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We are very pleased to inform that our international scientific journal ACTA TECHNICA CORVINIENSIS - Bulletin of Engineering completed its six years of publication successfully [2008 - 2013, Tome I - VI].

In a very short period it has acquired global presence and scholars from all over the world have taken it with great enthusiasm.

We are extremely grateful and heartily acknowledge the kind of support and encouragement from all contributors and all collaborators!



CONTENTS of Tome VII [2014] Fascicule 1 [January – March]

- 1. Tibor BORBÉLY – HUNGARY**
OPTIMAL DESIGN OF SEASONAL PIPE-CHANNELLED THERMAL ENERGY STORE WITH GAS HEAT TRANSPORT MEDIUM 19
Abstract: The momentary amount of the available solar energy and the demand usually are not equal during the usage of solar energy for heating and electric power supply. So it is necessary to store the heat energy. This article shows optimal design of a new construction, sensible heat store filled with solid heat storage material. The planned heat store has cascade system formed a spiral flow-path layout. This is a conceptual model, worked out in case of pipe-channelled construction. The aim of the special layout is to realize better overall efficiency than regular sensible heat stores have. The new construction would like to get higher overall efficiency by long flow-way, powerful thermal stratification and spiral flow-path layout which can ensure lower heat loss. The article shows the calculation method of the simulation of the charge and discharge and the calculation method of the overall efficiency using the results of the simulations. The geometric sizes and operating parameters of the thermal energy store with the best overall efficiency was calculated using genetic algorithm (GA). The results of the calculation tasks show that a thermal energy store with long flow-way, with cascade system formed spiral flow-path layout has much higher overall efficiency than an one-duct, short flow-way thermal energy store which has equal mass of solid heat storage material as the long flow-way one, mentioned before.
- 2. K. K. ALANEME, M. O. BODUNRIN, S. J. OLUSEGUN – NIGERIA**
CORROSION BEHAVIOUR OF COLD DEFORMED AND SOLUTION HEAT-TREATED ALUMINA REINFORCED ALUMINIUM MATRIX COMPOSITES IN 0.3M H₂SO₄ SOLUTION 27
Abstract: The influence of cold rolling and solution heat-treatment on the corrosion behaviour of alumina reinforced Aluminium (6063) alloy composites in 0.3M H₂SO₄ solution was investigated. AA 6063 – Al₂O₃ particulate composites having 6, 9, and 12 volume percent of Al₂O₃ were produced using two step stir casting process. The composites were cold rolled to 20 and 35% deformation before solution heat-treating at 550°C for 1hour cooling rapidly in water. Mass loss and corrosion rate measurements were utilized as criteria for evaluating the corrosion behaviour of the composites. It is observed that AA (6063) – Al₂O₃ composites exhibited superior corrosion resistance in comparison to the unreinforced alloy in H₂SO₄ solution. Furthermore, the cold rolling – solution heat-treatment process resulted in significant improvement in corrosion resistance of the composites in comparison to the as-cast and solely solution heat-treated temper conditions.
- 3. Flavius CÂMPEANU – ROMANIA**
SIMULATION METHODS FOR TRAFFIC AND POLLUTION ASSESSMENT 33
Abstract: One of emission sources in the urban area have been identified as coming from the road traffic. Therefore, several simulation methods for traffic and pollution assessment are presented. There were analyzed the three main methods used for assessing the atmospheric air quality and the classification of air pollution models depending on multiple criteria. The mathematical models are used to describe the correlations between the meteorological conditions and the level of atmospheric concentrations of the pollutant emissions, analysis and interpretation of the experimental data. The primary objective of some specialised operational models is meant to supply a fast but still realistic assessment of the pollutant dispersion for the emissions due to the road traffic. The microscale numerical modelling offers the opportunity for a detailed simulation of the impact of various scenarios of urban planning, in order to establish and optimise the related strategic decisions.
- 4. H. M. AL -HASSANI, W. I. KHALIL, L. S. DANHA – IRAQ**
MECHANICAL PROPERTIES OF REACTIVE POWDER CONCRETE WITH VARIOUS STEEL FIBER AND SILICA FUME CONTENTS 47
Abstract: An experimental work was carried out to investigate some mechanical properties of Reactive Powder Concrete (RPC) which are particularly required as input data for structural design. These properties include

compressive strength, tensile strength (direct, splitting and flexural), flexural toughness, load-deflection capacity and static modulus of elasticity. The effects of three variable parameters on these properties were carefully studied which are the silica fume content SF (0%, 10%, 15%, 20%, 25%, and 30%) as a partial replacement by weight of cement, steel fibers volume fraction V_f (0%, 1%, 2% and 3%) and superplasticizer type (Sikament®-163N, PC200). The experimental results showed that as the silica fume content (SF) increases from 0% to 30% the compressive strength significantly increases, while the increase in tensile strength is relatively lower. The inclusion of steel fibers leads to a considerable increase in tensile strength, while the addition of steel fibers causes a slight increase in compressive strength of RPC as fiber volume fraction increases from 0% to 3%. The increase in the steel fibers volume fraction and silica fume content improved the load-deflection behavior and consequently gave larger ductility and fracture toughness of RPC.

5. **Gordana KOMAZEC, Marija VUKSAN DELIC - SERBIA**

NEW TECHNOLOGIES GENERATE NEED FOR A NEW ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE

59

Abstract: The paper reflects on development of new technologies and mentality of its developers. Authors have selected important technologies which shape future life style. Each of selected technologies has specific characteristics which require different mentality of own developers. New ways of thinking and acting are necessary for different type of education. Today we are living in the period when science strongly produces new knowledge that is simultaneously translated into in new technologies. The speed of creating new technologies increases permanently, whereas the speed of change management lags behind the technology development. Because of this, it is important that management is innovated, i.e. that management processes are reengineered. Development of new technologies has marked number of evolutionary steps that different industries have made. Once competitors have reached similar level of technological advancement, exploration of new drivers of differentiation and competitiveness entered a "soft orbit". Companies started paying additional attention to innovation and talents. Therefore authors underline the connection between selected technologies, new ways of thinking and development of more adequate organizational practice, and human resources management that support it.

6. **Rosa GARCÍA SÁNCHEZ, Alexandra PEHLKEN, Marco LEWANDOWSKI - GERMANY**
ON THE SUSTAINABILITY OF WIND ENERGY REGARDING MATERIAL USAGE

69

Abstract: Material sustainability and efficiency in the different phases of the product life-cycle are relevant and necessary perspectives for improving the environmental and economic sustainability of products. Renewable energies need to be sustainable in all the aspects, particularly wind energy which gained the most renewable power capacity around the world in 2011. Sustainable production, maintenance and disposal of wind turbines support sustainability of the energy source. This paper identifies raw materials, auxiliary materials and operating supplies along the life-cycle of wind turbines. Furthermore, an overview of material requirements and potential improvement areas for sustainable material usage is developed and discussed.

