

End Of The Line

Maverick Technologies

Dealing with end-of-lifespan issues related to distributed control systems is an unwanted task for any manufacturer. How are they supposed to proceed with that task in today's ever-changing and increasingly complex manufacturing business environment? Matt Sigmon and Kirk Norris of Maverick Technologies, a provider of systems integration, industrial automation, process control and automation engineering services, recently discussed this very issue in an interview with [Manufacturing Business Technology](#) [1].

Matt Sigmon

MBT: Can you tell me a little bit about the issues companies are facing related to aging legacy and DCS systems?

Sigmon: As these legacy and DCS systems come to the ends of their lifespan, we obviously work with our customers in recognizing the struggles they have dealing with those kinds of issues and how to move forward over the next 5-30 years to leverage their capital outlay, keep their business profitable, or even improve it. As they struggled with those issues, we developed an offering that would help them navigate through these waters.

With limited capital and the drive to improve efficiencies and throughputs in their existing operations, they have to be very smart with how they lay out this capital and do these upgrades. What do they do right away? How do they do them? How do they get funding? Twenty years ago they were able to do a lot of this analysis and evaluation themselves using either their internal engineering groups or consulting engineers. The landscape has changed greatly in the past 20 years. We saw a need in helping our customers evaluate the next 5-20 years, what their options are, what the most cost-effective solutions are, and obviously to help them implement those solutions. This way they are not just upgrading IO, retrofitting their systems, or putting in new controllers. They are actually leveraging this opportunity to make improvements, and they are doing it smartly.

Norris: They are making a generational decision here. Even if they've done a great job maintaining their old system and have a good relationship with the legacy OEM, whatever they decided to do moving forward, they're going to get a very different-looking system with different capabilities. There's no question about whether they'll have to replace it or not. The equipment is just at the end of its useful life or fast approaching the end of its useful life. The type of money you're looking at investing, the type of timeframe you are looking to employ this equipment over, up front it makes sense to take a very comprehensive look at the various platforms and systems that are available to you and employ somebody that knows the advantages and disadvantages, has worked with all of them, and then can relate them to your

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specific needs.

The longer-term issue is two things: Keeping the system running optimally to maximize your investment, and the reason to automate in the first place is to increase your productivity, and then just the maintenance of the long-term total cost of ownership of the control system itself. It's a lot bigger world out there, and there are things to consider that an individual firm that has relied heavily on a single OEM may not be familiar with.

Kirk Norris

MBT: Sometimes there is a disconnect within one organization in regard to some of the options that are out there. Is that an issue in this decision-making process?

Sigmon: You've got folks that have been there a good while, they are very comfortable with the system they have, and that's very understandable. There's a natural inclination to go to the OEMs they've been using. That's most of the time. Sometimes we see there is a level of frustration with the existing OEM because of pricing, support, or other issues. Each individual has his or her gripes, preferences, and ways they think things should go. You even may see a particular plant want to go forward with a particular solution in a particular way. Sometimes that solution isn't well thought out from a business case standpoint. Options haven't been compared. This is not just a matter of a technology upgrade. You need to step back and look at not just the technology, but all the business drivers. When you look at individuals, some of the older folks that were around when these systems were put in have a certain perspective. Others have a different one. But you also see a variation in roles. They may have a different perspective.

Norris: What you mentioned is very common, I would say. If you are a large manufacturing company with multiple sites that may be using multiple DCS vendors, that's not uncommon. If you are going forward and want to standardize on a single system, there is going to be a lot of opinions. Sometimes that comes down to relationships. But this is a long-term investment. You're going to have to live with it.

Sigmon: The landscape has changed. It's not just that the old DCS systems are reaching end of life, there has been a lot of changes in North American manufacturing. There's been a lot of consolidation, a lot of acquisition, and even dynamics within companies to consolidate purchasing into central purchasing groups, versus out in the plant. And so you have a lot of dynamics that have changed since the first time these systems were put out, and it is important to think through those things so that in the end the projects get funded in a way that's smart, and these end customers are laying out capital in a smart way, not spending one nickel more than they need to, and getting the best return on it that they can. Often the immediate solution is not the best solution.

MBT: Technology can bring a lot to the table, so to speak. But do you feel

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all this new technology sometimes blinds potential customers to the fact that every business is different, and they all deal with different issues?

Norris: We feel strongly that it certainly makes a lot of sense invest a little bit of money upfront to understand the issues and understand those fine differences, see how your business has changed, and determine what may be confronting your business down the road and in the future. It is overwhelming. What you find in many of these companies is that level of complexity around what's available, and there isn't the same expertise always in the firm to do that analysis, to take the time and do real studies. We think the nature of this type of investment is a small price to pay, and really there is no price to pay. By making the right decision, by looking at this competitively across multiple suppliers who know they are in and out of a competitive situation by the mere fact that they are participating in an analysis such as this, these studies pretty much pay for themselves.

***MBT:* If the wrong decisions are made, the cost is going to add up and it's certainly going to be a difficult situation to deal with down the road. We're talking about a lot of cost here and some serious things to deal with. So it seems the more knowledgeable you are the better off you are going to be.**

Sigmon: I think we're trying to educate our customers and the marketplace in general. I have this theory, just based anecdotally on what I've seen. You have a spectrum of customers and clients out there. On one end you have the very proactive. Not only have they developed plans, they are probably to some degree already working on migration. It wouldn't surprise most of us who some of those companies are. They are the companies that have the capital. They have the money and have a history of having four or five proactive investments. On the other end of the spectrum is the really cash-strapped businesses, and there are several of those that have already emerged from bankruptcy or are at least cash-thin. They are really struggling, and they want to do certain things but they have no money. Then there are a ton of folks that are somewhere along the way.

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