

Smart Actuators Bring Big Benefits to Utility and Other Off-Highway Vehicles

HÅKAN PERSSON, PRODUCT MANAGER, THOMSON ACTUATORS

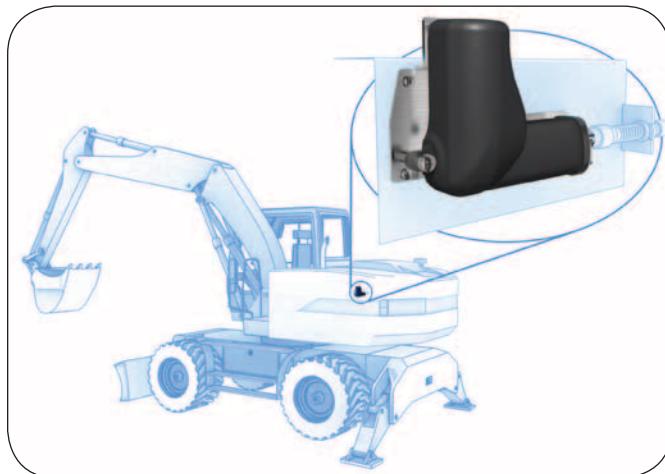


Figure 1 Throttle actuators allow automatic control of engine speed for reduced noise and emissions, and improved fuel economy.

Original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) of industrial utility and other off-highway vehicles are adding automated or improved manual control of many features and functions in order to improve performance, safety, ergonomics and cost. Frequently these improvements are based in computing technology that must be translated into physical motion in order to provide a benefit to the customer. Traditional hydraulic and pneumatic controls are often unsuitable for computer-driven operation, so there is a trend towards increasing use of electrical drive solutions. Smart electrical actuators with built-in position feedback, power systems and bus communications provide a cost-efficient solution that converts control logic into smart-motion articulation.

The traditional role of actuators in off-highway vehicles has involved the application of force under the guiding control of the operator to perform a task. As vehicles become more sophisticated, OEMs are adding cutting-edge features that typically involve the use of electronic controls to deliver optimized, more complex and safer motion tasks, etc. For example, a joystick provides inputs to a control that drives electrical actuators that steer the tracks of a skid steer (Fig. 1). Interposing the control system between

throttle to return to the idle position when power is no longer required.

A major obstacle to further advances in this area has been the limitations of conventional actuator technology. Traditional hydraulic and pneumatic actuators typically run from one end of the range of motion to the other without any means for accurate mid-range positioning—required by nearly all of the more sophisticated applications. Pneumatic and hydraulic actuators are sometimes fitted with electronic closed-loop feedback, but this adds considerable cost and complexity since both electronic and hydraulic or pneumatic controls and cabling are needed. Pneumatic and hydraulic actuators also require bulky pumps and valves, as well as the need to send heavy cables anywhere that power is to be deployed or controlled (Fig. 2).

For these reasons there has been a significant trend towards the use of electric actuators. Electric actuators dramatically

reduce the number of components needed by eliminating those required of a hydraulic system, such as: reservoir, pump, DC motor, motor relay, solenoid valve, check valve, hydraulic cylinder and pushbutton station. They replace cumbersome and sometimes dangerous hydraulic hoses with small, light wires and use actuators that are usually smaller and lighter than hydraulic cylinders while yet retaining the same force and stroke (Fig. 2). In addition, electric actuators are considerably quieter than a hydraulic system.

One available electrical actuator option consists of servo and stepper motor actuators typically designed to function in an industrial process with a very high level of accuracy and repeatability, and a 100 percent duty cycle. However these motors are quite expensive and, in most cases, their high cost is not justified for off-highway vehicle applications where objects are positioned a few times an hour, rather than continuously, and accuracy of $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch rather than 0.001 inch is sufficient.

