

OPC DataHub Offers Advanced Tunnelling of Process Data

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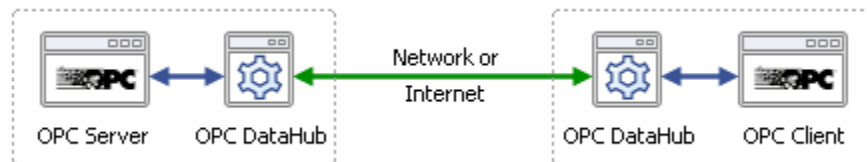
In today's process control environment, OPC is becoming the protocol of choice. Most PLC, DCS and equipment manufacturers offer an OPC server interface as part of their product suite. This allows software vendors to create OPC client applications that easily access real-time data from any piece of equipment offered by any vendor. Data from the factory floor is more available now than ever before. Accessing this data often means connecting over corporate or insecure public networks.

But networking OPC is challenging. The networking protocol for OPC is DCOM, which was not designed for industrial real-time data transfer. DCOM is difficult to configure, responds poorly to network breaks, and has serious security flaws. Using DCOM between different LANs, such as connecting between manufacturing and corporate LANs, is sometimes impossible to configure. To overcome these limitations, Cogent offers a "tunnelling" solution, as an alternative to DCOM, to transfer OPC data over a network. Let's take a closer look at how tunnelling solves the issues associated with DCOM, and how the OPC DataHub from Cogent Real-Time Systems provides a secure, reliable, and easy-to-use tunnelling solution with many advanced features.

Making Configuration Easy and Secure

The DCOM protocol is difficult to configure. Even the most experienced network administrators can have problems configuring DCOM networking, especially when trying to get the Windows login permissions and security settings to be match. Most integrators get around these problems by defining very broad access permissions on all machines involved. In a typical network environment, though, you do not want to configure your computers with loose access permissions. This means using DCOM can actually compromise your network security standards.

Tunnelling with the OPC DataHub eliminates DCOM and all of its configuration and security issues. The OPC DataHub uses the industry standard TCP/IP protocol to network data between an OPC server on one computer and an OPC client on another computer, thus avoiding all of the problems associated with using the DCOM protocol.



Tunnelling data using the OPC DataHub

The OPC DataHub offers this tunnelling feature by effectively 'mirroring' data from one OPC DataHub running on the OPC server computer, to another OPC DataHub running on the OPC client computer.

Better Network Communication

When a DCOM connection is broken, there are very long timeout delays before either side is notified of the problem. In a production system, these long delays without warning can be a very real problem.

The OPC DataHub has a user-configurable heartbeat and timeout feature which allows it to react immediately when a network break occurs. As soon as this happens, the OPC DataHub begins to monitor the network connection and when the link is re-established, the local OPC DataHub automatically reconnects to the remote OPC DataHub and refreshes the data set with the latest values.

Whenever there is a network break, it is important to protect the client systems that depend on data being delivered. Because each end of the tunnelling connection is an independent OPC DataHub, the client programs are protected from network failures and can continue to run in isolation using the last known data values. This is much better than having the client applications lose all access to data when the tunnelling connection goes down.

The OPC DataHub uses an asynchronous messaging system that further protects client applications from network delays. In most tunnelling solutions, the synchronous nature of DCOM is preserved over the TCP link. This means that when a client accesses data through the tunnel, it must block waiting for a response. If a network error occurs, the client will continue to block until a network timeout occurs. The OPC DataHub removes this limitation by releasing the client immediately and then delivering the data over the network. If a network error occurs, the data will be delivered once the network connection is re-established.

Securing the System

Recently, DCOM networking has been shown to have serious security flaws that make it vulnerable to hackers and viruses. This is particularly worrying to companies who network data across Internet connections or other links outside the company.

To properly secure your communication channel, the OPC DataHub offers secure SSL connections over the TCP/IP network. SSL Tunnelling is fully encrypted, which means the data is completely safe for transmission over open network links outside the company firewalls. In addition, the OPC DataHub also provides access control and user authentication through the use of optional password protection on tunnelling connections. This ensures that only authorized users can establish tunnelling connections.

