It may not be broke, but you can still improve it

We all know the squeaky wheel gets the oil. Maintenance managers also know that just because a wheel isn't squeaking, it doesn't mean it won't fall off at any minute. Equipment that seems to be purring along without a hint of trouble may suddenly have a problem that can create downtime, costs and urgent maintenance issues.

Just as you go to the doctor for a checkup even when you feel fine, smart maintenance managers perform routing service audits or assessments to ensure that assets are actually in good running order, operating at high levels of performance and don't have any pending problems.

It may seem unwise to invest money in a service audit when everything is running fine. In truth, there are many measurable paybacks from an audit, according to Rick Gardner, sales and marketing manager - medium voltage service at ABB.

"By identifying the components or systems in an asset that are most likely to fail, we can repair, replace or upgrade those components and add years or even decades to that asset's service life. Avoiding replacement of an expensive piece of equipment provides a big return on the asset audit investment. This is an especially important payback for utilities which rely on many pieces of equipment that have reached or exceeded their expected life.

"Improved reliability goes hand-in-hand with life extension," Gardner continues. "Based on our extensive experience with power equipment, we can predict with a high level of accuracy when key components of an asset are likely to fail. That makes it possible to greatly enhance reliability and avoid the costs of downtime in a manufacturing environment or of an outage for utilities or industrial customers."

The final return on an audit investment is potentially the most important.

“Older equipment lacks many of the safety features found on the current generation of assets,” Gardner explains. “The service audit can identify the risks and provide a go-forward plan to mitigate them, which includes identifying the highest priority issues that need to be addressed immediately. Considering the potential costs of a catastrophic equipment failure to your operators and your facility, safer equipment delivers a big return on that audit investment.”

Service audits for process automation equipment deliver the same kinds of benefits. But Robert Horton, ABB director of services in process automation, says that it’s common to see an even bigger benefit from the performance improvement.

“We go into a customer facility and evaluate their process. We analyze how their automation equipment measures up to benchmarks of world class operations. The analysis can be very detailed, as long as 100 pages. Based on that data, we work with the customer to see how the automation can be tuned and optimized.”

The return on the audit investment can be tremendous. Horton says it’s not unusual to see measurable returns on the order of 10 to 1, comparing pre-audit to post-audit process performance.

“For example, on paper machines we reduced a customer’s sheet break recovery time from 40 minutes to 20 minutes. That saved them millions per year.”

While there’s a cost to doing a service audit, the return on that investment is measurable and usually significant. Horton says that the best indication of the value customers realize from an audit is the question they pose after it’s completed: “Why didn’t we do this earlier?”

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