



Limiting Arc Flash Exposure

An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

Course Number: E-2033

Credit: 2 Hours / 2 PDH / 2 CPD

Limiting Arc Flash Exposure

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Exposure to arc flash can be fixed in three ways:

1. Avoiding arc flash hazards.
2. Limiting the level of arc energy discharged.
3. The adequate use of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Arc flash incidents can be cut down by following processes correctly, use of adequate equipment, proper preventive care, planning and coordination of operation, as well as skill improvement and real experience. Also crucial is the mental and physical circumstances of the staff such that the dropping of equipment and tools, accidental touching, etc., are averted. Taking care of the causes of arc flash is the main scheme for averting exposure. Incidents may happen despite care taken to avert them. In such circumstances, it is always better if the incident energy is low and staff is ready for the worst by implementing adequate PPE.

AVERTING ARC FLASH INCIDENTS

Arc flash can be averted by realizing its causes and taking steps to mitigate them. The different causes of arc flash are listed below. The mitigation steps are discussed in the following paragraphs. Summary of causes:

- Dust, impurities, and corrosion at contact surfaces producing heat, loosening contact and creating sparks.
- Sparks developed during racking of breakers, replacement of fuses, breakers/fuses closing into faulted and energized lines.
- Break down of insulating materials.
- Snapping of leads at connections due to force – human, rodents or birds.
- Incidental touching and dropping of tools, devices or metal parts.

PREVENTIVE SERVICE

Preventive service procedures are developed in most companies that need high reliability of supply or process persistence. Preventive service also gives a safer workplace. Improve maintenance service when carrying out reviews, preventive service, or even breakdown service by including methodologies that address arc flash hazards. This limits the total cost of applying an arc flash program. Implement the following in service practices:

1. Rodents and birds getting into panels and switchgear are not uncommon. These can cause short-circuits and eventually arc flash. This hazard can be precluded by closing all open areas of devices with wire net or sealant so that they cannot enter.
2. Use terminals that are resistant to corrosion. It can cause snapping of small wires that in turn may cause sparks and fumes when the tip of the wire touches the metal enclosure or other phase conductor. Regularly find corroded terminals and elements if the electrical devices are at a chemical plant or near a marine atmosphere. Electrical contact grease is usually used in joints and terminations. This will cut down corrosion.
3. Find loose and overheated connections. Impurities or dust at the terminal connectors can cause higher contact resistance, heating the terminals. A sign of such situation is colouring of the nearby insulation. Cable insulation heating can damage the insulation - another cause of flashover. Infra-red thermography can give precious information on poor connections and overheated electrical conductors or terminations.
4. If feasible, insulate exposed metal elements. If heat dissipation is not really required from the exposed metal element, and insulating it with some insulating tape or cover is not an issue, then it is better to complete it, rather than to keep them exposed. Insulation prevents arcing. For example, if staff drops an uninsulated spanner, that touches bare bus bars of two phases, a short circuit current will occur. Nevertheless, this will not occur if the spanner or the bus bar is insulated.
5. Ensure that relays and breakers function properly. Failure could cause prolonged exposure to arc flash that could lead to death. Routine maintenance and relay testing are completed in companies with good maintenance procedures. Relay test frequency may be every few years, depending upon the manufacturer's recommendations and company policy.
6. Contacts pitting takes place when fuses operate. Replace fuse contacts holder or the fuse holder, when unreasonable pitting is detected.
7. When a fuse melts, ensure that the fault has cleared before putting a new fuse. Closing a circuit on to a fault can cause sparks that could lead to arc flash.
8. Control and instrumentation wire should be kept in proper condition. It is not unusual for these wires to become bundled and messy. Occurrence of arc blasts can happen while opening covers of such switchgear/MCC.
9. Check out for excessive moisture or water/ice on insulating surfaces of devices. This may lead to flashover, especially on high voltage devices.

WORKING ON LIVE EQUIPMENT

1. It is always preferred to work on de-energized devices, regardless of the hazard risk category (HRC). When operation on live devices is inescapable, then reasoning and written authorization is needed. Integrate this precautionary step into the work routine.