Advanced OPC Tunnelling

While there are a few other products on the market that offer OPC tunnelling capabilities to replace DCOM, the OPC DataHub is unique in that it is the only product to combine tunnelling with a wide range of advanced and complimentary features to provide even more added benefits.

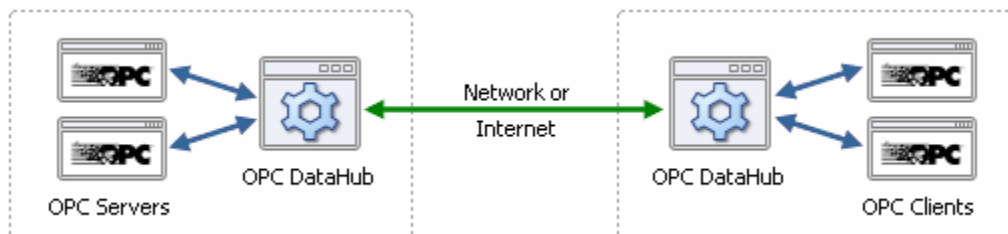
Non-Blocking

While it may seem simple enough to replace DCOM with TCP/IP for networking OPC data, the OPC DataHub also replaces the inherent blocking behaviour experienced in DCOM communication. Client programs connecting to the OPC DataHub are never blocked from sending new information. Some vendors of OPC tunnelling solutions still face this blocking problem, even though they are using TCP/IP.

Significant reduction in network bandwidth

The OPC DataHub reduces the amount of data being transmitted across the network in a two ways:

1. Rather than using a polling cycle to transmit the data, the OPC DataHub only sends a message when a data new value is received. This significantly improves performance and reduces bandwidth requirements.
2. The OPC DataHub can aggregate both client and server connections. This means that the OPC DataHub can collect data from multiple OPC servers and send it across the network using a single connection. On the client side, any number of OPC clients can attach to the OPC DataHub and they all receive the latest data as soon as it arrives. This eliminates the need for each OPC client to connect to each OPC server using multiple connections over the network.



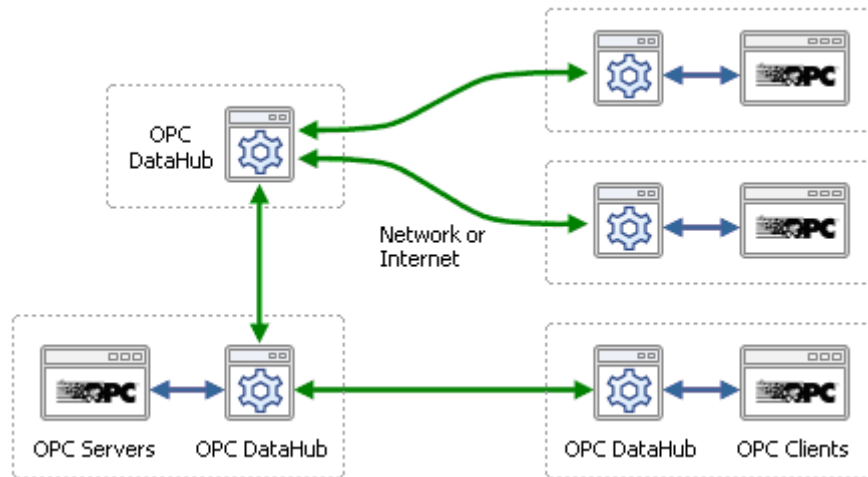
Combining Tunnelling and Aggregation with the OPC DataHub

Supports slow network and Internet links

Because the OPC DataHub reduces the amount of data that needs to be transmitted over the network, it can be used over a slow network link. Any interruptions are dealt with by the OPC DataHub while the OPC client programs are effectively shielded from any disturbance caused by the slow connection.

