Compressed air and its purification from generation to application

Compressed air is an essential power source that is widely used throughout industry. This safe, powerful and reliable utility can be the most important part of your production process. However, your compressed air will contain water, dirt, wear particles and even degraded lubricating oil which all mix together to form an unwanted condensate. This condensate often acidic, rapidly wears tools and pneumatic machinery, blocks valves and orifices causing high maintenance and costly air leaks. It also corrodes piping systems and can bring your production process to an extremely expensive standstill!

The quality of air required throughout a typical compressed air system can vary. It is highly recommended that the compressed air is treated prior to entry into the distribution system as well as at each usage point or application. This approach to system design provides the most cost effective solution to system purification as it not only removes the contamination already in the distribution system, it ensures that only the most critical areas receive air treated to the highest level.

In many instances the compressed air system will be supplying air to more than one application and although the purification equipment specified in the compressor room would remain unchanged, the point of use protection will vary depending upon the air quality requirements of each application.

In many cases this action alone is not enough, as modern production systems and processes demand an even higher level of air quality. Where required, “point of use” filtration, refrigeration or desiccant air dryers can provide the correct air quality, without the need for drying the complete compressed air installation, which can be both costly and totally unnecessary.

Sources of contamination found in a compressed air system

Contaminants in a compressed air system can generally be attributed to the following:

- The quality of air being drawn into the compressor
- Air compressors draw in a large volume of air from the surrounding atmosphere containing large numbers of airborne contaminants.
- The type and operation of the air compressor
- The air compressor itself can also add contamination, from wear particles to coolants and lubricants.

Compressed air storage devices and distribution systems
- The air receiver and system piping are designed to store and distribute the compressed air. As a consequence, they will also store the large amounts of contaminants drawn into the system. Additionally, piping and air receivers will also cool the moist compressed air forming condensate which causes damage and corrosion.
Types of contamination found in a compressed air system

**Atmospheric Dirt**
Atmospheric air in an industrial environment typically contains 183 million per yd³ (140 million per m³) of dirt particles. 80% of these particles are less than 2 microns in size and are too small to be captured by the compressor intake filter, therefore passing directly into the compressed air system.

**Water Vapor, Condensed Water And Water Aerosols**
Atmospheric air contains water vapor (water in a gaseous form). The ability of compressed air to hold water vapor is dependent upon its temperature. The higher the temperature, the more water vapor that can be held by the air. During compression, the air temperature is increased significantly, which allows it to easily retain the incoming moisture. After the compression stage, air is normally cooled to a usable temperature. This reduces the air's ability to retain water vapor, resulting in a proportion of the water vapor being condensed into liquid water which is removed by a condensate drain fitted to the compressor after-cooler. The air leaving the after-cooler is now 100% saturated with water vapor and any further cooling of the air will result in more water vapor condensing into liquid water. Condensation occurs at various stages throughout the system as the air is cooled further by the air receiver, piping and the expansion of valves, cylinders, tools and machinery. The condensed water and water aerosols cause corrosion to the storage and distribution system, damage production equipment and the end product. It also reduces production efficiency and increases maintenance costs. Water in any form must be removed to enable the system to run correctly and efficiently.

**Rust and Pipescale**
Rust and pipescale can be found in air receivers and the piping of “wet systems” (systems without adequate purification equipment) or systems which were operated “wet” prior to purification being installed. Over time, this contamination breaks away to cause damage or blockage in production which can also contaminate final product and processes.

**Micro-Organisms**
Bacteria and viruses will also be drawn into the compressed air system through the compressor intake and warm, moist air provides an ideal environment for the growth of micro-organisms. If only a few micro-organisms were to enter a clean environment, a sterile process or production system, enormous damage could be caused that not only diminishes product quality, but may even render a product entirely unfit for use and subject to recall.

**Liquid Oil And Oil Aerosols**
Most air compressors use oil in the compression stage for sealing, lubrication and cooling. During operation, lubricating oil is carried over into the compressed air system as liquid oil and aerosols. This oil mixes with water vapor in the air and is often very acidic, causing damage to the compressed air storage and distribution system, production equipment and final product.