7. **Tihomir OPETUK, Goran DUKIC - CROATIA**

LITERATURE SURVEY OF GSCM WITH INTERRELATED CONCEPTS

77

Abstract: This paper is a review of papers with keywords Green Supply Chain Management, Lifecycle Assessment, Product Lifecycle Management, Product Life Cycle Management and Life Cycle Management. Number of articles and doctoral theses written with above mentioned concepts, methods and models were analyzed, leading to a summarized presentation of papers with their interrelated appearance. This paper is an extended article of paper published on 5th International Conference: Management of Technology - Step to Sustainable Production (MOTSP 2013).

8. **Chung-Ping CHANG, Pi-Cheng TUNG, Yung-Cheng WANG, Lih-Horng SHYU - TAIWAN**
NOVEL OPTICAL DESIGN OF FOLDED FABRY-PEROT DISPLACEMENT MEASUREMENT INTERFEROMETER

91

Abstract: Due to its high resolution and the large measuring range, laser interferometer has been applied widely to the precision industrial measurement and calibration. Fabry-Perot interferometry was often used for the micro-displacement, because of its common optical path structure being insensitive to the environmental disturbances. In the past researches, some kinds of modified Fabry-Perot interferometers with corner-cube reflector have been proposed to enhance the measuring range. With such new optical structure, the Fabry-Perot interferometer can be used in the purpose of hundred milometer displacement measurement. This will be beneficial to realize the high precision displacement in the large measuring range and under the ordinary measuring environment. In this investigation, a novel folded Fabry-Perot interferometer has been proposed. With the optical design, the optical resolution is about 158.2 nm and the measurement range of the Fabry-Perot interferometer can be enhanced up to 200 mm without any tilt angle compensation system.

9. **Michal WIECZOROWSKI, Bartosz GAPINSKI - POLAND**
X-RAY CT IN METROLOGY OF GEOMETRIC FEATURE

95

Abstract: 3D X-ray CT in metrological applications is the latest field of coordinate measuring technique. The first commercial measuring devices appeared on the market around 2005. Since then, gaining new market areas that previously were reserved for other devices of coordinate measuring technique. An important advantage of CT is the ability to control closed space and simultaneous verification of internal structure - for example, casting bubbles. The paper gives an overview of CT method and its potential applications as one of the newest measurement device.

10. **Thomas SOBOTTKA, Wilfried SIHN, Thomas EDTMAYR - AUSTRIA**
INCREASING THE EFFICIENCY OF CLOSED LOOPS OF REUSABLE CONTAINERS IN PRODUCTION ENVIRONMENTS CONCERNING CONTAINER CLEANING

101

Abstract: Today reusable containers, widely used in closed loops in production environments, are cleaned irrespective of their cleanliness-status and thus the actual necessity for being cleaned. This often leads to a considerable degree of technically superfluous container-cleaning, associated with high costs, transport efforts and resource utilization. This paper aims at investigating ways to harness the savings potential of a necessity based triggering of the cleaning process amid securing the quality of the container supply, controlling the uncertainty introduced into the container-loops through the status-dependent triggering of cleaning and establishing a process transparency enabling a reduction of the overall container inventory. A case study performed in an automotive supplier is included.

11. **Veronika GAJDOŠOVÁ, Michal ČINÁK - SLOVAKIA**
VERIFICATION OF SHEET THICKNESS REDUCTION USING STEREO-PHOTOGRAMMETRY

111

Abstract: Deep drawing process is a complex process of significant planar deformation. Deformation in the thickness direction is a critical phenomenon in most cases regarding possible crack creation. Therefore, it is necessary to pay a special attention to its measuring. Direct measurement of the sheet metal thickness of parts is limited by complexity of their geometry. So it is necessary to evaluate it indirectly, e.g. by optical measuring of true strain using deformation networks. The digital photography method has been proven as effective but limited to only planar strain. Multiple images stereo-photogrammetry enables digitalizing the part surface into the three-dimensional model including real texture of deformation network. Strain measurements of individual network elements are accomplished only on the virtual model with no geometry restrictions. This contribution presents the way of verifying simulation results by photogrammetric measurement of thickness changes of B-pillar drawn by Kuka Enco Werkzeugbau s.r.o.

12. **Ján BABJAK, Tomáš KOT, Daniel POLÁK - CZECH REPUBLIC**
CONTROL SYSTEM OF THE RESCUE AND FIRE EXTINGUISHING ROBOT HARDY

115

Abstract: This paper presents the multipurpose service, emergency and rescue tracked mobile robot Hardy. The mechanical construction, technical solution, functions carried out by the robot and examples of potential applications are briefly explained in the beginning. Then follows description of the control system in the mobile robot and the operator's suitcase used for remote control. Presented are also experiences with modern electronic devices for control of hydraulic and electric motors in the robot based on the communication protocol SynqNET, implemented using technology from Robot System Integration (RSI). The next part of the paper deals with the user interface of the operator's application and some of the features that were designed to assist the operator, primarily the anti-collision system. The whole system is then critically evaluated using some experiences from practical use of the robot, even by a common user.

13. **Roman KIŠ, Martina JANOVCOVÁ, Milan MALCHO - SLOVAKIA**
THE EFFECT OF THE PIPELINE BENDING ON THE SHAPE OF THE NATURAL GAS STREAM FIELD BEFORE THE INLET TO THE ORIFICE PLATE IN THE HIGH-PRESSURE PIPELINES

119

Abstract: Worldwide raising requirements for the heat and the energy have huge influence on decreasing amounts of the mineral resources and to increasing tendency of their prices. It is necessary to deal with them responsibly. One of these cases is using natural gas as an energy and heat source. Nowadays billions of normalized cubic meters of natural gas are transferred and used every day around the world. The most common flow measurement type, used in high-pressure pipelines, is measuring by pressure differential, which mainly uses orifice plates inserted in the pipelines. In this type of measurement it is very important to have a steady flow to avoid inaccuracies in the measurement. It could be difficult in the case of the measuring of the volumetric flow in the measuring stations, where one transit pipeline is dividing into the more pipelines of smaller diameters with lots of bendings in a small area. These bendings should have the impact on the stream field of the natural gas before the inlet to the orifice plate that could affect flowing of the gas behind the orifice plate and differential pressure measured on the orifice plate. The aim of this article is to show the magnitude of the impact of different pipeline bendings on the shape of the stream field in the high-pressure pipelines.

14. **Milica KOVJANIC, Aleksandar KECMAN, Nemanja BRDAR**
Mihajlo STOJCIC, Gordana GLOBOCKI-LAKIC - BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA
DESIGN OF LABORATORY 3-AXIS CNC MILLING MACHINE BY MODULAR APPROACH
„LABROS 100S“ 123

Abstract: In this paper, the results of the research of the modular approach to the design of lab 3-axis CNC milling machine, the basic module of the support structure including the drive systems and the measuring systems, module of the main spindle and the control unit are presented. The parameters of the support structure and of the main spindle of the lab milling machine are indentified, because of the modular approach to the desing of the machine. The goal of this research is to develop our own hardware and software system of the control unit that will enable direct entry and recognition of the G-code according to ISO 6983.

