

Gas Utility Monitoring using T-BOX

Semaphore Products: T-BOX WM, LP, or LT

Introduction

Semaphore's T-BOX ultra-low and low-power products have been applied to natural gas utility installations throughout the world. Typical applications include line pressure monitoring, regulator monitoring and telemetry for metering installations.

The T-BOX ultra-low power and low power families include the T-BOX WM "Wireless Monitor," T-BOX LP RTU and the T-BOX LT Ethernet RTU. Selection among these products depends on the I/O count, whether power is available, and whether Ethernet networking is a requirement.

T-BOX WM best accommodates low I/O counts (up to 2 AI, 4 DI, 4 DO) while minimizing current draw and making operation on batteries feasible. For larger processes (up to 4 AI, 8 DI and 8 DO), T-BOX LP features very low current draw and can run on batteries or solar power. T-BOX LT accommodates up to 32 I/O points and provides an Ethernet interface. Current draw is appropriate to solar power systems or other dc power sources.

The simplest application is monitoring of a single line pressure. T-BOX WM is very cost-effective in this case, as it integrates monitoring, telemetry and battery power in a ready-to-install, IP67 housing. T-BOX WM interfaces readily with low-power, voltage pressure sensors and pressure transmitters, which operate on a 4–20 mA loop. By managing the power source for the pressure sensor or transmitter, T-BOX WM simplifies the installation.

Regulator monitoring usually requires two, pressure inputs as well as ancillary status inputs. In most cases, T-BOX WM provides a perfect I/O compliment. Discrete inputs are often used to connect with float switches for those installations in which water can accumulate in the regulator vault. Unlike the Nema 4 enclosures commonly used with RTU and pressure recorder products, the T-BOX WM IP67 enclosure can be temporarily submerged and provides a great deal of installation flexibility for regulator vaults.

When a third or fourth, analog input is needed for additional pressure or temperature measurements, T-BOX LP is used instead of the Wireless Monitor. The LP provides similar, ultra-low power operations with integral batteries but with twice the I/O count of the Wireless Monitor. Alternatively, the LP can be ordered with a dc input for use with small, solar power systems.

In metering applications, T-BOX RTU products have interfaced to gas meters using analog inputs, pulse counter inputs and serial, RS-485 connections using the Modbus protocol. For meters, which do not include integral corrections for pressure and temperature, T-BOX additionally interfaces with pressure and temperature sensors or transmitters.

Basic requirements for all sites include monitoring the gas flow, pressure and, depending on requirements of individual sites, ancillary inputs such as weather conditions or water levels; periodically reporting this information to operations management; and reporting on exception when appropriate, for example, when an alarm indicates low pressure or high pressure. Availability of this information not only ensures end-customer satisfaction but also allows the utility to schedule and route field personnel in the most efficient manner possible.

Power Management — Even at locations with dc instrument power, running power to the RTU and transmitters has become expensive. This necessitates use of an alternative source such as a battery or solar power system. Power management in the RTU minimizes power draw in order to keep power systems costs down. In typical, pressure monitoring applications, T-BOX WM can operate for five years using two, internal lithium batteries. TBOX LP can operate using either internal, lithium batteries or an external, solar power system. While the solar power system allows monitoring of a larger number of I/O points and on a higher frequency, T-BOX LP still conserves power in order to minimize the size — and cost — of the solar panel and battery.

T-BOX WM Wireless Monitor for Gas Utility Applications

Overview — The T-BOX Wireless Monitor (WM) is a fully integrated solution that provides cost effective monitoring and telemetry for locations with low I/O counts. Two analog inputs interface with low power transducers or 4–20 mA transmitters for pressure or temperature measurements. Four discrete inputs provide the status of contact inputs from devices such as float level switches and valve limit switches. Four discrete outputs are used to drive indicators or perform control functions such as opening and closing a valve.

T-BOX WM is also distinguished by a sophisticated, IP/Web technology platform. This technology employs an integral web server, IP communications and “push” messaging via e-mail, FTP and SMS text. T-BOX WM can initiate communications whenever necessary, e.g. upon an alarm, event, or periodic update. There is no need for polling from a top-end or host computer system. This communications strategy best exploits the benefits of inexpensive, public networks.

