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Years ago, many of us took part in the “Great Fieldbus Wars” that raged across the automation side of manufacturing. If you worked on the maintenance and reliability side of an operation, y ou were either a bystander—
essentially kept in the dark
—or some type of “collateral damage” in these wars. Debates about the technical merits of different “fieldbus” technologies and discussions of the benefits to be realized for manufacturers of all types seemed to be never-ending.

Things eventually settled down (as they usually do). The many digital fieldbuses that were proposed in the 1990s gradually coalesced into two main ones—*Foundation Fieldbus, promulgated by the Fieldbus Foundation, and Profibus PA, promulgated by Profibus International* . Although the initial benefits were touted as labor cost savings due to wiring reductions, the real benefits involved enhanced diagnostics. If maintenance and operations could devise ways to capture and use that information, many additional benefits would ensue. These included better information about the status of processes and the ability to react more quickly to problems.

Going digital

Larry O’Brien, Marketing Director for the Fieldbus Foundation, recently engaged me in a discussion about the benefits of digital networks. “The diagnostics issue is really an information management problem that can be solved with the technology we have today,” he observed. “NAMUR NE 107 diagnostics have been part of our specification since 2010. NAMUR NE 107 is extremely valuable because it not only creates standard symbols and terms for reporting diagnostic conditions, it makes it a lot easier to classify diagnostics in terms of severity and root cause.”

O’Brien continued, “When you go completely digital, the volume and type of diagnostics that are available to you increase exponentially, as does the bandwidth to report these diagnostic conditions. All of a sudden, you find yourself able to access thousands of diagnostic parameters at a time from many different devices across your fieldbus network.”

Think about the “exponential increase” O’Brien describes: This takes diagnostics into a whole new dimension, where it becomes part of your overall plant optimization strategy.**MT**

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