



Industrial IoT will not deliver on its potential – unless it solves this challenge

Lack of data visibility in existing plants hinders Industrial IoT deployment...but non-invasive instrumentation upgrade is a key part of the solution

IIoT (Industrial Internet of Things) is a hot trend these days – it promises to revolutionize our industrial prowess by improving efficiency at existing power plants, refineries, off-shore oil platforms, pharmaceutical plants, hospitals etc. According to McKinsey, IIoT will unlock \$6.2 trillion in potential economic impact by 2025. For the electricity sector alone, the World Economic Forum estimates \$1.3 trillion of value can be captured with IIoT.

But in some of the largest planned deployments of IIoT, the reality is more problematic. Most existing plants do not provide the data visibility that IIoT needs; without that data, IIoT cannot work. Upgrading the plants to obtain the data can be extremely costly and also disruptive to operations, making the whole proposition economically unattractive. Unless we can solve this challenge, Industrial IIoT will not fulfill its potential.

WHAT IS THE INDUSTRIAL INTERNET OF THINGS?

Before we delve further, let's take a minute to recap what IIoT is. In our everyday lives, we already experience an emerging Internet of Things. We have a proliferation of sensors and intelligence in our smart phones, our cars, our home thermostats, and even smart refrigerators. This rich source of sensor data can be networked, gathered and analyzed by super smart software which will help us to detect problems, work more productively and save more energy. IIoT, or *Industrial IoT*, is the application of the same principles to industrial plants and processes. Gathering process data on pressures, temperatures, flow rates, RPM, vibration etc. will allow smart IIoT software to make plants more efficient, safer, and more reliable.

Virtually all the major industrial technology companies are rolling out IIoT offerings. Early on, IBM had Watson. GE has Predix. Schneider offers EcoStruxure. Honeywell announced Sentience. The majority of the current focus is on the *software* side of IIoT – databases and algorithms to crunch through terabytes of data to detect faults and optimize processes. Of the \$3 billion in Venture Capital investment in IIoT, most if not all are targeting software.

THE CHALLENGE OF DATA VISIBILITY

But when it comes to real-life deployments at existing plants, software driven efforts have encountered a huge hurdle. Those older inefficient facilities which are the prime targets for IIoT were mostly built decades ago, before the advent of the internet and before digital networked sensor technologies. There isn't sufficient data available to feed the sophisticated IIoT software.

Some of the largest IIoT efforts have already been stymied by this problem. Notably in November 2016, GE and Exelon announced the largest and most ambitious IIoT partnership in history, focusing on Exelon's fleet of power generation assets. Similarly, IBM and Areva (now Framatome) launched yet another effort in December 2017. These programs included nuclear power plants, which involve complex processes and equipment and also high safety standards, making it an ideal opportunity for IIoT. This effort comes at a critical time for the nuclear industry – in 2016, the Nuclear Energy Institute set a target of 30% cost reduction within two years to ensure nuclear power can compete with low cost shale gas and even solar and wind based generation. IIoT appeared to be the key to unlock these savings.



Typical nuclear power plant in the US is over 35 years old, built before the availability of widespread digital sensors and networking

But even GE and Framatome, which built and/or maintained many of the original reactors and arguably the best positioned in the IIoT space, will run into huge challenges. Most of the nuclear fleet is over 35 years old. When one walks into a typical plant, it is striking to see thousands of manual gauges which are read by roving uniformed technicians. These dial gauges, two to eight inches in diameter, use a needle to display pressure, flow, temperature and other process data for feedwater systems, condensers, steam generators etc.

Ideally, this process data would be captured using digital sensors and available for IIoT applications - but this is not the case at virtually all existing nuclear plants. The plants must be retrofitted to enable the necessary digitization. But digitizing even just one pressure gauge can be an intensive task which takes tens of thousands of dollars and months to accomplish. It involves detailed engineering design and assessment which must be reviewed and approved by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, plus actual installation work to cut pipes, install transducers, perform leak checks, run signal and power cables and installing I/O and controllers to collect the data. Moreover, the work can only be done when the unit

involved is shut down – which means expensive disruption to plant operations. Using conventional approaches, there is no realistic way to perform the upgrade within the two year time window set by the industry, and the huge upfront cost would take over a decade to pay back.



Thousands of manual gauges monitor critical parameters such as pressure, temperature, flow; the readings are not digitized and do not lend themselves to IoT or fault detection analytics



Technicians read instruments manually and write on clipboards

NON-INVASIVE DIGITIZATION OF INSTRUMENTS

The only way to proceed is to look for alternative ways to retrofit manual instrumentation without the associated high cost and disruption. This turns out to be the specialty of a technology startup company in Silicon Valley which developed a non-invasive optical based system. The Wireless Gauge Reader (WGR) from Cypress Envirosystems is essentially an “electronic eyeball” the size of a hockey puck, which can be attached to the face of an existing gauge in minutes without the need to cut any pipes or run any wires. Once attached, the WGR reads the gauge needle and converts that reading to a digital wireless value which can then be transmitted to a software application like GE’s Predix. The devices can be installed in about 10 minutes each, with no shutdown or disruption to plant operations, and data is immediately visible using industry protocols such as OPC or RESTful API.

At an average cost of about \$1,500 per gauge, the WGR is perhaps one tenth the cost of using conventional instrumentation. In addition to dial gauges, non-invasive wireless level indicator readers and analog vibration monitors are also available from Cypress Envirosystems and are similarly easy to install. Together, these solutions can quickly and cost-effectively digitize existing process data, and enable the huge savings promised by IIoT.



Non-Invasive “Electronic Eyeball” Wireless Gauge Reader from Cypress Envirosystems - Installs in minutes without breaking seals, running wires, or incurring process downtime

APPLICABILITY TO A WIDE RANGE OF PLANTS

Of the 61 commercially operating nuclear plants in the United States, over half are older than 35 years, and virtually all of them older than 20 years. The majority of them have manual instrumentation, which will hinder IIoT deployment. Many of these plants have been granted, or will apply for license renewals which extend their operational life up to another 40 years, so it is imperative to find ways to improve efficiency for the long term.

Beyond nuclear power, there are 141 refineries, over 7,500 conventional fossil fuel power plants, and over 13,500 chemical plants in the nation which share many of the same conditions. Improving efficiency at these brownfield sites is not only a business priority, but will be critical for maintaining jobs and a healthy industrial base in the US to compete with foreign greenfield plants.

Collectively, as McKinsey pointed out, these types of facilities represent trillions of dollars of potential savings ready to be unlocked by IIoT. But plants looking to implement IIoT must look beyond only software and networking to ensure success. Data visibility is clearly one of the key hurdles for the broad deployment of IIoT, and non-invasive approaches such as the Wireless Gauge Reader may be the only cost effective way to upgrade and digitize their instrumentation.

March 2018

About the Contributor:

Harry Sim is CEO of Cypress Envirosystems,
Email: harry.sim@CypressEnvirosystems.com
Phone: (408) 307-0922
Web: <http://www.cypressenvirosystems.com>