**Oil Vapor**
In addition to dirt and water vapor, atmospheric air also contains oil in the form of unburned hydrocarbons. The unburned hydrocarbons drawn into the compressor intake as well as vaporized oil from the compression stage of a lubricated compressor will carry over into a compressed air system where it can cool and condense, causing the same contamination issues as liquid oil.
Up to 99% of the total liquid contamination found in a compressed air system is water.

Oil is perceived to cause the most problems as it is seen emanating from open drain points and exhausting valves, however, in the majority of instances, it is actually oily condensate (oil mixed with water) that is being observed.

How much water can be found in a typical compressed air system?

The amount of water in a compressed air system is staggering. A small 100 SCFM (2.8m³/min) compressor and refrigeration dryer combination, operating for 4,000 hours in typical climatic conditions can produce approximately 2,200 gallons (8,328 liters) of liquid condensate per year.

If the compressor is oil lubricated with a typical 2ppm (2 mg/m³) oil carryover, then although the resulting condensate would visually resemble oil, oil would in fact account for less than 0.1% of the overall volume and it is this resemblance to oil to which a false association is made.

The example above assumes uses a small compressor to highlight the large volume of condensate produced. If a compressed air system was operated in warmer, more humid climates, or with larger compressors installed, running for longer periods, the volume of condensate would increase significantly.

Contamination and types of compressors

It is often believed that the level of compressed air purification equipment required in a system is dependent upon the type of compressor used. Contamination in a compressed air system originates from many sources and is not related solely to the compressor or it's lubricants. No matter what compressor type is selected, adequate filtration and separation products will be required to remove the large volume of dirty contaminated water as well as the dirt, rust, pipescale and microbiological contamination in the system.

Preventative maintenance provides you with the following benefits:

- Lowest operating costs
- Superior compressed air quality
- Continued protection of downstream equipment and processes
- Peace of mind

Compressed air and it's purification

Having identified the different types of contamination that can be found within a compressed air system, we can now examine the purification technologies available for it's removal.
Particle and coalescing filters

Coalescing filters are probably the most important items of purification equipment in any compressed air system. They are designed to remove oil and water aerosols using mechanical filtration techniques and have the additional benefit of removing solid particulate to very low levels (as small as 0.01micron in size). Installed in pairs, most users believe one to be an oil removal filter and the other to be a particulate filter, when in fact, the pair of filters both perform the same function. The first filter, a general purpose filter is used to protect the high efficiency filter against bulk contamination. This "dual filter" installation ensures a continuous supply of high quality compressed air with low operational costs and minimal maintenance time.

Bulk liquid removal high efficiency water separators

Used to protect filters in systems where excessive cooling takes place in distribution piping. Water Separators will remove in excess of 98% of bulk liquid contamination through centrifugal separation techniques.

Refrigeration dryers

Refrigeration dryers work by cooling the air, so are limited to positive pressure dewpoint ratings to prevent freezing of the condensed liquid. Ideal for general purpose applications, they typically provide pressure dewpoints of 38°F (3°C), 45°F (7°C) or 50°F (10°C) pdp. Air is reheated before it re-enters the system to prevent piping from “sweating” in humid conditions. Refrigeration dryers are not suitable for installations where piping is installed in ambient temperatures below the dryer dewpoint i.e. systems with external piping.

Adsorption (desiccant) dryers

Water vapor is water in a gaseous form and is removed from compressed air using a dryer, with dryer performance being measured as pressure dewpoint. Adsorption or desiccant dryers remove moisture by passing air over a regenerative absorbent material which strips the moisture from the air. This type of dryer is extremely efficient and typical pressure dewpoint ratings are -40°F (-40°C) or -100°F (-70°C) pdp. This means that for water vapor to condense into a liquid, the air temperature would have to drop below -40°F (-40°C) to -100°F (-70°C) respectively (the actual air temperature after an adsorption dryer is not the same as it's dewpoint). Beneficially, a pressure dewpoint of -15°F (-26°C) or better will not only prevent corrosion, but will also inhibit the growth of microorganisms within the compressed air system.