2. Always use insulated tools. Dropping of tools can lead to momentary faults, sparks and arcs. Insulated tools and devices can help reduce and remove this type of incident.
3. Torque control: When using spanners, wrenches or screwdrivers to fasten or loosen a connection use adequate torque. When excessive force is needed, it is not unusual to lose control. Slipping of screws or nuts and bolts may lead to accidental touching. Fasteners that are corroded or heated can be hard to loosen. Work off line if loosening is challenging.
4. Do not use paint, cleaning chemicals, spray, etc., on live exposed metal elements. The fumes or spray may be conductive and it may decrease the insulating features of air and allow an arc to strike through. Spraying directly on live conductor can also give a conducting path that will end up in electric shock.

CUTTING DOWN INCIDENT ENERGY ON STAFF

The incident energy exposure can be cut down by appropriate system design or operating sequence. Several ways to cut down the energy on an existing system are shown below:

1. Cut down the fault level
2. Cut down the exposure time
3. Remote operation
4. Remote racking

CUTTING DOWN THE FAULT LEVEL

Fault level can be cut down in the following ways:

1. Change system arrangements to cut down available fault current/smaller kVA transformers.
2. Current limiting fuses/breakers.
3. Current limiting reactors.

SYSTEM ARRANGEMENT

Cutting down the fault level depends on the existing system arrangement. Double ended load centres with closed tie in normal service (Figure 1) are a basic example where the fault level can be decreased by either opening the tie or one incoming breaker. The short circuit current will be decreased by roughly 50% and the incident short circuit current energy will also be decreased, even though not inevitably in the same proportion. If the bus has two power sources or a source and a normally closed tie as presented in Figure 2, opening one of the sources (or tie) will decrease the fault level while servicing on the devices is completed. For both cases, the loading and relay setting need to be verified to ensure that the opening of a breaker does not overload the other power source.

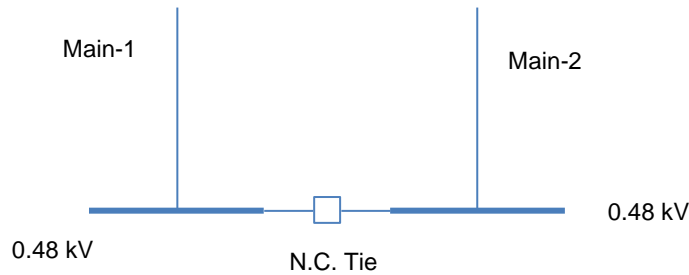


Figure 1. Double-end load center configuration

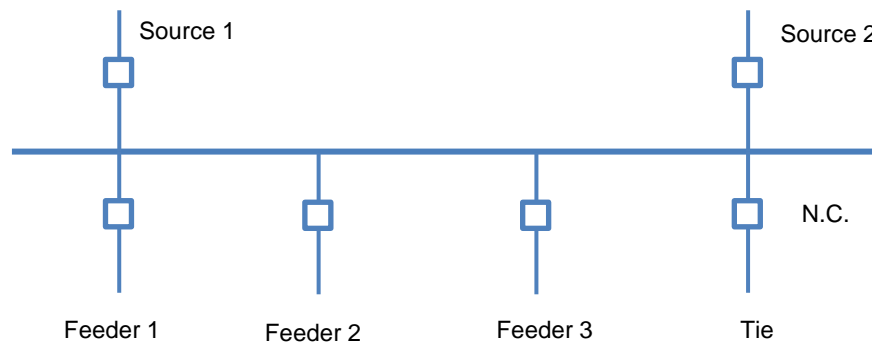


Figure 2. Dual sources

CURRENT LIMITING FUSES/BREAKERS

Current limiting fuses/breakers put additional resistance within the fuse device while the fuse is melting. This fixes the fault current. Fault currents within the current limiting area of the fuse are usually cleared within half a cycle. Since the incident arc energy is relative to arcing time, current limiting fuses/breakers limit the arc energy.

CURRENT LIMITING REACTORS

Current limiting reactors bring in extra impedance in the electrical system and are utilized to limit the short circuit current. This not only decreases damages induced by faults but also lets the utilization of circuit breakers with smaller duty. Fixing the short circuit current can also raise the fault clearing time if the fault current lies in the protective relay inverse time delay characteristics. Hence, protective device coordination assessment is also needed when selecting current limiting reactors.

