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How Protection Relays Solve Electrical Problems

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I. INTRO TO PROTECTION RELAYS

What is a protection relay?

- Inputs and Settings
- Processes
- Outputs

How do protection relays solve electrical problems?

- Stage 1 – Early stages of a failure
- Stage 2 – During a failure
- Stage 3 – After a failure

II. RELAY APPLICATION

Ground-Fault Protection

- Definition of Ground Fault
- DC Systems
- Ungrounded AC Systems
- Solidly Grounded Systems
- Resistance-Grounded Systems
- System Capacitive Charging Current
- Resistor Monitors
- Ground-Continuity Monitors

Motor Protection

- Overview
- Common Motor Problems and Solutions
- Motor Protection and the NEC®

Arc-Flash Protection

- Overview
- Arc-Flash Safety Standards
- Arc-Flash Mitigation
- Arc-Flash Relays

I. INTRODUCTION TO PROTECTION RELAYS

What is a Protection Relay?

A protection relay is a smart device that receives inputs, compares them to set points, and provides outputs. Inputs can include current, voltage, resistance, or temperature. Outputs can include visual feedback in the form of indicator lights and/or an alphanumeric display, communications, control warnings, alarms, and turning power off and on. **See Figure 1**.

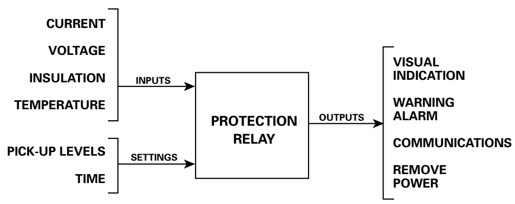

FIGURE 1

Protection relays can be either electromechanical or electronic/microprocessor-based. Electromechanical relays consist of mechanical parts that require routine calibration to stay within intended tolerances. Microprocessor-based or electronic relays provide quick, reliable, accurate, and repeatable outputs. Using an electronic or microprocessorbased relay instead of an electromechanical design provides numerous advantages including improved accuracy, additional functions, reduced maintenance, smaller space requirements and lower life-cycle costs.

Inputs

A relay needs information from the system to make a decision. These inputs can be collected in a variety of ways. In some cases, the wires in the field can be connected directly to the relay. In other applications, additional devices are needed to convert the measured parameters to a format that the relay can process. These additional devices can be current transformers, potential transformers, high-tension couplers, RTDs, or other devices.

Settings

Many protection relays have adjustable settings. The user selects settings (pick-up levels) that allow the relay to make a decision. The relay compares the inputs to these settings and responds accordingly.

Processes

Once the inputs are connected and the settings are made, the relay compares these values and makes a decision. Depending on the need, different types of relays are available for different functions.

Outputs

A relay can have several ways of communicating that a decision has been made. Typically the relay will operate a switch (relay contact) to indicate that an input has surpassed a setting, or the relay can provide notification through visualfeedback such as a meter or LED. One advantage of many electronic or microprocessor-based relays is an ability to communicate with a network or a PLC.

Let's use a thermostat to illustrate the protection relay function in **Figure 1**. The input that is measured is temperature and the input device is the temperature sensor. The user sets the desired temperature setting (pick-up level). The relay measures the existing air temperature and compares it to the setting. The outputs can be used to provide controls (turning an air conditioner or furnace on and off) and visual indication on the thermostat display.

How Do Protection Relays Solve Electrical Problems?

Similar to how the thermostat solves the problem of automating the control of the air conditioner or furnace in a home, protection relays can solve electrical problems. The purpose of the protection relay is to detect a problem, ideally during its initial stage, and to either eliminate or significantly reduce damage to personnel and/or equipment.

The following stages illustrate how an electrical problem develops:

Stage 1: When conductors with good insulation are exposed to fault initiators such as moisture, dust, chemicals, persistent overloading, vibration or just normal wear, the insulation will slowly deteriorate. Such small changes will not be immediately obvious until the damage is severe enough to cause an electrical fault. Relays can detect that a problem is developing by identifying slight deviations in current, voltage, resistance, or temperature. Due to the small magnitude in change, only a sophisticated device such as a sensitive protection relay or a monitor can detect these conditions and indicate that a problem may be developing, before any further damage occurs.

Stage 2: As the problem becomes more severe, further changes take place such as insulation breakdown, overheating, or overvoltage. Since the change from normal to abnormal is great, traditional devices can be used to interrupt power. Protection relays can also be used to provide additional protection by detecting the fault contributors (overheating, overvoltage, etc.) not possible with fuses and circuit breakers.