Important note regarding compressed air dryers

As adsorption and refrigeration dryers are designed to remove only water vapor and not water in a liquid form, they require the use of particulate and coalescing filters, and possibly a bulk liquid separator to work efficiently.
Compressed air quality standards - ISO 8573

ISO 8573 is the group of International Standards relating to the quality of compressed air and consists of nine separate parts. Part 1 specifies the quality requirements of the compressed air and parts 2-9 specify the methods of testing for a range of contaminants.

ISO 8573.1: 2010 is the primary document used from the ISO 8573 series and it is this document which allows the user to specify the air quality or purity required at key points in a compressed air system.

ISO8573-1 lists the main contaminants as Solid Particulate, Water and oil. The purity levels for each contaminant are shown in separate tables, however for ease of use, this document combines all three contaminants into one easy to use table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ISO8573-1:2010</th>
<th>Solid Particulate</th>
<th>Water</th>
<th>Oil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Maximum number of particles per m³</td>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td>Vapor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.1 - 0.5 micron</td>
<td>0.5 - 1 micron</td>
<td>1 - 5 micron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>≤ 20,000</td>
<td>≤ 400</td>
<td>≤ 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>≤ 400,000</td>
<td>≤ 6,000</td>
<td>≤ 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>≤ 90,000</td>
<td>≤ 1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>≤ 10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>≤ 100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Specifying Air Purity In Accordance With ISO 8573-1:2010

When specifying the purity of air required, the standard must always be referenced, followed by the purity class selected for each contaminant (a different purity class can be selected for each contaminant if required). An example of how to write an air quality specification is shown below:

Example:
ISO 8573-1:2010 Class 1.2.1

ISO8573-1:2010 refers to the standard document and its revision, the three digits refer to the purity classifications selected for solid particulate, water and total oil. Selecting an air purity class of 1.2.1 would specify the following air quality when operating at the standard’s reference conditions:

Class 1, Particulate
In each cubic meter of compressed air, the particulate count should not exceed 20,000 particles in the 0.1 - 0.5 micron size range, 400 particles in the 0.5 - 1 micron size range and 10 particles in the 1 - 5 micron size range.

Class 2, Water
A pressure dewpoint (PDP) of -40°F (-40°C) or better is required and no liquid water is allowed.

Class 1, Oil
In each cubic meter of compressed air, not more than 0.01mg of oil is allowed. This is a total level for liquid oil, oil aerosol and oil vapor.

Cost Effective System Design

To achieve the stringent air quality levels required for today’s modern production facilities, a careful approach to system design, commissioning and operation must be employed.

Treatment at one point alone is not enough and it is highly recommended that the compressed air is treated in the compressor room to a level that will provide general purpose air to the site and also protect the distribution piping.

Point of use purification should also be employed, not only to remove any contamination remaining in the distribution system, but also with specific attention on the quality of air required by each application. This approach to system design ensures that air is not “over treated” and provides the most cost effective solution to high quality compressed air.
General purpose oil free air

Bulk contamination is removed to an adequate level prior to the air entering the distribution system. Point of use particulate filter(s) are used for removal of contamination within the distribution system. Point of use adsorption dryer installed where lower dewpoints are required.

Typical Applications

- Plant Automation
- Air Logistics
- Pneumatic Tools
- General Instrumentation
- Air Conveying
- Air Motors
- Temperature Control Systems
- Blow Guns
- Gauging Equipment
- Raw Material Mixing
- Sand / Bead Blasting
- Decompression Chambers
- Cosmetic Production
- Medical Air
- Dental Air
- Lasers and Optics
- Robotics
- Spray Painting
- Air Bearings
- Pipeline Purging
- Measuring Equipment

High quality oil free air

Bulk contamination is removed to an adequate level prior to the air entering the distribution system. Point of use particulate filter(s) are used for removal of contamination within the distribution system. Adsorption dryers are used for critical applications where lower dewpoints are required.

Typical Applications

- Blow Molding of Plastics e.g., P.E.T. Bottles
- Film Processing
- Critical Instrumentation
- Advanced Pneumatics
- Air Blast Circuit Breakers
- Decompression Chambers
- Medical Air
- Dental Air
- Lasers and Optics
- Robotics
- Spray Painting
- Air Bearings
- Pipeline Purging
- Measuring Equipment