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Like their colleagues in other departments, those responsible for equipment maintenance have felt the reality of a declining engineering and manufacturing workforce. And when that shrinking workforce meets budget cuts, many manufacturers decide to focus on efficiency improvements—*in their production infrastructure, in their workforce or in their supply chain*—as a means to improve uptime and reduce costs short-term without negatively impacting their long-term strategic direction. When identifying and implementing these operational efficiencies, however, manufacturers should also consider their plant maintenance efforts.

Indeed, most maintenance engineers currently face a fairly complex troubleshooting effort when problems arise during production. For example: The line operator calls a maintenance engineer to examine a glitch. Perhaps it's a mechanical or configuration issue, or maybe it's the control technology installed on the line. If it is the control technology, and the maintenance engineer is able to identify that a part needs to be replaced, he/she attempts to locate a spare part. If the spare is convenient, the engineer installs it and sends the faulty hardware out for repair, which requires getting quotes from multiple vendors and other time-consuming tasks.

Alternatively, the root of the issue might be difficult to identify, or maybe the maintenance engineer isn't sure precisely how to configure the replacement part, thus requiring outside support to fix the issue. A manager has to approve the cost for that support, and a service engineer has to be dispatched, often taking more time than the application can afford to be down.

Simplifying these efforts could help maintenance engineers be far more effective in their jobs. For example, if the maintenance engineer could immediately phone a control engineer to not only diagnose the problem quickly but also simultaneously initiate appropriate remediation, this not only reduces the amount of time it takes to administer support but also reduces the amount of time production is down. In addition, utilizing this single-phone-call methodology creates more time for the maintenance engineer to spend on preventive and predictive tasks—*something that can ultimately help reduce the number of downtime events in the first place.*

New, comprehensive service agreements provided by automation vendors allow companies to do exactly that: simplify and streamline issue resolution, maintenance, support and repair processes. In the case of Rockwell Automation, these contracts typically combine remote support, replacement parts and on-site service into a single annual agreement, available for one flat fee. Although IT companies have offered similar service options for several years, this type of comprehensive support for automation and control equipment is a new concept designed to give maintenance engineers access to the help they need, whenever and wherever they need it, while helping their employers achieve financial predictability in their maintenance budgets.

Service contracts also help manufacturers avoid the relearning process and corresponding delays that so often plague the troubleshooting process when the issue has to be explained multiple times to multiple parties. With a single call, maintenance engineers can access specialists with decades of experience solving the challenges engineers face daily, without the need to locate the “right” person at the “right” company with the “right” knowledge—*all before remediation actually begins.*

While comprehensive service contracts might not be for everyone, any maintenance department struggling to keep up with demands on its time and budget can benefit from simplifying its support experience. **MT**

The opinions expressed in this Viewpoint section are those of the author, and don’t necessarily reflect those of the staff and management of *Maintenance Technology* magazine.

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