Energy Saving Opportunities and Value of Information: a Trade-off in a Production Line

Huiting Su\textsuperscript{a}, Nicla Frigerio\textsuperscript{b}, Andrea Matta\textsuperscript{a}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China
\textsuperscript{b}Department of Mechanical Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy

Abstract

A general framework for switching the machine off/on has been recently proposed in literature for single machines. However, the amount of information available along the production system is often limited and it might be not trivial to understand which information provides more benefits. This paper studies the performance of a production line when several control policies are applied at machine level. The amount of information available at machine level varies and the trade-off with energy reduction is investigated. The considered performance measures are the energy consumed per part and the system throughput. Numerical results are based on discrete event simulation.

1. Introduction

Energy saving in production plants is becoming more and more challenging to contain the environmental impact of manufacturing, and, nevertheless, to reduce costs. One of the measures for saving energy is the implementation of machine state control strategies that reduce energy consumption during the machine idle periods. These strategies are based on the information that the machine can have from the system. This paper studies the performance of a controlled production line when the amount of information at machine level varies.

1.1. Literature Review

The energy required by a machine tool can be significantly reduced applying a state control at machine level. The state control aims at reducing the power demand the machine keeps consuming when the production is not requested. Indeed, the machine auxiliary equipment keeps consuming energy during non-productive states. This generates an excess that could be reduced by controlling the machine state, i.e. switching the machine off. Recently, the potential of machine state control during non-productive periods has been highlighted by several researchers. For example, Gadhim et al. \cite{1} estimated up to 26% of energy consumption saving in the analyzed scalping process line by applying a switch-off policy. Weinert and Mose \cite{2} simulated different production scenarios where advanced standby strategies are implemented and the potential saving is shown to be up to 53% of the energy consumed in non-productive periods. However, most of machine tools do not have eco-green functionalities, and in the industrial market there are only few energy-saving control systems available. Most of them have been developed by machine tool builders in order to support the final users. Further, the selection of the policy parameters is not supported by any tool or method and the selection is often experience-based.

In the last years, several research efforts focused on controlling production systems by switching off and on the machines to minimize total energy consumption when a start-up transitory is needed to resume the service. Mashauei and Lennartsson \cite{4} proposed a control policy to schedule on/off mode machine tools in a pallet constrained flow shop under deterministic assumptions. Chang et al. \cite{4} and Brundage et al. \cite{5} estimated the opportunity windows for real-time energy control in machining lines for scheduling machines into on and off modes. This approach considers random failure at machines and assumes the availability of perfect information along the system. Frigerio and Matta \cite{6} studied analytically the switching policy for single machines under the assumption of stochastic arrivals, constant start-up and no information from the buffer in front of the machine. In another work, they considered a policy that includes the upstream buffer occupancy as information \cite{7}. Jia et al. \cite{8} studied serial production lines with Bernoulli machines...
and finite buffers where some machines can be controlled using buffer information.

The use of simulation which allows an energy simulation of machines under several production scenarios is a powerful method to analyze complex systems. Among the others, Abele et al. [9] proposed a methodology to parametrize and simulate the energy behavior of a machine tool according to its state. Heinemann et al. [10] proposed a hierarchical evaluation tool to analyze the impact of several energy measures on the system performance, e.g., changing lot size, equipment, process parameters. Frigerio and Matta [11] discussed the impact of a machine control on the performance of a production line when a control policy is applied locally at machines.

This paper studies a production line with finite buffer capacities when several switching policies are applied at machine level: (i) three policies will be proposed at machine level according to the amount of information that might be available, (ii) the value of the information will be discussed in terms of system and machine conditions–e.g., room temperature. In this work we refer to this transitory as start-up. The start-up duration \( T_{wu} \) at machine \( i \) is a random value because the machine may require different times to reach the proper physical working condition according to system and machine conditions–e.g., room temperature. In the working state the machine is processing a part. We assume there is a buffer between two machines with finite capacity \( K_i \), where \( i \) is the buffer index. The buffer upstream the machine controls the release of parts, whereas the downstream buffer receives the parts after the completion of the process. The number of parts in each buffer is represented as the integer variable \( n_i \). Each machine can be blocked if the downstream buffer is full. Further, blocking before service is assumed. We assume the last machine of the line cannot be blocked and the first machine cannot be starved of raw parts. When a machine is blocked, it is assumed to consume as in the on-service state. The machine processing time \( T_{wu} \) at the machine \( j \) is random with mean \( T_{wu} \). The stochastic processes involved in the system are assumed to be independent of each other and stationary and they can be calibrated to model equipment failures. The transition between two states can be triggered by the occurrence of an uncontrollable event or a controllable event.