15. **Peter SUROVÝ, Štefan EMMER - SLOVAKIA**
THE COMPARISON OF YIELD OF DEPOSITION OF FUNCTIONALLY GRADED CERMET
LAYERS Ni-ZrO₂-8Y, Ni-TiB₂ AND Ni-Al₂O₃ DEPOSITED BY ELECTROPHORETIC DEPOSITION 127

Abstract: This paper deals with comparison of yield deposition for functionally graded cermet layers Ni-ZrO₂, Ni-TiB₂ and Ni-Al₂O₃ which were obtained by electrophoretic deposition (EPD) in benzene alcohol-based suspension. The cermet has very interesting properties which can be achieved by a combination of different materials. The yield of deposition for FG cermet layers Ni-ZrO₂-8Y, Ni-TiB₂ and Ni-Al₂O₃ has a significant influence for final powder deposition. On the base of evaluation of results, the yield of deposition was the highest in case of FG cermet Ni-Al₂O₃ followed by Ni-ZrO₂-8Y and Ni-TiB₂. The highest possible yield of deposition leads to the resulting materials with the desired properties.

16. **Petr KONEČNÝ - CZECH REPUBLIC**
MICROMILLING USING PNEUMATIC SPINDLE - EXPERIMENTS AND APPLICATION 131

Abstract: Pneumatic high speed spindle is a response to ever increasing demands on machine tools. Designers of contemporary products require machining of smaller details of higher shape complexity. This means that smaller tools have to be used for machining. To be able to keep the defined cutting speed of a smaller tool we have to increase spindle speed. There is a limit, however, of standard machining spindles. To overcome this problem a pneumatic spindle has been introduced as an accessory device applicable to any machine tool. With speed of up to ten times higher than the speed of regular spindle we are now able to effectively machine complicated shapes using tools of diameter as small as 0.1 mm. This paper presents practical results of high speed pneumatic spindle application for real industrial products. Furthermore there are results of experimental testing and machining introduced to give a better perspective of behaviour of pneumatic spindle during cutting process. These experiments show reactions of spindle speed to extreme cutting conditions. The practical applications show production of radial turbines and distributors, making a groove with depth of 10xD and more.

17. **Filip VITÁLOŠ, Marcel VLČEK, Cyril BELAVÝ - SLOVAKIA**
THE ROBUST CONTROL OF DISTRIBUTED PARAMETER SYSTEMS 135

Abstract: This contribution describes dynamic properties of the temperature fields in casting die, as the system with distributed parameters. The dynamics of systems with distributed parameters with lumped-input/distributed-output are solved by finite element numerical method, which is conducted in a COMSOL Multiphysics software environment. In the theoretical part of this work are introduced the basic properties of systems with distributed parameters, IMC controllers and explained the programs, which are applied during this work. The last part of this presented work deals with control of the temperature field in the casting die with robust IMC controllers.

18. **Ferenc BAGLYAS - HUNGARY**
FLOWER PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR IN HUNGARY IN 2013 139

Abstract: A quantitative survey was conducted to find up-to-date information about today's dry flower purchasing behaviour in Hungary. 130 questionnaires were filled in Kecskemet and in Hortus Hungaricus flower exhibition in Budapest. The data was analyzed by SPSS 11.5 statistical package program. Frequencies and cross tabs were calculated. Multivariate statistics (factor, correspondence analysis) were applied to find latent variables. ANOVA model revealed significant statistic differences. The questionnaires were filled mostly by women. The age and income were evenly distributed in the sample. Another goal of our research was to deep interview wholesaler and retailers. In the conclusions practical management suggestions are provided to both wholesalers and retailers, small and big shops alike. Up to date catalogues, direct marketing, wide choice are the key issues that retailers should consider.

19. **Zoran PANDILOV, Vladimir DUKOVSKI - MACEDONIA**
COMPARISON OF THE CHARACTERISTICS BETWEEN SERIAL AND PARALLEL ROBOTS 143
Abstract: Robotics is a field of modern technology that crosses traditional engineering boundaries. Understanding the complexity of robots and their applications requires knowledge of mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, systems and industrial engineering, computer science, economics, and mathematics. This paper gives survey of the position analysis, jacobian and singularity analysis, stiffness analysis, dynamics and applications of serial and parallel robots. Also a detailed comparison of the characteristics of serial and parallel robots and their advantages and disadvantages are presented.
20. **Audun RØNNING SANDERUD, Trygve THOMESSEN - NORWAY**
RELEASING THE SYNERGY OF HUMAN-ROBOT COLLABORATION - REDUNDANT ROBOTICS IN PRACTICE 161
Abstract: The later year's evolvement to a more commonly open innovation model [1] have laid a fundament for a rapid growth of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). While large enterprises often have large production lines with low variation, the task for the industrial robot is predictable and highly repetitive, SMEs have more often small batch production with high variation. The SMEs have in the most recent years begun to adopt industrial robots in their production. While SMEs rarely have their own expertise on robotic installation the use has been made possible by more user friendly program editors and remote service and operations. To further enhance the flexibility and overcome the challenges of complex niche production, redundant industrial robots should be introduced to a larger extent. The challenges with redundant industrial robots have so far been the complexity related to solving the inverse kinematics with reasonable secondary tasks. This paper presents advantages of using redundant industrial robots, and aim to motivate more research on user friendly, "easy-to-use" redundancy resolutions for redundant industrial robots.
21. **Giovanni BELINGARDI - ITALY**
LIGHTWEIGHT DESIGN OF VEHICLE BODY A CONTRIBUTION TOWARD GREENER ENVIRONMENT 165
Abstract: The vehicle mass experienced a period of progressive increase. Nowadays as it is essential to decrease both the fuel consumption and the CO₂ production, lightweight design becomes a relevant target for car manufacturer. One of the considered strategy toward lightweight is the substitution of the material used for manufacturing the different parts of the car body. Together with the new developed HSS steels, aluminium and magnesium are considered. Recently composite material solutions have gained a lot of attention due to their very interesting characteristic. The paper discusses some the relevant aspects when developing a new material solution from the material production to the end-of-life. The paper includes one example of results that can be achieved with properly oriented light weight design procedure.
22. **Mitar JOCANOVIĆ, Velibor KARANOVIC - SERBIA**
Darko KNEŽEVIĆ - BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA
APPLICATION OF GEAR REDUCER OILS IN FOOD PROCESSING INDUSTRY 171
Abstract: Technological production systems within food processing industry use machines which have specific requirements regarding the lubrication of particular components that come into contact with raw processing material. To satisfy stringent requirements, different types of lubricants have been developed. The problem of lubricating components and assemblies in the processing and packaging machines lies in the fact that the lubricant must possess qualities which allow it to come into contact with tobacco without compromising its safety. This paper gives an example of a synthetic ester-based gear oil used in tobacco industry. This paper reviews an example of gear reducer oil in a circulation system used for lubrication of working components of a cigarette filter making machine - Filter Maker.
23. **Peter BIATH, Juraj ONDRUŠKA - SLOVAKIA**
ILLUSTRATIVE COURSE OF COMPACTION PROCESS OF THE PELLET PRESS PLG 2010 175
Abstract: The article is aimed to clarify issues of calculation and illustrate the course of compaction process of pellet press PLG 2010. Construction of machine and its main parts are described in introduction to form image of the issue. Introduction also describes the basic principle of machine functioning. Next chapters are devoted to the principle of the finding out course of compaction ratio of the press. At the first 3D model of pressing space was created to find out of compression ratio. Next step was to divide the pressing space to smaller precisely defined parts, and measure its volume. The measured values were used to calculate exact values of compression ratio. And finally the calculated values were added to diagram, which describes illustrative course of compaction ratio the pellet press. Finally we must mention that the determined compaction ratio is not real but only idealized.

