuselage LH side - Doors) and 820 (RH side - Doors). These errors are attributable to overlapping descriptions, such as the mention of doors, seals, and fuselage components that appear in both zones.

Similarly, zones 100 and 200 (lower and upper fuselage) were often confused due to similar vocabulary describing general fuselage issues, such as corrosion, paint, or antenna installation. Pairs like 630 and 670 (Wing interior and trailing edge), and 570 and 530 (left wing trailing edge and interior), also presented confusion stemming from their close physical proximity and interchangeable terms like "spoiler" and "fairing."

Other recurrent confusions include:

- 110 and 710: Similar terminology due to overlap between fuselage and nose landing gear compartments.
- 240 and 230: Similar descriptions of central fuselage sections.
- 330 and 320: Difficulty in differentiating horizontal vs vertical stabilizers due to similar design and problem descriptions.

### 5.3. Recommendations

#### A. Rearrangement or Creation of New Labels for Fuselage

Given the high degree of lexical similarity and overlapping tasks in fuselage-related zones, one recommendation is the strategic regrouping of these labels. If regulatory and operational constraints do not allow a definitive rearrangement, then reconfiguring these labels into functionally clustered groups could improve model clarity. Alternatively, if MRO have the need to distinguish current labels, fundamental differences should be identified, and technicians explicitly instructed to differentiate descriptions between adjacent fuselage zones to improve input clarity.

#### B. Possibly Not Including Major Zones

To reduce label ambiguity, the exclusion of major zones 100 and 200 from the training dataset is suggested. These zones aggregate subzones without offering distinct descriptions, thus confusing the classifier. It would probably be beneficial to exclude these. If the maintenance task refers to the full major zone, then this solution would have to include multi-label classification in order to allow for all the subzones to be selected as labels, this model does not include multi-label classification due to computational constraints.

### C. Clarification of Zoning for Wings

For wing zones, the key issue lies in lexical and structural overlap between adjacent or symmetric zones, and probably not from confusion between left and right. Labels such as 530/630 and 570/670 should either be differentiated more clearly in documentation or regrouped where distinctions are functionally irrelevant, just like for fuselage zones. Furthermore, encouraging consistent terminology in maintenance descriptions, especially specifying side (e.g., LH/RH, leading/trailing), can also mitigate misclassifications.

### D. Instruction for More Standardized Text

Naturally, when filling the free text fields, a vocabulary that is not only more standardized but also in accordance to the existing zoning, when describing tasks, would help the model in classification. This is true not only for classification of zones, but also other classification models that could be developed according to MRO needs.

### E. Technician Instruction on AI

Since most effective solutions include some degree of behavior change from technicians, it is advisable to educate maintenance personnel on the functioning of AI models and the value of accurate, detailed descriptions. This can prevent resistance to procedural changes and foster better alignment between human and machine-readable data.

### F. Developing a More TLP-Friendly Environment

Adopting Technical Language Processing (TLP) principles (2) is essential for improving NLP model performance in aviation contexts. Therefore, all companies should be encouraged to, first, contribute to widely available data banks specific for the development of such tools. Second, on a company level, the creation of a dictionary of terms and/or a customized tokenizer, including a whole adapted pipeline like the one in Aviation-BERT (10) is advised.

### G. Double Confirmation

While the model achieved an accuracy of 85.69%, the remaining proportion of misclassifications could potentially carry implications in the highly demanding reality of the sector, this is something to be checked in further investigations.

However, if needed, given the model accuracy and depending on acceptable thresholds for this context, it could be deployed in operational systems paired with supplementary human oversight. A dual-check system where model predictions are cross-verified with technician entries, and mismatches flagged, can provide a practical balance between automation and reliability. This ensures high precision without compromising trust in AI predictions.

## 6. Conclusion

This study applied a fine-tuned BERT model to classify maintenance reports by aircraft zone, addressing persistent inaccuracies in maintenance reports. With an achieved accuracy of 85.69%, far surpassing the 6.37% baseline from manual entries, the model demonstrates strong potential for automating zoning tasks in aviation MRO operations.

For model development, the 20% LR warm-up period,  $1 \times 10^{-5}$  LR and 0.1 dropout were found to be the most adequate levels for finetuning this dataset. Thus, the lower level of LR paired with the lower level of dropout probability proved to perform best, followed by the medium level of dropout with LR levels at medium and high (presumed to still be in the range of medium, i.e., not high enough).

Maintenance management wise, the model faced challenges in distinguishing zones with overlapping language, particularly among fuselage and wing labels. These findings support the need for domain-adapted pipelines such as models like Aviation-BERT, as well as more structured technician input.

Key recommendations include revising zone labels, excluding ambiguous major zones, and in the future adopting multi-label classification, and introducing human-in-the-loop validation for critical outputs. This approach not only improves reliability but ensures scalability within regulatory constraints.

Finally, these results position NLP not just as a tool for efficiency but as a fundamental component of smart manufacturing pipelines. The ability to convert free-text maintenance report fields into structured machine-friendly inputs opens the way towards digital integration, a goal of the industry 4.0 and 5.0.

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