T-BOX WM allows users to access site information, anytime, anywhere, using a cellular phone, PDA or laptop computer. This caters to operations management, who are often traveling and making use of a “mobile office.” There is no need to operate the system from a central location.

NETWORK MESSAGING AND NOTIFICATION

END DEVICE INTERFACING



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T-BOX WM is housed in a ready-to-install, IP67 enclosure. Included in the enclosure are the main electronics, communications device, optional liquid crystal display (LCD) and one or two lithium batteries. The dual-battery arrangement doubles the life vs. a single battery and allows the RTU to operate on one battery while the other is replaced. The IP67 rating means that the enclosure is not only weatherproof but can be temporarily submerged. T-BOX WM is also approved for operation in Class I, Division 1, Groups C and D hazardous locations. T-BOX LP is approved for operation in Class I, Division 2, Groups C and D hazardous locations.

Analog Measurements for Pressure, Differential Pressure and Temperature — Via one or two, analog inputs, T-BOX WM interfaces with transducers or transmitters for level, pressure, differential pressure or temperature.

To simplify the installation, T-BOX WM provides power to operate the transducer or transmitter. Optimally, low power transducers are used in order to minimize battery drain. Such a transducer provides an output range of 1-5 V dc and operates using nominal 6 V dc or 12 V dc power. Current draw is typically 3 mA or less.

Many operators prefer an analog transmitter, which provides a 4–20 mA signal and operates using nominal 12 V dc or 24 V dc power. Although the current draw is much higher, T-BOX WM is still able to provide power to these transmitters and uses intelligent management to permit operation on a lithium battery.

A key factor is that, in most cases, the measurements need not be continuous. On a user-selected interval, TBOX WM will power-up the transmitter, wait for another, user-configured time to allow the transmitter output to stabilize, take a reading, then power-down the transmitter. Typically, readings take place, once-per-hour or once-per day. NOTE: If readings are required significantly more often, up to “live” once-per-second, T-BOX LP or LT can be employed, instead, with solar power or commercial dc power.

Power savings using this type of operation are substantial. Consider an analog transmitter that draws 60 mA at 12 V dc. If it is powered on for one minute every hour, the duty cycle is 1/60 and the equivalent, continuous current draw is only 1 mA. In fact, most transmitters draw less current than the one in the example and many operations require readings on a daily rather than hourly basis.

In contrast to some monitoring products on the market, T-BOX WM allows both, analog inputs to operate, simultaneously. There is no multiplexing in terms of time or hardware.

Local Display Operation — Even though it consumes very little power, the LCD is normally turned off because local operations are infrequent. A technician will simply press the “Activate” key, on the front panel, to power up the LCD. The LCD will remain active for a user-configured time, typically five minutes. This allows, as an example, the technician to see the live measurements over varying conditions.

The display will also indicate whether there are any alarms such as low flow, low line pressure, low battery, or transducer/transmitter failure.

Communications Operations — In a manner similar to that for external transducers or transmitters, the internal communications device operates intermittently. Depending on the technology employed, the entire module may or may not be completely powered-down in order to minimize the start-up delay time.

T-BOX WM will initiate communications as specified by the user. “Push” communications via e-mail, SMS text or FTP will take place on a periodic basis or when an alarm occurs.

An alarm can be a transition on a discrete input or a condition that is determined by programmable logic. An example of the latter is a low pressure in gas line. T-BOX WM will set an alarm when the analog input is below a user-configured limit. Multiple limits could be used. Some operations implement three low limits, including low, very low and out-of-service.

Most commonly, periodic communications occur less frequently than readings are taken via the analog inputs. For example, T-BOX WM will initiate a call on a daily basis while readings are taken hourly. As determined by the user, the daily call can provide the latest reading, each of the readings since the last call and/or figures from the historical log (please refer to the section, below, for information on the logging capabilities). E-mail and FTP messaging can include files, for example, tabular logs or trend graphs.

Alarm Management — T-BOX WM uses an alarm management system that not only detects and reports alarms but can be configured to require alarm acknowledgement and escalate unacknowledged alarms.

If configured to do so, an alarm transition will initiate communications. Messaging can be to multiple recipients while escalation can be to multiple groups, each including multiple recipients. Alarm acknowledgement is performed by users via a PC, PDA or even a cellular phone. Using a phone, the user sends a text message to acknowledge the alarm. T-BOX WM will not only clear the alarm, internally, but can initiate programmable logic functions in response to a text message.