24. Pavel ZÁCHA - CZECH REPUBLIC

STEAM ENGINE - CFD SIMULATIONS WITH MOVING MESH

179

Abstract: The first steam engine was designed almost 250 years ago. Nevertheless, even today there are its applications linked to energy utilization which are of interest. Especially in some technological processes were throttling of steam generates losses, which generate no useful energy. This paper briefly analyses problems arising from the CFD simulation of steam flow in a piston machine. Based on a prototype facility a simplified 2-dimensional model, with computational grid of the single-acting steam engine in pre-processor GAMBIT, was set up. In the first part of this paper the model generation is described and difficulties linked with moving and dynamic meshing are discussed. In the second part, the boundary conditions for the simulations are defined and results of simulations performed in the CFD code ANSYS-FLUENT are presented. The main outputs of the performed simulations are indicator diagrams that can subsequently be used for determination of the time-dependent forces acting to the piston.

25. Rohit BHADARIA - SINGAPORE

Rajdeep BORGOHAIN, Abirlal BISWAS, Sugata SANYAL - INDIA

SECURE AUTHENTICATION OF CLOUD DATA MINING API

183

Abstract: Cloud computing is a revolutionary concept that has brought a paradigm shift in the IT world. This has made it possible to manage and run businesses without even setting up an IT infrastructure. It offers multifold benefits to the users moving to a cloud, while posing unknown security and privacy issues. User authentication is one such growing concern and is greatly needed in order to ensure privacy and security in a cloud computing environment. This paper discusses the security at different levels viz. network, application and virtualization, in a cloud computing environment. A security framework based on one-time pass key mechanism has been proposed. The uniqueness of the proposed security protocol lies in the fact, that it provides security to both the service providers as well the users in a highly conflicting cloud environment.

Manuscript Preparation - General Guidelines

193

The ACTA TEHNICA CORVINIENSIS - Bulletin of Engineering, Fascicule 1/2014 [January-March/2014] includes scientific papers presented in the sections of Conference on:

- The 5th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE "MANAGEMENT OF TECHNOLOGY - STEP TO SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION" - MOTSP 2013 (29 - 31 May, 2013), in Novi Vinodolski, CROATIA, as a joint project organized by the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture in Zagreb, CROATIA. The new current identification numbers of the papers are # 6 - 10, according to the present contents list.
- The 7th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE for YOUNG RESEARCHERS and Ph.D. STUDENTS - Education, Research, INnovation 2013 - ERIN 2013 (15 - 17 May, 2013), hosted by Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, in Častá-Papiernička, SLOVAKIA. The new current identification numbers of the papers are # 11 - 17 and # 23 - 24, according to the present contents list.
- The 11th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE on ACCOMPLISHMENTS in ELECTRICAL and MECHANICAL ENGINEERING and INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY - DEMI 2013, organized in Banja Luka, BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA (30 May - 1 June, 2013), jointly by the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, University of East Sarajevo. The new current identification number of the papers are # 20 - 22, according to the present contents list.
- The INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE MOTOR VEHICLE & TRANSPORTATION - MVT 2012, organized in Timisoara, ROMANIA (7 - 9 November, 2012), hosted by the University "Politehnica" of Timisoara, Mechanical Engineering Faculty, Road Vehicles and Transportation Department, under support of SIAR (Society of Automotive Engineers of Romania).

Also, the ACTA TEHNICA CORVINIENSIS - Bulletin of Engineering, Fascicule 1/2014 [January-March/2014] includes, also, original papers submitted to the Editorial Board, directly by authors or by the regional collaborators of the Journal.

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1,2. Thomas SOBOTTKA, 1,2. Wilfried SIHN, 1,2. Thomas EDTMAYR

INCREASING THE EFFICIENCY OF CLOSED LOOPS OF REUSABLE CONTAINERS IN PRODUCTION ENVIRONMENTS CONCERNING CONTAINER CLEANING

1. Vienna University of Technology, Faculty of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering, Institute of Management Science, AUSTRIA
2. Fraunhofer Austria Research GmbH, AUSTRIA

Abstract: Today reusable containers, widely used in closed loops in production environments, are cleaned irrespective of their cleanliness-status and thus the actual necessity for being cleaned. This often leads to a considerable degree of technically superfluous container-cleaning, associated with high costs, transport efforts and resource utilization. This paper aims at investigating ways to harness the savings potential of a necessity based triggering of the cleaning process amid securing the quality of the container supply, controlling the uncertainty introduced into the container-loops through the status-dependent triggering of cleaning and establishing a process transparency enabling a reduction of the overall container inventory. A case study performed in an automotive supplier is included.

Keywords: reusable container, efficiency, container management, Auto-ID

INTRODUCTION

In modern production, in particular in the automotive supply chain, reusable load carriers and small containers are widely and increasingly used [1] [2] – yet, little effort and attention goes into the management of the container loops and the cleaning process of the containers, resulting in high costs of container usage. This paper presents a concept in the making, aimed at increasing the efficiency of container management and the container cleaning process in particular, by building a concept around the status dependent cleaning of containers and increasing the controllability of the container loop with Automatic Identification Technology (Auto-ID).

In the majority of current industry applications the level of transparency in container loops is very low [3]. To ensure a secure supply of containers and load carriers for production processes, companies have to rely on high safety stocks. Furthermore, since the containers have to be cleaned regularly, due to dust and dirt exposure in production and logistics processes, and are cleaned irrespective of

their actual need for cleaning, the cleaning efforts – costs and resource consumption – are higher than necessary. Since the cleaning process is usually conducted by external washing-plants, transports and handling efforts arise and lead to unnecessary emissions of CO₂ gas. Although the current ineffectiveness of these container and load carrier loops leads to significant excess costs, resource consumption for the companies as well as environmental pollution and strain on transport and road networks, the problem of container management is underrepresented in both companies' development schemes and scientific publications.

The aim of the presented approach, which is currently being developed in the course of a research project, is to reduce the cleaning efforts by applying an automatic detection of the container cleanliness status and only sending the soiled containers to the cleaning-bay, while introducing an Auto-ID supported container loop monitoring and control that could enable a lower overall container stock in the system. Included in the

research consortium are Auto-ID system providers, experts in sensor-technology as well as application partners in the automotive supplier industry. A case study with the latter is an integral part of the ongoing work.

This paper is meant to provide an overview of the subtopics involved in the project, present the approach, report on the current status and give a preview of some preliminary findings of the work so far.