3. Control Policies and Information Flow

The machine behaviour follows the machine state model in Fig. 1. Whenever a part is loaded from the upstream buffer, the machine passes from the on-service state to the working state. At part departure the machine returns on-service until the next part is loaded or the switch off command is issued. In the latter case, the machine is triggered out-of-service and the service is interrupted. With the switch on command the machine starts the start-up procedure to resume the service. As a consequence, the machine is switched off to save energy and,
but it cannot control the machine while blocked. The control it focuses on the excess generated while the machine is starving or when the number of parts in the downstream buffer holds less than a certain number of parts \( N_{\text{off}} \) which is the threshold to interrupt the service in machine \( i \). Therefore, machine \( i+1 \) cannot be switched on because its upstream occupancy never reaches the required level \( N_{\text{on}} \) and the system is in deadlock. Condition (4) avoid the second deadlock in Fig. 2 where machines \( i \) and \( i+1 \) are out-of-service and the buffer holds \( n \) parts such that \( N_{\text{off}} > n > N_{\text{on}} \). The number of parts \( n \) cannot increase, becuse the part flow is interrupted at machine \( i \), nor decrease because the flow is interrupted also at machine \( i + 1 \). Therefore, machines cannot resume the service and the system is in deadlock.

The machine expected energy consumed per part \( E[Q^i] \) (expressed in \( \text{kJ}/\text{part} \)) is the ratio between the expected power consumed and the expected throughput at the same machine:

\[
E[Q^i] = \frac{E[P_i]}{TH_i} \quad \forall i = 1..m
\]

Condition (3) avoid the first deadlock in Fig. 2 where both machines \( i \) and \( i+1 \) are out-of-service and the intermediate buffer holds \( N_{\text{off}} \) which is the threshold to interrupt the service in machine \( i \). Therefore, machine \( i+1 \) cannot be switched on because its upstream occupancy never reaches the required level \( N_{\text{on}} \) and the system is in deadlock. Condition (4) avoid the second deadlock in Fig. 2 where machines \( i \) and \( i+1 \) are out-of-service and the buffer holds \( n \) parts such that \( N_{\text{off}} > n > N_{\text{on}} \). The number of parts \( n \) cannot increase, becuse the part flow is interrupted at machine \( i \), nor decrease because the flow is interrupted also at machine \( i + 1 \). Therefore, machines cannot resume the service and the system is in deadlock.

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Similarly for the buffer expected energy consumed per part \( E[Q^i] \) with \( i = 1..m \). Let \( w_{bi} \) be the power absorbed by the \( i \)-th machine in state \( xi \). Further, let \( w_{bi} \) be the power necessary for holding one part in the queue \( i \), when the following machine is busy. Therefore, the expected power \( E[P_i] \) consumed by buffer \( i \) or machine \( i \) depends on the probability of being in each state in the feasible state set. The line throughput is defined as the throughput of the \( m \)-th machine, \( E[TH_m] = E[TH_i] \), and due to the conservation of flow it is \( E[TH_m] = E[TH_i] \forall i = 1..m - 1 \). In the following, the throughput values are expressed in parts per hour (pph). The expected total energy consumed per part \( E[Q_i] \) is the sum of the machine and buffer expected energy consumptions:

\[
E[Q_i] = \sum_{i=1}^{m} E[Q^i] + \sum_{i=1}^{m} E[Q^i] [\text{kJ}/\text{part}]
\]
an energy hotspot, thus it is not trivial to select a machine to be controlled.