DC actuators provide a much less expensive alternative that still meets the requirements of most off-highway vehicle applications. However, conventional DC actuators require a number of add-on components, such as an

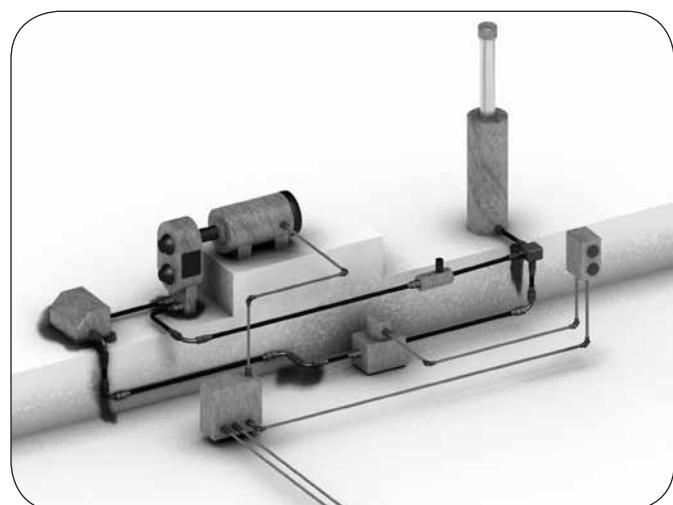


Figure 2 Replacing hydraulic and pneumatic cylinders with electrical linear actuators enables simpler and smaller installation, easier control, lower energy costs, higher accuracy, less maintenance, less noise and a clean, healthier environment.

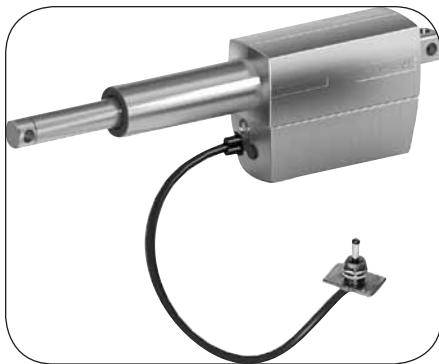


Figure 3 Detail view of a smart actuator developed by Thomson that includes H-bridge, power, control and position feedback systems integrated into one actuator.

H-bridge, which is needed for reversing the direction of the motor, as well as power, control and position sensing systems. These add-ons increase the cost and complexity of the actuator, requiring additional cabling and connectors and extra steps during the assembly process and maintenance.

More recently, smart actuators have been developed specifically to address the requirements of off-highway vehicle manufacturers by packaging the H-bridge, power, control and position feedback systems in a single actuator. Assembly and maintenance of the vehicle are simplified because with the now-integrated H-bridge, all users have to do is connect power cables and bus to the actuator (Fig. 3).

This new generation of smart actuators builds on the proliferation of bus communication that substantially reduces the cost and complexity of integrated vehicle operation. With bus communications, a single control unit can replace the need for multiple single-function controllers. This approach also substantially reduces the wiring required in the vehicle. Bus communication has already been proven in the automobile industry, and is also used in many other vehicle types. Now, manufacturers of off-highway vehicles can utilize the technological advancements and economies of scale that have been developed for the automotive industry in order to increase functionality while reducing the cost of their own vehicles.

With the traditional approach, an electronic control unit (ECU) is required for each actuator. By using a

smart actuator with a bus, rather than running a separate cable from the controller to each actuator, as required with the traditional approach, only a single cable needs to run from the controller that passes each actuator. Each actuator control has a unique address, listens to every signal from the vehicle

control system, and responds only to signals having its own address.

Actuators also offer the advantage of providing status information. The command goes out to an actuator to travel to a certain position; when the actuator reaches that position it sends a clear signal to the control unit. The actuator can also return position and

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speed information. The implementation of the bus system also makes it simple to add additional sensors that can track other measurements such as temperature or load.