T-BOX WM also maintains an alarm history, which can be displayed as a web page and attached, as a file, to e-mail and FTP messages. Each message includes a time and date stamp, signal i.d. and text description.

Historical Data Logging and Trending — On user-defined intervals, T-BOX WM will perform statistical calculations on measured inputs and update the historical log. Averages, totals, minima and maxima can be run over intervals such as hourly, daily, monthly, etc. Historical logs can be displayed as web pages on a PC and transmitted, as files, with e-mail and FTP messaging. Logs can be maintained in tabular as well as trend graph format. To simplify configuration, Semaphore offers a software tool, Report Studio, which provides powerful trending capabilities.

While the historical information is commonly used for pressure profiling and billing purposes in metering applications, long-term trends also contribute to continuous improvement programs.

Web Server — The integral web server provides an HMI capability, which can offer significant cost savings versus expensive licensing for SCADA software. Web pages can be accessed by users, anywhere in the world, via the Internet or an intranet.

For natural gas utility applications, web pages also comprise an inexpensive HMI for local technicians. Not only is process information provided but system diagnostic information is available in the T-BOX WM data base.

Semaphore's software tools greatly simplify configuration of web pages and eliminate software integration problems. No programming is required. Using WebForm Studio, dynamic objects, entry fields, tables, trends, and links to other pages are simply added with a few clicks.

Programmable Logic — Although most applications are for monitoring and telemetry, T-BOX supports a programmable logic environment that includes advanced, automation functions. Using Semaphore's TWinSoft, engineers have a choice of programming environments to suit their preferences:

- IEC 61131-3 LD (Ladder Diagram)
- Basic
- Microsoft Automation

TWinSoft contains a complete set of tools, such as editor, debugger, code generator, documentation generator, library manager, archiver, and online control. TWinSoft makes it easy to download identical programs into multiple RTUs and also eases programming changes in order to allow for continuous improvement.

Typically, T-BOX WM applications will use this functionality for calculations related to alarming, units conversions, timing functions such as rate-of-change, and data logging. Nevertheless, programmable control operations can also be performed via the discrete outputs.

Conclusion

Natural gas utility applications take full advantage of the features offered by Semaphore's T-BOX product line, in particular, the Wireless Monitor:

- Fully integrated — Complete monitoring, telemetry and automation functionality is provided in a ready-to install, IP67 housing that includes the battery-based power source. End users or service providers need not incur any additional costs or scheduling delays for systems integration.
- Power management — Very low power consumption allows users to configure scanning and communications strategies that best utilize the included, low cost, lithium battery power source in T-BOX WM. This integral power source further reduces costs related to integration and installation. T-BOX LP operates using battery or solar power while T-BOX LT operates using solar or dc power.

- Dual batteries — One or two lithium batteries can be installed inside the T-BOX WM or LP enclosure. Using two batteries provides double the lifetime vs. a single battery and allows the WM or LP to operate on one battery while the other is replaced.
- Integral Web server — This feature provides significant savings vs. SCADA/HMI software, which could require expensive licensing. Web pages are accessible to users, anywhere, anytime. PC-based Web pages also provide all, local HMI operations when maintenance personnel visit the sites, thus saving the cost of additional software.
- Alarm management — The T-BOX alarm system detects alarm conditions and reports them using Push Technology. Alarm management ensures that un-acknowledged alarms will be escalated. Even cellular phone users can acknowledge alarms and send text commands to a T-BOX.
- Data logging — T-BOX data logging capability retains historical information, such as line pressures, in both tabular and trend graph formats and allows users to adapt operations for the highest efficiency. Trends can also assist in maintenance management and continuous improvement.
- Push technology — End user operations personnel are immediately notified of alarms and important events without the need for polling the T-BOX. This takes best advantage of inexpensive data communications plans on public networks.
- Programmable automation — A choice of programming via IEC 61131-3 LD (Ladder Diagram), Basic, or Microsoft® Automation provides calculation functions and control outputs, e.g. to open and close a feed line valve. These capabilities are very uncommon in products intended for monitoring only.