Load balancing between computers

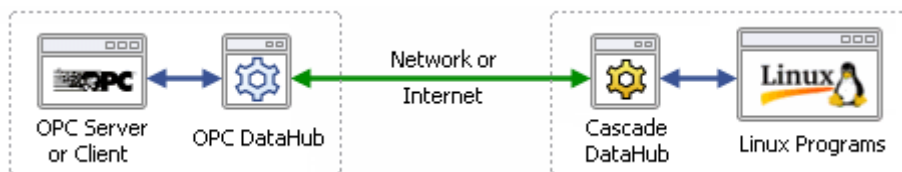
The OPC DataHub also offers the unique ability to balance the load on the OPC server computers. You may have a system where multiple OPC clients are connecting to the OPC server at the same time, causing the server computer to experience high CPU loads and slower performance. The solution to this is to mirror data from the OPC DataHub on the OPC server computer to an OPC DataHub on another computer and then have some of your OPC clients connect to this second 'mirrored' computer. This reduces the load on the original OPC server computer and provides faster response to all OPC client computers.



Load Balancing using the OPC DataHub

Access to data on network computers running Linux

Another one of the unique features of the OPC DataHub is its ability to mirror data between OPC DataHubs running on other operating systems, such as Linux and QNX. This means you can have your own custom Linux programs act as OPC servers, providing real-time data to OPC client applications running on networked Windows computers. The reverse is also true. You can have your Linux program access data from OPC servers running on networked Windows computers.



Connecting OPC to Linux using the OPC DataHub

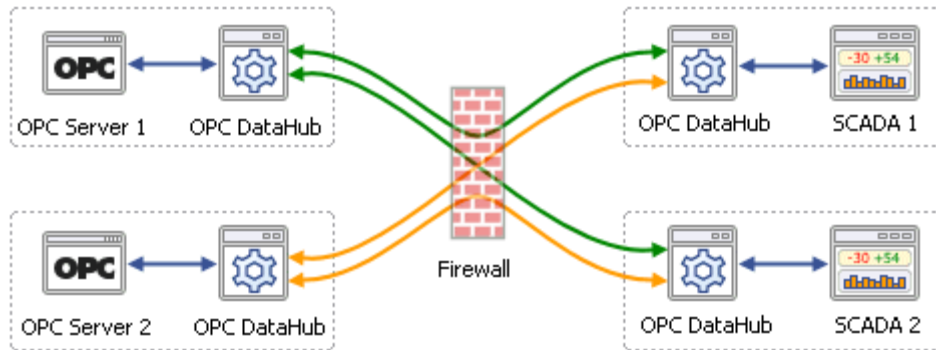
Advanced Tunnelling Example - TEVA Pharmaceuticals (Hungary)

TEVA Pharmaceuticals in Hungary recently used the OPC DataHub to combine tunnelling and aggregation to network OPC data over the network and through the company firewall.

Laszlo Simon is the Engineering Manager for the TEVA API plant in Debrecen, Hungary. He had a project that sounded simple enough. He needed to connect new control applications through several OPC stations to an existing SCADA network. The plant was already running large YOKOGAWA DCS and GE PLC control systems, connected

to a number of distributed SCADA workstations. However, Mr. Simon did face a couple of interesting challenges in this project:

- The OPC servers and SCADA systems were on different computers, separated by a company firewall. This makes it extremely difficult to connect OPC over a network, because of the complexities of configuring DCOM and Windows security permissions.
- Each SCADA system needed to access data from all of the new OPC server stations. This meant Mr. Simon needed a way to aggregate data from all the OPC stations into a single common data set on each SCADA computer.



Using the OPC DataHub to Aggregate and Tunnel Data

After searching the web, Mr. Simon downloaded and installed the OPC DataHub. Very quickly he had connected the OPC DataHub to his OPC servers and determined that he was reading live process data from the new control systems. He was also able to easily set up the OPC tunnelling link between the OPC server stations and the SCADA workstations, by simply installing another OPC DataHub on the SCADA computer and configuring it to connect to the OPC server stations.

"I wanted to reduce and simplify the communication over the network because of our firewall. It was very easy with the OPC DataHub." said Mr. Simon after the system was up and running. Currently about 7,000 points are being transferred across the network, in real-time, using the OPC DataHub. "In the future, the additional integration of the existing or new OPC servers will be with the OPC DataHub."

About Cogent Real-Time Systems Inc.

Founded in 1995, Cogent Real-Time Systems is the leader in real-time cross-platform data integration between Windows, Linux and QNX. Customers include the Bank of Canada, Cadbury Chocolate and the European Space Agency. Cogent leverages its experience in real-time data communications to provide the next generation of OPC products.