DECREASING ARCING TIME

Arcing time can be decreased in few ways. Some system settings modifications may be needed for this purpose. Some strategies presented in this paragraph are as follows:

1. Decreasing safety margin for relay and breaker operation with enhanced solid state trip elements.
2. Bus differential protection to mix selectivity with instantaneous tripping.
3. Temporary instantaneous trip setting during work.
4. Retrofit time-overcurrent relays with delayed instantaneous trip element if required.
5. Optical sensor to trip breaker in the case of arc flash.
6. Use smaller fuse size if feasible; smaller current limiting fuses may operate quicker. Fuses will typically be much faster than breakers at high fault currents – even neglecting current-limiting effect this can greatly decrease arc energy.
7. Protective device coordination study to balance improving reliability with decreasing arc flash hazard.

DECREASING BREAKER RESPONSE TIME SAFETY LIMIT

Incident energy grows with time and fault current. Decreasing either or both decreases the incident energy due to an arcing fault. Faster operating relays and trip elements can decrease the arcing time to some degree. In this regard, a protective relaying assessment may be completed in order to check if they can be decreased in time and pick-up. If a protective device assessment was completed a number of years ago when electro-mechanical relays were the standard, 0.4 second margin between relay was typical. This allowed for breaker operating time, over-travel, and a time safety margin. Breaker times are now typically 5 cycles rather than the 8 cycles of older breakers. Microprocessor relays are now being utilized, for which the over travel has basically been eliminated. The repeatability of the microprocessor relay is better than that of the electro-mechanical relay. Hence, the safety margin can be decreased. The end result is that the relay coordination limits can be 0.2 to 0.25 seconds instead of 0.4 seconds. This is a 25%-35% decrease in arc energy exposure.

BUS DIFFERENTIAL PROTECTION

A major enhancement in clearing time would result if an instantaneous relay could be utilized instead of time-delay relays. Feeders on both low and high voltage systems are likely to have instantaneous settings and hence, would limit the arc exposure time. Nevertheless, a fault on the main bus is usually cleared by time-delay relays for selectivity purposes. In high voltage electrical systems, utilizing bus-differential relaying reduces the arc exposure time to a minimum. The arc energy exposure can easily be 5 to 30 times less than that of the delayed clearing time.

TEMPORARY INSTANTANEOUS SETTING

Replacement low-voltage trip devices have an instantaneous unit that that can be switched on or off. This has a high advantage on the incoming main circuit breakers. In many situations, for coordination reasons, the instantaneous is not set and fault clearing times are delayed for selectivity. A main circuit breaker clearing time with a load centre tie and feeder circuit breakers could easily have a short time setting of 0.4 seconds. If the instantaneous trip could easily be switched on while work is being completed lower fault currents could be tripped and cleared in less than 0.04 seconds. The incident energy exposure is decreased to 10% of its previous figure. During servicing, full selectivity of protective elements may be lost, but the decrease in arc flash exposure makes it worth. The temporary instantaneous protective setting should be switched off and the original protective setting should be fixed for normal service after the work is done. Different instantaneous protective trip elements with increased protection can also be added to shunt trip or transfer trip for added protection during work processes.

RETROFIT INSTANTANEOUS PROTECTIVE TRIP ELEMENT

If bus-differential protective relaying is not feasible then the main protection relay can be retrofitted with an instantaneous protective element and a safety control switch. As presented in Figure 3, a selector switch can be utilized to place the instantaneous in operation when servicing is being completed. Typically, the instantaneous protection would not be operable due to the open contact of the selector switch. Nevertheless, when job is being done on the energized elements, the safety switch would be closed, thereby limiting the arc exposure time to the minimum. The delayed fault clearing time could be in the order of 0.04 seconds instead of 0.1 second. The delayed trip time would get if the arc flash exposure is limited to a safe amount of radiation a staff would be able to stay away from the fault. The time-selective protection is not used for the duration of the job in the place. Ideally, positive feedback from the trip element is used to reassert the setting.

Many medium voltage circuit breakers have two groups of settings for different protective settings for different service; a second group could be for servicing where the instantaneous. Again, the improvement in human

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