FUNDAMENTALS, BACKGROUND & DEFINITIONS

The following section will give a brief background of the terminology associated with the presented problem: containers and container management as the main subject including the current concepts available for this planning task, followed by dirt detection and measurement and finally Auto-ID as the key elements of the new approach.

Container Management

In modern production reusable load carriers are widely used in closed loops inside production plants as well as in open loops including suppliers and customers. This is especially true for the automotive industry where the standardized load carriers and small containers are used in transport, consignment and picking systems. Furthermore, modern logistics concepts with standardized transport and handling concepts require standardized load carriers, which also help increasing process safety and quality – nonreturnable packaging in contrast is prone to facilitate the formation of dust on the production floor – and enable (partially) automated handling and transport processes for material [4].

The term container in this context refers not to standard metal freight containers but rather to all kinds of (smaller) Reusable Plastic Containers (RPC) and load carriers used for transporting, handling, supplying and picking of material [5]. In the latter category there are pallets, load carriers and small load carriers as well as blister trays that are tailored towards holding a batch of a certain material and are usually contained within Small Load Carriers. The standardized plastic Small Load Carriers are very common in a large variety of production environments and are the container type considered in the case study.

Due to the sheer number of load carriers in industry applications – in a typical load-carrier loop associated with one production plant, such as the inventory of load carriers in the case study, can easily exceed a million units – and with a unit price of ~15-4.000 € [5] the costs associated with setting up, maintaining and using this kind of load carrier are an important factor for the operating costs of a production. The costs involved are [6]:

- ✘ inventory costs (i.e. capital holding costs)
- ✘ maintenance costs
- ✘ administration costs
- ✘ handling costs
- ✘ depreciation costs
- ✘ storage costs
- ✘ out of stock costs

The goals for a container management system, derived from the basic logistics goals, are:

- ✘ ensuring a timely supply of containers at the point(s) of use
- ✘ low operating costs
- ✘ low inventory costs

Despite the importance to manage these load carrier loops efficiently to secure a reliable supply amid the lowest possible operating costs, this topic has largely been neglected by the companies that maintain the container loops as well as by researchers [6]. A study conducted by the University of St. Gallen shows that almost a third of the companies have no IT-support for their container management, another third at least registers the load carriers in their ERP system, but only a minority employs systems that support the planning, monitoring and control of their load carrier logistics.

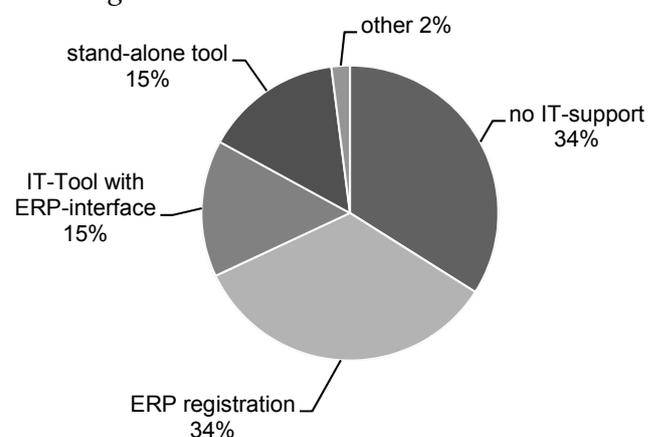


Figure 1 – Tools used by companies to manage container loops, source: [6]

One measure that is increasingly applied in the industry is outsourcing the container management and logistics to a third party logistics provider – thus creating cost awareness within the service requester.

Dirt Measurement

As mentioned in the introduction, it is common practice in companies using small load carriers to have their containers cleaned irrespective of the actual need for the specific container to be cleaned. This, together with the high number of containers in a system and the necessity of transports for an outsourced container management and cleaning, potentially leads to either excess costs plus resource consumption due to the unnecessary cleaning of still clean load carriers or to a compromised quality due to soiled load carriers being fed into production processes. An initial survey among companies indicates the first effect to be of more relevance than the latter.

To prevent this excess effort, the presented approach incorporates a cleanliness-status dependent initiation of cleaning processes for every load carrier. This can be achieved by implementing the following three options, all of which are currently being investigated in the research project:

- ✧ manual control of the container-cleanliness status (visual inspection)
- ✧ (semi-) automatic control of cleanliness status (using sensor technology)
- ✧ determining the number of cycles or time spent in the system that a container can be used before it has to be cleaned and monitoring every container accordingly (i.e. via an Auto-ID system)

The (semi-) automatic identification has to rely on the technical implementation of measuring dirt on the outside of and inside the load carriers. Dirt in this context can be residues originating from exposure of the containers to its environment in production, handling or transport processes that have the potential to compromise the quality of the material that is being transported and stored in the containers. This includes liquids, dust, chips and residues from packaging materials and labels. Figure 2 shows possible measuring principles for

measuring dirt that are potentially relevant in the context of load carriers [7].

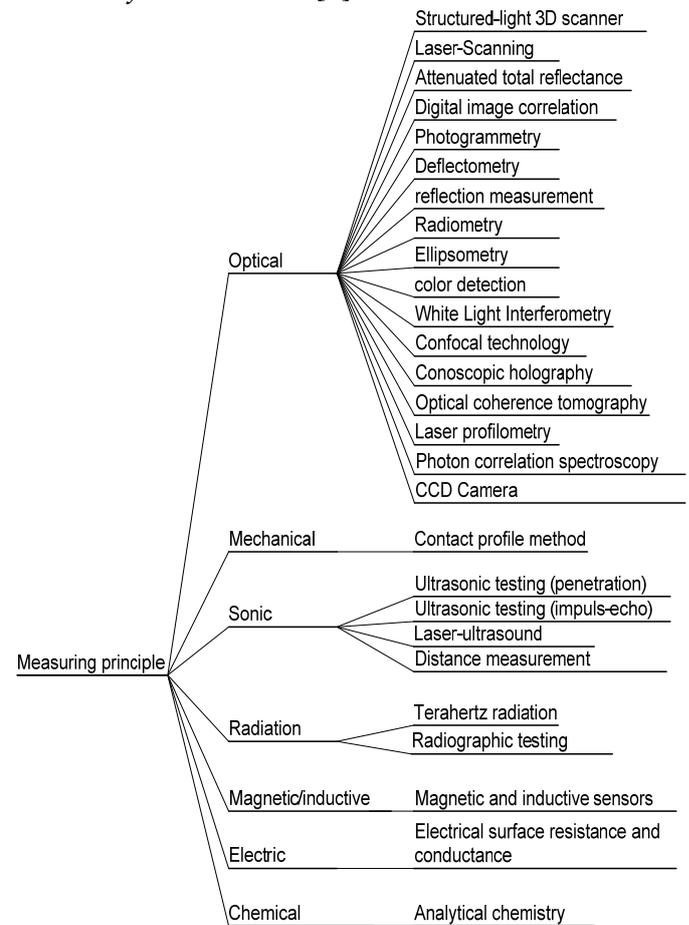


Figure 2 – Overview of measuring principles for dirt measurement

Basically the measurement can be based on identifying the shape, color and size of dirt on the container surface or it may detect changes in material behavior (e.g. conductivity, reflection) or it might identify physical characteristics of the material that constitutes the dirt (e.g. mechanical, chemical, optical or electrical characteristics).