Stage 3: At this point, the problem has occurred and caused damage. Different types of protection relays and monitors can reduce or eliminate damage because they detect problems in advance of traditional devices. As an example, if a facility is continually resetting circuit breakers, replacing fuses, or repairing equipment and cannot locate the problem, they may be experiencing overcurrents. If this is the case, the user can install a protection relay that has an overcurrent feature. The relay measures the current (input) and allows the user to program limits (settings). The settings typically are more sensitive than the fuses or circuit breakers.

Once these limits are exceeded, the relay will operate an internal switch (relay contacts). The user has the option to use the switch to turn on a light (alarm indication) or remove power (trip) before greater problems occur. The user can use the alarm indication to help identify the faulty equipment prior to the traditional fuse or circuit breaker clearing the fault.

II. RELAY APPLICATION

Ground-Fault Protection

The primary purpose of grounding electrical systems is to provide protection against electrical faults. However, this was not common practice until the 1970's. Until then, most commercial and industrial systems were ungrounded. Although ungrounded systems do not cause significant damage during the first ground fault, the numerous disadvantages associated with ground faults resulted in a change to the grounding philosophy. There are other advantages for a grounded system, such as reduction of shock hazards and protection against lightning.

Electrical faults can be divided into two categories: phase-to-phase faults and ground faults. Studies have shown that 98% of all electrical faults are ground faults (Source: Woodham, Jack, P.E. " *The Basics of Grounding Systems*" May 1, 2003 <http://www.ecmweb.com/mag/electric_basics_grounding_systems_2/index.html>).

While fuses can protect against phase-to-phase faults, additional protection, such as protection relays, are typically required to protect against ground faults.

Definition of Ground Fault

A ground fault is an inadvertent contact between an energized conductor and ground or the equipment frame. The return path of the fault current is through the grounding system and any equipment or personnel that becomes part of that system. Ground faults are frequently the result of insulation breakdown. It's important to note that damp, wet, and dusty environments require extra diligence in design and maintenance. Since contaminated water is conductive, it exposes degradation of insulation and increases the potential for hazards to develop.

Table 1 shows the leading initiators of electrical faults.

LEADING INITIATORS OF FAULTS	% OF ALL FAULTS
Exposure to moisture	22.5%
Shorting by tools, rodents, etc.	18.0%
Exposure to dust	14.5%
Other mechanical damage	12.1%
Exposure to chemicals	9.0%
Normal deterioration from age	7.0%

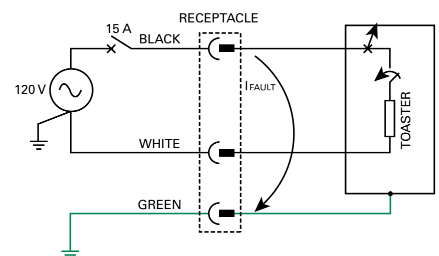

FIGURE 2

As an example, in the toaster circuit **Figure 2**, the black or hot wire is shorted to the metal casing of the toaster. When the circuit closes, all or part of the current is channeled through the toaster frame and then through the green ground wire. When sufficient current flows (typically 6 x 15 A = 90 A), the circuit breaker will open. A protection relay could be installed to detect currents as low as 10 mA, which would open the circuit breaker at a significantly lower level, hence, much quicker than the traditional circuit breaker.

Although the example above shows a solidly grounded single-phase circuit, the philosophy is the same on three-phase circuits discussed later. Relays and monitors are specifically designed to look for the leading initiators shown in *Table 1* by detecting low-level changes in current, voltage, resistance or temperature.

DC Systems

Direct current (DC) systems have positive and negative buses. If either bus is intentionally grounded, then it is referred to as a grounded system. If neither bus is grounded, then it is referred to as an ungrounded DC system. A ground fault on a DC system may cause damage to the source as well as in the field.

If the system is ungrounded, then it is possible to use a ground-fault relay by installing a ground-reference module between the two buses to establish a neutral point (see *Figure 3*). The ground-fault relay uses this neutral point as a reference to detect low-level ground faults.

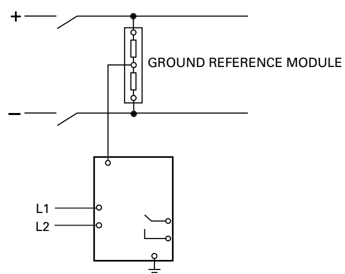

FIGURE 3

Ungrounded AC Systems

Ungrounded AC systems, as shown in **Figure 4**, were used where continuity of power was critical. For example, chemical plants or refineries involving processes that cannot be interrupted without extensive dollar or product loss may have an ungrounded system. However, experience has proven that these systems are problematic and are being replaced with resistance grounded systems. Two major problems with ungrounded systems are transient overvoltages and difficulty locating ground faults.