The machine tools considered are real CNC machining centers with small-medium workspace-cube and locally chilled. This machine type requires 5.35 kW while on-service, and 0.52 kW when out-of-service. The machine start-up has a power consumption of 6 kW and deterministic duration $t_{\text{sw}} = 20$ s. We acquired these data with dedicated experimental measurements from a real machine configured to operate in a Powelltrian manufacturing line. The power consumed during the working state (12 – 16 kW on average) depends on the process executed. The power demand of this machine is aligned with data found in the literature and can be representative of a wide range of machine tool commonly used in the manufacturing field. The higher variability is on the working power which is highly dependent on the process, but it is not considered in the analysis because it does not affect the selection of the policy parameters, being not dependent on control actions.

4.1. Scenarios

Two main scenarios are considered in the experiments: scenario B with a balanced line, and scenario M5 with a bottleneck in M5. In both cases, systems are globally controlled, which means controlling all machines at the same time. As far as scenario B, the processing time at all machines is identically distributed and follows a discrete distribution with two values: 100 s in the 95% of the cases and 280 s in 5%. With this distribution, we model in a simplified way failure durations of the length of 3 minutes in addition to the standard processing times of 100 s. In scenario M5, the processing time of machines M1–M4 and M6–M9 is: 100 s in the 98% of the cases and 280 s in 2%. In such a system, M5 is the bottleneck. Two variations of each scenario are considered resulting in four cases in total: cases B/H and M5/H have an holding power consumption $w_H = 0.1$ kW, cases B/NH and M5/NH have the more neglectable holding power. A power consumption $w_N = 0.1$ kW represents a high percentage of total demand of cases B/H/AO (Table 1) and M5/H/AO (Table 3). Higher values of $w_N$ are therefore not analyzed in this work.

Experiments are conducted using four policies: Always On (AO), Upstream Policy (UP), Downstream Policy (DP), and Upstream & Downstream Policy (DUP). Actually, UP has the first machine (M1) Always On because it is saturated, while other machines (M2–M9) use UP. DP has the last machine (M9) Always On because it is never blocked, while other machines (M1–M8) use DP. For DUP, M1 is downstream controlled and M9 is upstream controlled for the previous reasons, while M2–M8 are under UDP. We refer to each case with a notation “scenarioholdingpolicy”, e.g., B/NH/AO is scenario B, negligible holding cost, always on policy.

4.2. Simulation model and experiments

The simulation model of the analyzed production lines was developed in Arena®. Since the control policy can be implemented at all the machines of the system, a new Arena® template (i.e., a library) has also been created for modeling a general machine controlled with a general switching policy that considers different amounts of information from the environment. By using our template, the developer can rapidly build complex simulation models of production systems composed of energy oriented controlled machines. Indeed, the machine parameters can be input using a convenient user interface in which the developer can introduce power data, processing time, start-up and policy parameters.

OptQuest is used to select a set of control parameters $(N^U, N^D, N^O)$ for each controlled machine to minimize the expected total energy consumption of the line. OptQuest automatically chooses the number of replications from 2 to 10, it compares solutions to be significantly different on average (95% of confidence), and it selects the best solution. Simulations in OptQuest were executed for a duration of $10^5$ s (about 116 days) and an initial transient identified with the Welch method equal to 5 · $10^4$ s (about 6 days). In order to give more accurate results and to select the best solution, the top solutions identified by OptQuest have been evaluated in longer simulations (20 replications with $10^5$ s (about 1157 days — 3 years) simulation length and 5 · $10^4$ s of initial transient. A non-parametric test has been used to compare results and verify whether they were significantly different (Kruskal-Wallis test with $p_{\text{value}} < 0.05$).

5. Numerical Results

5.1. Scenario B/H: balanced line with holding power

Compared to B/H/AO, the three control policies (B/H/UP, B/H/DP, and B/H/UDP) achieved significant energy saving. As reported in Table 1, the optimal control for B/H/UP is consistent with the results achieved in a previous paper [11] and saves 11.40% in terms of energy. The saving achievable increases when using downstream information (B/H/DP saves 25.73%). The optimized control for B/H/UDP saves almost 50% compared to B/H/AO—i.e., more than the effect of UP and DP together—and the optimal policy is not the combination of the solutions found for UP and DP.