Auto-ID

The third option of achieving a status dependent and thus demand-based cleaning of every load carrier, monitoring for every container the time spent in the system or the number of usage cycles, can best be achieved by employing an Auto-ID system. This technology enables the quick and automatic identification of every individual load-carrier in the system at every identification point – for example after being used and emptied in a production facility – so that the status of every container can be monitored, e.g. with a barcode and updated either in a corresponding database or, with

some Auto-ID technologies like RFID, directly on the container itself, thus reducing the necessity for a permanent connection to a database IT-infrastructure.

The characteristics of Radio-Frequency Identification (RFID), compared to other Auto-ID technologies, are the ability to identify objects via electromagnetic waves sent between RFID readers and transmitters (tags), transmitting information about the object from the tags to the readers. It is possible to identify multiple tags on multiple objects virtually simultaneously and some tags also enable changing the data saved on the tag memory, which is called dynamic memory. While the basic functionality of RFID is the automatic remote identification of tagged objects, the technology offers a large variety of additional benefits and applications, utilizing the full range of technical capabilities and the versatility arising from a combination of the RFID technology with other information technologies, such as WLAN, Sensors and GPS modules [8].

Since RFID enables both options, database storage of status information and a dynamic memory with decentralized data storage, and a recent study [6] indicates that experts consider the potential for an RFID application in the field of container management as very promising, it will be the major technology investigated in the context of the current research project as well as in the case study.

METHODS AND CONCEPTS

In the section to come, the key conceptual elements of the approach and their development and adaption will be presented, starting with simulation as a way of predicting the effects of changes in the complex system of container loops and thus providing a tool to design and evaluate possible new and improved container loop configurations. This is followed by methods-time measurement (MTM) as a concept of ensuring simulation results with relevance to planning real world industry applications. Also, the development of the envisaged container management configurator concept, incorporating the simulation element, will be introduced.

Simulation

The system of a reusable container loop is a complex logistical system with a complex system of goals. The system complexity arises both from the multitude of input variables and actuating variables – e.g. work schedules, capacities, arrival rates – as well as the number of stations included in the material flow – e.g. various load carrier types and various interdependent workstations were they are combined, batched, separated, stored and transferred.

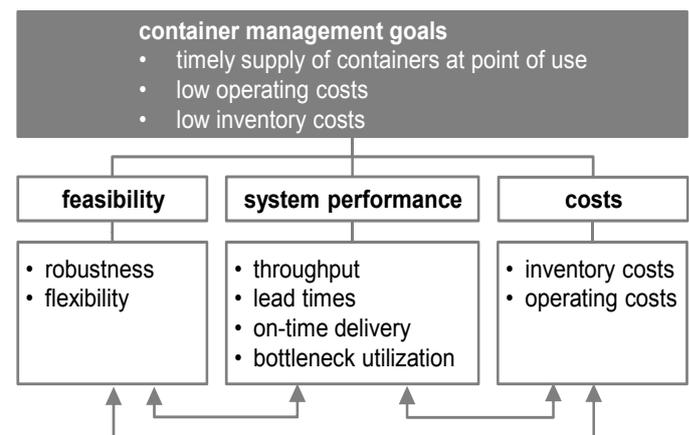


Figure 3 – Basic goal system for the simulation of container loops

Figure 3 illustrates the goal system. Another method of planning complex systems are optimization techniques that may also be combined with simulation – in that case simulation works as the evaluation function of the optimization algorithm [9]. Due to the complexity of optimization techniques and the fact that the problem at hand is not trying to optimize one given system but creating and comparing different model system variants – to be able to evaluate the effects of introducing automatic cleanliness detection and Auto-ID and to compare these variants – simulation will be used without optimization in the current work.

Simulations can either be:

- ✧ dynamic or static
- ✧ deterministic or stochastic
- ✧ continuous or discrete

In the context of material flow simulations in logistics processes, usually a dynamic system behavior with stochastic components is being observed at different points in time in what is called a Discrete Event Simulation (DES) [9] [10].

Determining the apt degree of detail for the simulation model is the main objective of an economic model building approach since more detail results in complexity, which in turn results in increased modeling efforts. There are different modeling environments available for simulation tasks – some of which are based on rather basic coding while others are more end-user-oriented and require less simulation specific knowledge; the latter will be used in the course of this research project.

Methods-Time Measurement

In order to create a realistic simulation model and to be later able to create reliable results of what-if scenarios of different model variants, it is crucial to determine realistic parameters for the simulation model, especially for the not yet implemented future scenarios that are to be evaluated. In order to obtain reliable parameters for logistics operations, especially those including manual operations that are prone to a high stochastic fluctuation, the planning tool Methods-Time Measurement (MTM) will be applied. MTM is a system of predetermined motion times for manual operations, originating in industry research by Maynard, Stegemerten & Schwab in 1940s [11].

The system is based on standard times for basic manual movements such as grasping, reaching, moving and releasing, which were originally analyzed by experts evaluating high speed camera footage of these operations being executed by skilled workers, considering the factors effort and skill of the workers, as well as the conditions of the working environment and consistency of the work performance [11]. While the predetermined times do factor in learning effects, they still include a certain amount of buffer capacity, so that skilled workers can achieve the times without difficulty. All movement-times in MTM are measured in Time Measurement Units (TMU), with one TMU equaling 0,036 s, and are encoded in a standardized format, defined by the MTM council. In recent decades, the standard time system for basic movements, named MTM-1, has been complemented by accumulated times for more comprehensive movements, ranging from movement combinations to basic processes to entire work procedures in specific industries [12], as

shown in Figure 4. For the logistics processes in the context of simulating load carrier loops, the system of standard processes for logistics will be applied. Using these aggregated time modules defined for certain fields of application, i.e. standard logistics procedures, rather than conducting a detailed MTM planning from scratch for every process used in the simulation model, helps keeping the simulation model at an appropriate level of accuracy and thus avoiding excess modeling efforts. However, it is necessary to ensure the validity of the aggregated time modules for every processes in the simulation for which they are used.

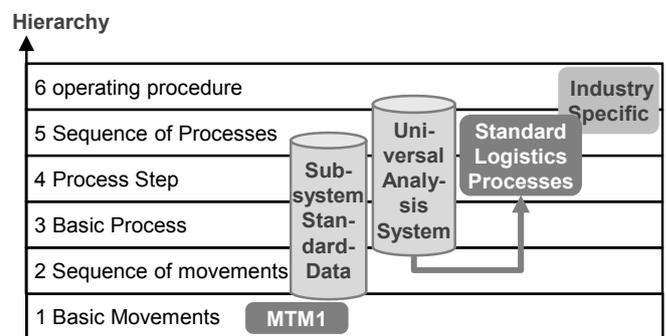


Figure 4 – Overview of the system of MTM standards, see: [12]

Resulting Concept

Simulation and the MTM aided configuration of the logistics material flow model of container loops are the core methods that will be adapted and developed, together with technology selection methods for Auto-ID and dirt measurement, into a configurator for an optimized container management, including a demand dependent container cleaning scheme. An overview of the configurator concept currently in the making is depicted in Figure 5.