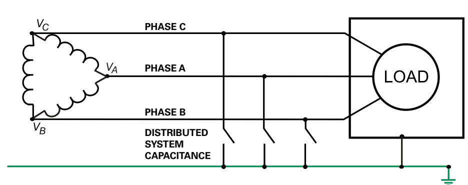

FIGURE 4

- An ungrounded system has no point in the system that is intentionally grounded (other than the normal bonding which is always present to connect the non-current-carrying metal parts to ground). Grounding occurs only through system capacitance to ground (as shown in **Figure 4**).
- Continuity of operation occurs because the system can operate with one phase faulted to ground.
- An intermittent or arcing fault can produce high transient overvoltages to ground. These voltages are impressed on the phase conductors throughout the system until the insulation at the weakest point breaks down. This breakdown can occur at any point in the electrical system, causing a phase-to-ground-to-phase fault.
- Although a ground fault can be detected or alarmed on the system, it is difficult to determine the location of the fault.

There are two methods used to detect ground faults on ungrounded systems. One method is to monitor the voltages between the phases and ground. As a ground fault develops, the faulted phase will collapse to ground potential, causing an indicator light to dim. The indicator lights on the unfaulted phases become brighter.

A second method to detect a ground fault is to measure the insulation resistance. As the insulation deteriorates, a relay continuously monitoring the insulation resistance can alarm at different levels for predictive maintenance. A visual indicator or meter can also be used.

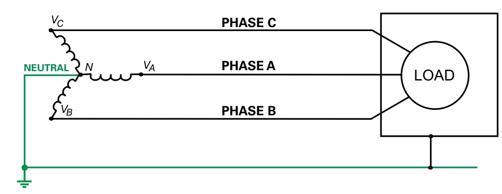

FIGURE 5

Solidly Grounded Systems

Due to the problem of ungrounded systems, a shift in philosophy occurred and designs moved from ungrounded to grounded systems. In most cases, the type of grounding system chosen was solidly grounded. A solidly grounded system is a system of conductors in which at least one conductor or point is intentionally grounded (usually the neutral point of transformer or generator windings) see **Figure 5**. The problem with the direct connection is that ground-fault current can be excessive, causing Arc-Flash hazards, extensive equipment damage, and possible injury to personnel. A solidly grounded system cannot continue to operate with a ground fault.

- In a solidly grounded system, the wye point (or neutral) of the power source is connected solidly to ground and offers a very stable system that maintains a fixed phase-to-ground voltage.
- The high ground-fault current is easy to detect with fuses, circuit breakers, or protection relays, allowing for selective tripping (tripping the faulted feeder and not the main feeder).
- When a ground fault occurs, high point-of-fault damage can quickly result since the energy available to the ground fault is only limited by the system impedance (which is typically very low).
- Due to excessive ground-fault current and arc-flash hazards, the faulted feeder must be removed from service. This does not allow for continuous operation during a ground fault.

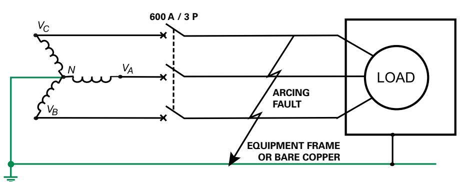

FIGURE 6

Figure 6 illustrates an example of the dangers associated with solidly grounded systems. In this example, a ground fault occurs and the overcurrent protection is set at 600 A.

Assume that this ground-fault is not a bolted fault, but an arcing fault due to an insulation breakdown or a partial reduction of clearances between the line and ground.

- Because of the arc resistance, fault current may be as low as 38% of the bolted fault level. This can be in the range of a normal load or a slight overload.
- The fault current may be low enough that the overcurrent device (600-A circuit breaker) does not sense a fault, or may pick it up but not trip for a long time.
- The energy being supplied by the source is concentrated at the arc and could cause severe equipment damage very quickly. This energy release could cause a fire that in turn, could damage the premises and present an extreme hazard to personnel.

Aside from converting this solidly grounded system to resistance grounding, the best way to prevent damage is to detect low-level ground leakage prior to it becoming a ground fault. In order to accomplish this, the protection relay must be able to sense a low-level ground leakage without nuisance tripping. In modern facilities, equipment often generates noise or harmonics that can interfere with a protection relay's ability to function properly. For example, the noise or harmonics may be higher than the desired ground-fault relay settings, causing the relay to falsely operate when there is no fault on the system. The protection relay must be able to filter out noise or harmonics to provide reliable protection.

Resistance-Grounded Systems

Resistance grounding solves the problems commonly associated with both ungrounded systems and solidly grounded systems. The name is derived from the addition of a resistor between the system neutral and ground (as shown in **Figure 7**). The specifications of the resistor are user determined to achieve a desired ground-fault current, which must be greater than the system capacitive charging current (explained later in this section).