Smart actuators also provide the opportunity to synchronize vehicle functions. For example, suppose two actuators are required to lift the hood of a vehicle and these actuators must move in tandem with each other in order to ensure that the load is shared between the two actuators. This is difficult—if

not impossible—to accomplish with a hydraulic or pneumatic actuator, but can be done easily with smart DC actuators. The control system simply sends out a command to move one step to each of the actuators; it then waits until clear signals are received from each actuator indicating it has reached

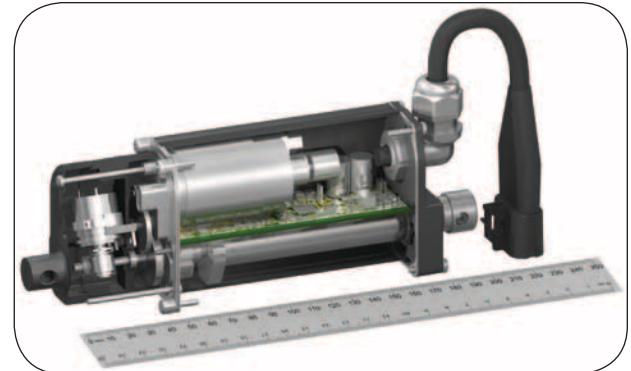


Figure 4 Thomson torque feedback device (TFD) provides variable torque output—in proportion to a DC input—for steering and other by-wire applications.

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the desired position before sending the next move command.

Replacing hydraulic steering with electronic steer-by-wire systems offers the potential to add significant functionality by customizing the connection between steering wheel and steering mechanism. Design engineers can easily change the steering ratio with a software command and can even design the vehicle so that the steering ratio can be changed in the field or programmed to change on the fly, depending on vehicle operating conditions. For example, an electronic steering system could be configured to have a high steering ratio at low speeds and a lower ratio at high speeds to help avoid sudden turns at high speed, or configured to allow for rapid maneuvering at low speed. Electronic steering can be programmed to indicate that the vehicle is nearing the end of the steering range by increasing torque resistance. Electronic steering also opens up the door to other more advanced options such as using torque resistance to prevent the operator from steering towards detected obstacles (Fig. 4).

Likewise, smart actuators can be used in agricultural vehicles to optimize the adjustment of harvesting systems in combines. The combine's grain processing chamber takes the threshed grain and cleans it from its chaff by blasting it with air and running it through a sieve. The air flow louver adjustment controls the volume of air flowing through the cleaning system and the louvers must frequently be adjusted to optimize the performance of the cleaning unit for various crop conditions. Too much air flow and you lose grain, too little air flow and the chaff is

not cleared. Normally, the operator must climb down from the cab to make these adjustments, which reduces productivity. With electric actuators this can now be controlled directly from inside the cab.

There are many potential applications on nearly every type of off-highway vehicle to combine onboard computers with smart actuators to deliver unique functionality that can set an OEM's product apart from its competitors. OEMs can capitalize on these advantages at the lowest cost by utilizing smart actuators that integrate all of the components needed to deliver motion control in a single package.

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Using Finite Element Analysis (FEA), the housing is designed to be compact while maintaining housing rigidity to ensure shafts, gears and bearings are not exposed to excessive flexure and extraneous loads during operation. Bearing spans for the MPT APG are kept to a minimum to avoid shaft deflection and excessive loads, and all Master APG gearboxes are designed with bearings that will provide a B10 life of at least 5,000 hours.

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Many gearboxes use heavy press fits on all mating internal components, making component disassembly and replacement very difficult. Additionally, housings are often cast as one or two pieces, making it very difficult to access internal components. MPT has taken a different approach with APG, keeping disassembly in mind, including pry slots on housing covers. Features such as these make it easy to access the internal components to change seals, bearings and gears whenever necessary.

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of applications. These issues are not only issues for the driven equipment such as table roller drives, conveyors etc., but can also create problems in the driving equipment itself, such as the engine or motor. To protect the whole driveline from these factors, a coupling is typically used between the driving and driven equipment. The same goes for diesel/gas-driven equipment, where a coupling is often used to protect the driven equipment from the harmful effects of torsional vibrations that occur as a result of the reciprocating motion of the diesel/gas engine.

Gear, grid and disc pack type couplings are commonly used in these types of applications, but a great substitute can be compression-type highly flexible couplings. The main advantage is that compression-type highly flexible couplings need no lubrication at all in operation. In fact, once installed, there is nothing to worry about for several years in the vast majority of applications. The only replacement part, the rubber elements, can be switched in very

short periods of time in most cases (space allowing), and without moving either the driving or driven equipment. In addition the metal components almost never need replacing at all. The CT (compression-type) coupling is the latest addition to the large product range of the German-based Voith Company. It is especially designed for industrial applications; e.g., metal manufacturing, mining, cement and power generating set applications.