The configurator is meant to provide planners with a tool with which to assess the opportunities of integrating a status dependent cleaning of containers as well as integrating an Auto-ID supported container management. It will support the selection of both technology systems, according to the requirements, using a questionnaire, by giving recommendations for suitable system variants. The tool will further assist in mirroring the current situation of a container loop and generating possible future state variants. As a last step, the system will enable a comparative evaluation of current state and the generated

future state variants, according to logistics performance criteria – the goals of which are defined in the sections 2.1 and 3.1 – thus providing planners with recommendations for improving their container loops.

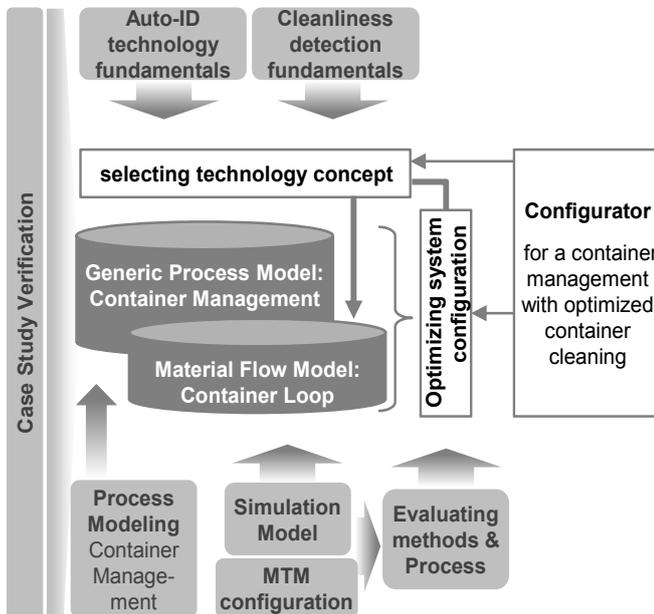


Figure 5 – Overview of the container management approach

CURRENT AND PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The section to follow is meant to give a brief report on the current status of the research work and show exemplary preliminary results gathered so far.

Technology Selection

In order to find a suitable technology for the semi-automatic detection of dust, thus enabling a cleanliness evaluation of the containers in a loop, the measuring principles and options in section 2.2 have been investigated. All options have been evaluated according to their principal technical ability to detect the type of dirt that is to be expected in container loops in industry settings.

Furthermore, an evaluation concerning the prospect of each technology to be implemented in a real life factory environment and the effort associated with this implementation have been evaluated. An evaluation table on the example of optical measurements is shown in Figure 6.

Due to its availability as standard products, its robustness and history in other industry applications – e.g. quality control applications – and the relative versatility in detecting a variety of “dirt” types, the first technology to be investigated

in detail is the use of CCD-cameras, in combination with an image processing algorithm to detect dirt particles in container images.

Measurement Principles	Dirt Type			
	Chips	Liquids	Dust	Packaging residues
Structured-light 3D scanner	●	●	○	●
Laser-Scanning	●	●	●	●
Attenuated total reflectance	●	●	●	●
Digital image correlation			○	
Photogrammetry			○	
Deflectometry			●	
Reflection measurement	●	●	●	●
Radiometry	●	●	●	●
Ellipsometry			●	
Color detection			●	
White Light Interferometry			●	
Confocal technology			●	
Conoscopic holography	●	●	●	●
Optical coherence tomography			●	
Laser profilometry	●	●	●	●
Photon correlation spectroscopy			○	
CCD-Kamera	●	●	●	●

- “suitable”: technically fit for the application, practical implementation well foreseeable
- “limited suitability”: technically fit for the application, practical implementation complex
- “possibly suitable”: technically in principle fit for the application, practical implementation probably problematic
- “impractical”: technically theoretically fit for the application, practical implementation not foreseeable
- “not suitable”: technically theoretically fit for the application, practical implementation not foreseeable

Figure 6 – selection of measuring methods – example optical measuring methods.

Currently a trial application is being tested with example load carriers in different cleanliness states in the case study. First experiments have shown that it is necessary to use multiple cameras from different angles and a light source, all encased in a tunnel-like structure to ensure stable lighting

conditions, to properly check the load carriers for dust and other types of soiling. Using reference images of clean containers to compare them to be tested containers against, the major task now is to distinguish visual conspicuities other than dust and dirt – e.g. dents and scratches that do not affect the quality – from dirt. One possible approach is the use of additional image processing algorithms looking for the characteristics of these “not-problematic” visual signs, while another would be supplementing the camera system with another type of sensor or adding a pressured air cone to detect whether the suspected particles change their position in-between two successive scans while being exposed to an air stream – thus indicating they might be dirt particles. To utilize the full potential of automatic dirt detection it is beneficial to consider the use of a system of conveyor belts. The conveyor belts are able to place the load carriers in the camera-cell described above and hold it in place exactly long enough for the system to measure the dirt level and still being able to keep the time the container has to stay still in the camera cell as short as possible, enabling the fastest possible material flow through the dirt detection unit. The conveyor belt system with a few switch plates would also be able to take over some of the sorting of load carriers, thus potentially increasing the sorting process and relieving the workers assigned to the sorting task of a considerable amount of their workload. Whether the conveyor belt system will prove economically beneficial to the overall system performance and efficiency according to the described goal system is the subject of current simulation experiments, which are elaborated on in the following section. To be able to transport all kinds of containers, which in the case study are small load carriers and blister-trays, without having to use additional transport skids, the conveyors have to be of the belt conveyor type.

For the Auto-ID technology selection, a capability profile of existing technology variants has been compiled. This was then compared to a requirements profile. The case study showed that the ability to not only identify the container type but also individual containers would be of additional value: It would on the one hand enable

precise statistics for the container inventory – e.g. how often have containers been used in production or for transport and how long have they been circulating in the system – that would enable a precise planning of successive container circles as well as planning the substitution of old containers before they break in use, and on the other hand the loss of containers, especially of valuable types, could be precisely monitored. The precise statistics for each container would also enable the possibility of not having to implement the automatic cleanliness detection at all – in less quality sensitive applications, the containers could be monitored and after a certain number of use-cycles they could be transferred to the cleaning process. To ensure no soiled containers are used, experiments have to be executed to determine the number of permissible cycles each container type is allowed to accumulate before they need washing. This counting of cycle times can either be done by keeping and updating a variable inside a database for each container or by storing that information on each container – the latter option is only enabled by RFID Transponders with a dynamic memory. Due to the benefits of identifying individual containers in the system and the possibility of also storing and manipulating data on transponders applied to the load carriers themselves, RFID technology has been selected as the preferred Auto-ID technology within the case study.

