Not So Risky Business

These days, we must look at all sides of every important issue and then pursue the best decision. And whether we are conscious about it or not, this is usually the decision that includes the least amount of risk or potential for loss, coupled with the highest level of owner satisfaction possible. A little bit of risk is fun at times but, in the area of our personal finances or performance in our professions, reducing our exposure to risk is of paramount concern.

It makes perfect sense, then, that when you evaluate a manufacturer of automation components and systems that no less importance be placed in this critical area. “Will the support I get from this manufacturer reduce my risk or am I putting my neck on the line if I select this company as my supplier?” Support can mean many things to many people, but for the remainder of this article, let’s take a look at technical support.

First, let’s determine the minimum level of technical support capabilities you should look for in obtaining the peace of mind you want and the best total ownership experience you need before, during and after your automation purchase:

- 24/7, 365 no-charge phone support with a knowledgeable, courteous professional on the other end.
- The ability to assist in all areas of setup or troubleshooting.
- A willingness to direct you to another resource within the company if necessary.
- Call capture and referral capabilities that can provide you with the benefit of allowing the entire technical support group to access an instant history of your specific issue(s). This provides you with the added peace of mind of knowing that if you need to call back, any technician in the group can instantly reference your case and take care of the question without delay.

Now that we set some guidelines to consider when evaluating a technical support offering, let’s look at a situation concerning an industrial variable-frequency drive. Technical support can play a role in many areas of a project, ranging from presale analysis and evaluation through physical installation and startup, including maintenance. This process also repeats many years down the road.

Presale Evaluation & Analysis
A problem has been identified that needs a solution. Management has also given you an additional requirement that the process needs to increase output by 30 percent over the original system. You have already searched the Web sites of some industrial variable-frequency drive vendors, but you are still not sure about all the technology, terminology and performance claims stated. You want the extra

assurance that you are making the right choice. So you pick up the phone and call the technical support group number listed on the Web site.

If the technical support member asks you for a purchase order or puts up any type of fee-based hurdle, immediately hang up the phone and call the next vendor on your list. The vendor you call must be ready to review your application questions and offer straightforward suggestions when asked. You should be able to have your technology and terminology questions explained in clear and understandable language. This presale application/technical support phase should make you feel comfortable with the choice you are about to make.

Physical Installation, Startup & Operation
This phase is most critical concerning the channel you are planning to purchase through. You may have saved a few percent on the initial variable-frequency drive price, but that thrill is quickly forgotten when you have a deadline to meet, and you can’t get started up quickly and correctly. This is what total cost of ownership is all about, and when you really begin to have that positive ownership experience or start to regret your selection.

Many vendors ship what are now called “cheat sheets” or “quick-start guides” along with a CD containing all manuals, a spare parts list, wiring diagrams and a host of other assistance documentation, along with quick links to Web pages providing technical assistance. Some times, though, this is still not enough. Your skilled, trained and experienced local distributor or sales representative can be the best source for eliminating risk during this critical phase.

Startup can be scheduled many weeks after the physical unit is installed and wired for operation. There are times when a qualified start-up technician is needed to assist during this phase, again with the ultimate objective of reducing risk and enhancing your total experience of ownership. These services are at times fee-based but must provide value. The operation phase of ownership should last many years and provide consistent, trouble-free service.

Production & Maintenance
This phase arrives many years after the initial sale, but cannot be overlooked. It is in this phase in which the assurance of a solid technical support resource backed by years of product knowledge and application expertise adds true value and reduces your risk of ownership. When the need to modify a production or process line arises, you need to have the assurance that you can pick up the phone or e-mail a well-staffed, highly trained group of product and application experts to assist in getting your needs met quickly and efficiently.

A variable-frequency drive that has given you decades of faithful service may need attention from time to time. Ultimately, this attention includes the replacement of the unit, and the evaluation and analysis process begins again. When this occurs, you need to know that a migration path to the next generation of improved technology is available from your vendor.

The variable-frequency drive vendor you choose must remove the risk of selecting it

now and in the future. The success of your project, maybe your job and possibly your company depends upon it.

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