Selection of the right compression-type highly flexible coupling is the most difficult part. Every individual component of the drive chain has to be considered to find the right coupling for perfecting the drive system.

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Maxon Motors

RELEASES FOUR-QUADRANT SERVO CONTROLLER

Maxon's new Escon 36/3 EC is a four-quadrant PWM servo controller designed for efficient control of brushless DC motors with Hall sensors up to approximately 100 watts. The Escon 36/3 EC has suitable control properties and a very fast digital current controller with a large bandwidth for optimal motor current/torque control. The drift-free yet dynamic speed behavior enables a speed range of 0 to 150,000 rpm. The Escon 36/3 EC provides a wide range of functions, with fully configurable digital and analog inputs and outputs. It allows dynamic drive solutions that meet the

highest demands and can be run in various operating modes (speed controller (closed loop), speed controller (open loop), current controller).

The compact servo controller is controlled by means of an analog set value. This value can be specified by means of analog voltage, an external or internal potentiometer, a defined value or by means of a PWM signal with variable duty cycle. Other functions include the ability to enable or disable the power stage, depending on the direction of rotation, or to use speed ramps for acceleration and deceleration. The speed can be regulated by means of Hall sensors.

When the servo controller is connected to a PC via a USB port, it can easily and efficiently be configured with the "Escon Studio" graphical user interface. During startup and configuration of the inputs and outputs, monitoring, data recording and diagnostics, the user has access to a large variety of functions and is assisted by user friendly software wizards, as well as a well-designed automatic procedure for fine tuning the controller.

The Escon 36/3 EC has protective circuits against overcurrent, excess temperature, under- and over-voltage, voltage transients and short-circuits in the motor cable. It is equipped with protected digital inputs and outputs and an adjustable current limitation for protecting the motor and the load. The motor current and the actual speed of the motor shaft can be monitored by means of the analog output voltage. The large range for the input voltage and the operating temperature allows flexible use in a variety of drive applications.

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Modern vector drive technology allows the Accudyne system to provide true 4-quadrant capability, with completely seamless crossover between motoring and loading modes. It also offers the most precise speed and torque control available, especially in low-speed applications where full torque can be applied all the way to

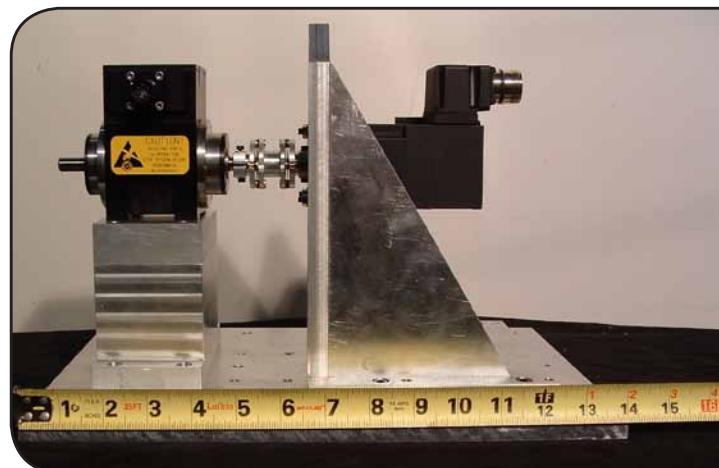
stall (zero speed). For more sophisticated testing requirements, the Accudyne dynamometer family offers advanced features, such as inertia simulation, engine simulation and NVH Testing.

Additionally, Sakor recently introduced the MicroDyne series of small motoring dynamometers. Suitable for a wide range of automotive, military and aerospace testing applications, this newest innovation from Sakor is capable of testing all types of small rotary devices such as motors, pumps, generators, compressors and more. The MicroDyne is a fully functional, four-quadrant dynamometer engineered specifically

for low-power applications. Versions are available in sizes from 100 watts to five kilowatts.

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