Within RFID technology the same selection procedure applies: the capability profile of different RFID variants is compared to the requirements profile, ranging from read-distance to mechanical durability requirements due to the environmental conditions in the washing plant through which the containers have to pass frequently. In a first step, passive Ultra High Frequency Transponders have been selected for the first case study trials, mainly due to their combination of low prices, availability of durable PU adhesive labels and their reading range.

It is important to note that the abovementioned technology selection is only a preliminary selection for the first trials currently in progress in the course of the case study within the research project. For the configurator tool as the pursued end result,

this technology selection process is currently being implemented in a selection assistance system that will allow planners to be provided with technology suggestions by entering key characteristics of the respective application environment they are faced with.

Status of concept and Case Study

Concerning the general concept and the configurator functions regarding the creation of possible future state variants of the container loop and its management, the first efforts have been dedicated to setting up a simulation model in a suitable DES environment. With an apt simulation model it will be possible to run a number of experiments to determine the savings potential achievable by introducing cleanliness detection and RFID into container loops and gain data on how to configure the resulting system for efficiency, according to the goals described in section 2.1 the simulation model also serves as the basis for the to be compiled optimization routine that the resulting container management configurator will eventually include.

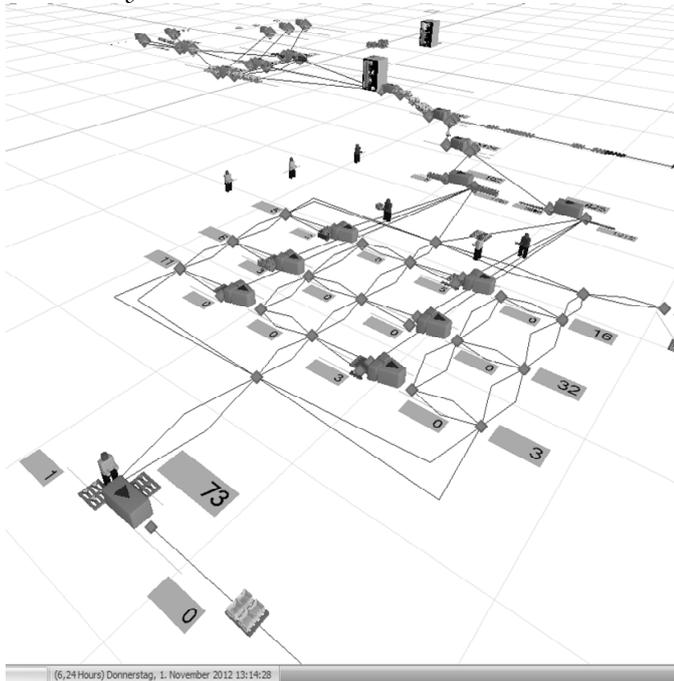


Figure 7 – container loop simulation model in Simio – in progress

Figure 7 shows a section of the basic simulation model layout derived from the work on the case study. It is implemented in the simulation program Simio, a popular commercial DES simulation environment for material flow applications. The current state of the simulation design has produced

a simulation model that is able to reproduce the current state of the container loop quite accurately with regard to major variables and performance indicators. This is a key step on the way to test possible system variants including Auto-ID implantation as well as automatic cleanliness detection and a demand driven cleaning of containers. These variants are currently being modeled and tested.

Another element of the configurator concept that is currently in progress is the compilation of a standard generic process and process variants for container management loops, both including open and closed loops. The goal is to develop a standard set of processes and process variants that fits almost every container loop commonly found in real life applications. Figure 8 shows an example process variant for such a standard process. In this example the introduction of a demand driven initiation of the cleaning process for containers creates a transport path from the production plant directly to customers and suppliers. This transport path is shorter than the alternative of going via the external container-cleaning service provider. Therefore, every container that does not require cleaning can be transported directly to the supplier or customer, thus shortening the transport route and of course the resource consumption for the cleaning process. However, it is important to note that a direct transport from the production plant to the customers and suppliers is not always economically sound – if for example the container quantities per customer/supplier are too low, the containers have to be transported via transport hubs that are usually operated by logistics service providers – thus increasing the complexity of the transport logistics involved.

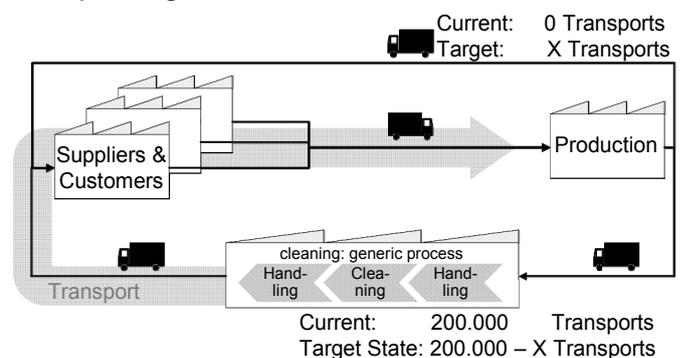


Figure 8 – example of a generic process description - container loop

The case study is being conducted in a production plant of a supplier in the automotive industry and will be focused on a particular set of products and the corresponding load carriers. The container inventory associated with the selected products amounts to approximately 300.000 units. Every day about 30.000 containers exit the production and have to be forwarded to the cleaning process that is executed by a third party logistics provider located in a considerable distance from the considered plant. In a first step to assess the potential of introducing a demand driven cleaning process, the container flow in the case study has been temporarily changed, so that workers assume the task of deciding whether the containers require cleaning and sorting them accordingly. In preliminary trials approximately 75% of the containers proved to be clean and could be directly forwarded to the suppliers and customers. Since the RFID system is not yet implemented, it is not possible to verify how often some of the containers have been used without being cleaned – first experiments indicate that most container types can be used multiple times before they have to be sent to cleaning. This would be equivalent to a reduction of cleaning efforts – including transportation and cleaning itself – of well over 75%. The first simulation experiments indicate that for most load carrier types the necessary inventory could be reduced by 20-30%, thus potentially lowering inventory costs.

CONCLUSIONS & OUTLOOK

Although still in the first half of the project duration, the research work has already produced preliminary results indicating that the savings potential is of considerable magnitude. The entirety of implications still has to be investigated but a reduction of the cleaning frequency of containers would greatly reduce the efforts and expenses associated with the cleaning process. Since the supply of containers would still be ensured, the efficiency of the reusable container loop would increase accordingly, with regard to the goal system of container loops.

The immediate next steps will be overcoming problems with the automatic measuring of the cleanliness status of the containers. Furthermore, the simulation experiments with system variants

have to be finalized, thus producing empirical data for the effective configuration of container loops. Also, the process variants and the evaluation and assessment tools have to be developed into an accessible tool for practitioners. This will include trying to derive empirical data from the experiments, both with simulation and in real life trials, in the course of the case study, into generic formulae and reference tables, thus reducing the need for users of the configurator tool to adapt the simulation models to calculate the potential benefits and the proper configuration of their future state container loop as much as possible. Moreover, the real life trials have to be finalized and eventually the best system variants determined with the help of the simulation models have to be implemented in the case study application.

A combined optimization procedure and simulation could prove a promising way to further improve the results of the container management configurator – this could be the subject of future research in this field.

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