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An Open Mind to Open Systems

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To sell their products and to gain a commercial advantage over the competition, controls manufacturers need to differentiate themselves by shouting about the new technology that they have to offer.

When the shouting has died down, it falls to systems integrators to actually make these systems work and avoid getting carried away with enticing 'flavour of the month' technology. It seems that not a week goes by without a new gadget being introduced to the market, and in the face of so many flavours of the month, it can be tough for systems integrators to have an open mind to open systems.

Despite this, open systems will not go away. There are many barriers to the success of open protocols, but momentum continues to grow.

There appears to be a perception that the open protocol initiative has been driven more by the smaller manufacturers rather than the larger ones. Indeed, the smaller operations, with a smaller client base, have less to lose and more to gain through a "let's open up the market" approach.

Also, the balance of power is shifting from the product to the person. With proprietary protocols, the client's system was tied to the make and model of the product installed.

Now, as the systems are bound together by the aptly named 'systems integrators,' the power lies with the brain that did the binding and not the products that have been bound. Therefore, it is the integrating engineer who now holds the key to a system's success and ongoing lifecycle support, and not the availability or longevity of any given product range.



BG Controls maintains an open mind to open systems and their protocols. As budgets tend to be leaner in the systems integrator world, BG's solutions are only put together when there is real benefit and value to the client. As a result, successfully installed open systems are those that have been completed without any agenda to steer the client from one manufactured product to another. To date, these installations can be divided into two groups. The first of which have been achieved through horizontal integration of competing systems and have helped end users reduce the lifecycle costs of their system.

This has been made possible via BG Controls' bureau, which supports eight different manufactured systems. By connecting competing BMS systems, clients have been given the freedom to expand in whichever product direction they wish. The bureau has enabled BG to establish proven links from Andover to Delta, from North to Trend, from TAC to Trend, from Honeywell to TAC, from York to Trend and from Trend to Honeywell. Echelon, and more latterly BACnet, have allowed this to happen.

A second group of successful open systems installations has been completed through vertical integration between non-competing systems. This helps construction teams to value engineer their projects. In this instance smarter buildings can be created through intelligent systems that can now compete and communicate their data with each other. This assists engineers in 'sucking up' data from different systems rather than manually entering the data. Communicating systems can create a smarter solution by reducing the amount of software required and enabling systems to act without manual intervention.

In short, it is the responsibility of the systems integrators to live up to their name. Whereas before they chose the best system for the project, now they can mix and match the best two or three systems for the project and build on the strengths of different products. For example, products manufactured by Trend, TAC and Delta Controls may have particular strengths when it comes to designing plant room applications. Likewise, Siemens and Honeywell could be preferred for local field controls, and Trend and Honeywell may be more suitable for applications requiring inverters.

One successful installation used Delta for the BMS plant controls, Siemens for the local field controls, Midtherm for natural ventilation and Trend for the inverters. It is true that one system for one project is still the norm, but as we have seen, this needn't be the case. Some installers are now taking a proactive approach towards open systems but others are yet to catch up. This may be due to a lack of effort and imagination, or possibly even a fear of the unknown.

However, the first step in the move to open systems should be for installers to keep an open mind and not to panic. The second step requires more effort on their behalf and a will to create the best mix and match system to suit each application. Although this means more input at the design stage, it does pay dividends. The technology is there, so it's now down to installers to openly embrace open systems and pass on the rewards to clients.