However, the system selected throughput varies significantly because of the time spent for start-ups, and the variation is more significant for UDP. Therefore, in order to study whether the control policies can still achieve significant energy saving while ensuring a certain throughput, constrained optimizations have also been executed using minimum target levels for the throughput. Compared to the common practice (B/H/AO), the throughput loss for the optimal solutions of cases B/H/UP and B/H/DP are about 0.74% and 2.34%, respectively (see Table 1). Therefore, to compare control policies under the same production constraint, the throughput targets have been set close to these values: namely 0.7% and 2% of throughput reduction. A constraint at 0.1% is also tested. The latter constraint cannot be met in case B/H/UDP, therefore, the solution with the highest throughput is in Table 1.

The plot of energy consumption vs throughput is shown in Fig. 3. Although the optimization is constrained, the saving is still significant. Particularly under the optimal control, DP always performs better than UP, and UDP always results as the best policy among the others. Theoretically, UP and DP are expected to perform similarly, because starvation and blockage are symmetrical along the line—UP switches off the machines when starved while DP switches off the machines when blocked. The reason of this misalignment is in the energy consumed holding parts. DP limits the buffer level at $N^\text{off}$ as detailed in section 3. Therefore, it performs better because it
highly reduces the buffer energy which represents the 78.01% of the total energy consumption when all machines are kept on–

service (Table 1). Further, the results in Table 1 show that the machine energy in B/H/DP is higher than that in B/H/UP for both unconstrained and constrained optimizations. However, the total energy in B/H/DP is still much lower than in B/H/UP because of the high holding energy in B/H/UP.

Under a throughput constraint, UDP still performs better than other policies (UP and DP). When the same constraint is applied, UDP saves almost the sum of the amount saved with UP and DP. The reason is that UDP controls the machine both during starvation and blockages since it has access to more information.

5.2. Scenario B/NH: balanced line without holding power

The system performance for unconstrained optimizations are collected in Table 2. Although the expected total energy saving achieved with UP and DP are still significantly different (Kruskal-Wallis test $p_{value} < 0.005$), such a difference is much smaller than in B/H. This means that when the holding cost is not a matter in the optimization problem, the UP and DP performs similarly in terms of energy, which is consistent with our expectation. These results hold also in constrained optimizations. The throughput reduction is also lower than B/H. A reasonable explanation is that all control policies result in a raise of buffer level when ignoring holding cost, thus decreasing machine starvation and increasing throughput.

A remarkable results is that, the optimal control for the UDP is dominant. The energy saved with UDP is almost the sum of saving with UP and DP—which is aligned with results in section 5.1. Furthermore, it is interesting that the loss of throughput is also the least. The reasons of this result need to be further investigated in the future with more focused experiments.

5.3. Cases M5/H and M5/NH: unbalanced line

Also in these scenarios, the three policies achieved significant energy saving as in Tables 3 and 4. Since M5 is bottleneck, the number of parts in buffers upstream the bottleneck is high and machines are mostly blocked. Downstream, the buffer level

Table 1: Case B/H: unconstrained and constrained optimal control

| TH Constraint | B/H/AO (ref) | B/H/UP | B/H/DP | B/H/UDP |
|---------------|--------------|--------|---------|---------|
| $E(Q^H)$     | 515.703      | 497.949 | 525.316 | 319.794 |
| $E(Q^H)$     | 145.401      | 87.763 | 91.202  | 171.183 |
| $E[Q_t]$     | ±1.447       | ±1.792 | ±1.785  | ±0.381  |
| $E[TH]$      | 32.1372      | ±0.0322| ±0.0050 | ±0.0047 |±0.0040 | ±0.0004 | ±0.0040 | 31.3834 |

Table 2: Case B/NH: unconstrained optimal control

| B/NH | AO | UP | DP | UDP |
|------|----|----|----|-----|
| $E(Q)$ | 145.401 | 85.228 | 83.309 | 33.844 |
| ±0.498 | ±0.451 | ±0.410 | ±0.115 |±0.0000 |±0.0036 |±0.0005 |±0.0000 |±0.0040 |
| $E[TH]$ | 32.1372 | 31.9572 | 31.88232 | 32.0022 |
| ±0.0032 |±0.0036 |±0.0065 |±0.0040 |±0.0000 |±0.0036 |±0.0005 |±0.0000 |±0.0040 |

| a1 | [*, *, *, *] | [*, *, *, *] | [*, 10, 9] | [*, 6, 5] |
| a2 | [*, *, *, 9, 1, *, *, *] | [*, 7, 4] | [*, 10, 9] | [*, 7, 4] |
| a3 | [*, *, 7, *, 1, *, *, *] | [*, 5, 4] | [*, 10, 9] | [*, 7, 5] |
| a4 | [*, *, *, 1, *, *, *] | [*, 6, 9] | [*, 10, 9] | [*, 10, 9] |
| a5 | [*, *, *, 1, *, *, *] | [*, 7, 5] | [*, 10, 9] | [*, 10, 9] |
| a6 | [*, *, *, 1, *, *, *] | [*, 8, 4] | [*, 10, 9] | [*, 10, 9] |
| a7 | [*, *, *, 1, *, *, *] | [*, 6, 9] | [*, 10, 9] | [*, 10, 9] |
| a8 | [*, *, 1, *, *, *] | [*, 6, 9] | [*, 10, 9] | [*, 10, 9] |
| a9 | [*, *, *, 1, *, *, *] | [*, *, *, 1, *, *, *] | [*, *, *, 1, *, *, *] | [*, *, *, 1, *, *, *] |

Fig. 3: Total expected energy vs expected throughput of the optimal solutions in case B/H: unconstrained and constrained results.
is low and machines frequently starves. Therefore a policy that works on blocked machine should perform better. Indeed, DP results are around four times that of UP. UDP is still the best policy. The results achieved for M5/NH are consistent with the previous cases. Two alternative policies have been also evaluated for case M5/H. (i) A policy where M1–M5 are always on in order to avoid the starvation of the bottleneck machine and M6–M9 controlled with UP. The total energy consumption of this case is not statistically different from the optimal solution of M5/H/UP (Kuskal-Wallis test with $p_{value} = 0.191$). That means M1–M4 are very rarely switched off and the control applied does not really matter. (ii) A policy which uses DP on M1–M5 and UP on M6–M9. This policy performs better than UP and DP because it apply the policy which is more appropriated on machines having high blocking/starvation.

In scenario M5 (both H and NH) the savings achievable are higher than that in scenario B, because the non-bottleneck machines are less saturated, therefore the amount of energy exceed is higher. For the same reason, the throughput reduction is lower because the bottleneck machine, that mainly affects the throughput, is almost never switched off.

Table 3: Case M5/H: unconstrained optimal control.

| M5/H | AO   | UP   | DP   | UDP   |
|------|------|------|------|-------|
| $E(Q_1)$ | 735.423 | 652.820 | 406.637 | 274.067 |
| $E(T_H)$ | 33.0233 | 33.0109 | 32.6770 | 32.2019 |

Table 4: Case M5/NH: unconstrained optimal control.

| M5/NH | AO   | UP   | DP   | UDP   |
|------|------|------|------|-------|
| $E(Q_1)$ | 231.935 | 135.457 | 105.724 | 33.235 |
| $E(T_H)$ | 33.0233 | 33.0046 | 32.8690 | 32.9206 |

6. Conclusion Remarks

Several control policies have been applied to machines in a production line with finite buffer capacities according to the level of information available at machine level. A new simulation template library has been created allowing to study complex systems when the machines are controlled. Comparing the different control policies with the common practice in manufacturing, it is remarkable that:

- All control policies may achieve significant energy saving without largely compromising production throughput.
- Savings in unbalanced lines are more promising.
- The more information the control have access to, the higher the energy saving.
- DP performs better than UP because it reduces the number of parts in the buffers. However, when the holding energy is negligible, UP and DP perform similarly.

Since these results were obtained with simulation, there is no claim they are general and valid for any production line. However, the study cases analyzed in this paper are seminal to further analysis. More complex production systems will be investigated in future experiments, once the effect of the policies have been fully understood. Structural properties of the optimal control policies will be further investigated for optimization purposes. A sensitivity analysis for critical parameters is considered as an important extension for policy applicability. Applications of the proposed policies in real manufacturing systems are straightforward, particularly for energy intensive processes.

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