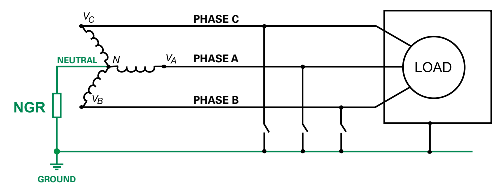

FIGURE 7

- Transient overvoltages can be eliminated by correctly sizing the neutral-grounding resistor (NGR) to provide an adequate discharge path for the system capacitance.
- Continuity of operation with one ground fault is typically allowable when ground-fault current is ≤10 A.
- The NGR limits the available ground-fault current. This eliminates or minimizes point-of-fault damage (Arc-Flash Hazards) and controls the ground-fault voltage.
- Pulsing current can be used to locate ground faults when ground-fault current is ≤10 A. Pulsing current is created by using a shorting contactor to short out half of the resistance, causing the ground-fault current to double (usually one cycle per second). A hand-held zero-sequence meter is used to detect the fluctuating ground-fault current, and locate the ground fault.
- The only disadvantage of resistance grounding is that if the resistor fails, the system will become ungrounded. Resistor monitoring is recommended to protect against this.

A protection relay for resistance-grounded systems is used to detect a ground fault and to monitor the neutral-to-ground connection. It can be used to provide alarms or to trip the feeder from service upon the detection of a ground fault. The relay can provide a pulsing circuit that can be used to locate the ground fault. The relay can also alarm or trip if the neutral-to-ground path fails.

For systems 5 kV and less, high-resistance grounding can be used. High-resistance grounding typically limits the resistor current to 10 A or less. By doing so, the ground fault can remain on the system, given that the system is rated for the voltage shift.

For systems above 5 kV, neutral-grounding resistors are typically rated for 25 A or more, and ground-fault current is cleared within 10 s.

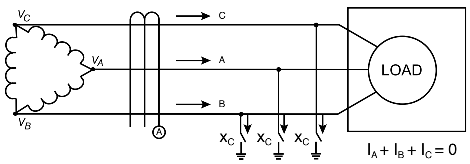

FIGURE 8

System Capacitive Charging Current

Although not physically connected to ground, electrical conductors and the windings of all components are capacitively connected to ground. Consequently, a small current will flow to ground from each phase. This current does not occur at any particular location; rather, it is distributed throughout the system just as the capacitance to ground is distributed throughout the system. For analysis, it is convenient to consider the distributed capacitance as lumped capacitance, as shown in **Figure 5, 6, 7**, **and 8**.

Even if the distributed capacitance is not balanced, the ammeter will read zero because all the current flowing through the CT window must return through the CT window.

System charging current is the current that will flow into the grounding connection when one phase of an ungrounded system is faulted to ground (See **Figure 9**). It can be measured as shown below if appropriate precautions are taken:

- If the fault occurs on the supply side of the CT, the sum of the currents in the CT window is not zero.
- Ammeter A will read the sum of the capacitive currents in the unfaulted phases. This value is the charging current of all the equipment on the load side of the CT.

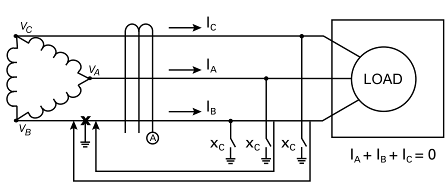

FIGURE 9

- A single-line diagram of a three-feeder, resistance grounded system with a fault on feeder 3 is shown in **Figure 10**.
- A CT (A1 and A2) on unfaulted feeders will detect the charging current of that feeder.
- A CT (A3) on a faulted feeder will detect the sum of the resistor current ($_{IR}$) and the charging currents ($I_1 + I_2$) of the unfaulted feeders.

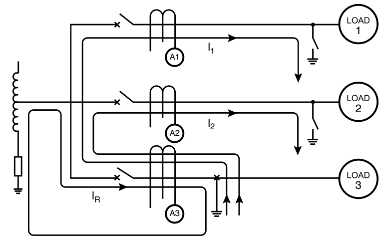

FIGURE 10

Selective coordination in a resistance-grounded system can be achieved if the pick-up setting of each ground-fault relay is greater than the charging current of the feeder it is protecting. If the pick-up setting of a ground-fault relay is less than the charging current of the feeder it is protecting, it will trip when a ground fault occurs elsewhere in the system. This is known as sympathetic tripping. Sympathetic tripping can be avoided by choosing a relay pickup setting larger than the charging current from the largest feeder. If the relative size of the feeders can change, or if the advantage of using one operating value for all ground-fault relays in a system is recognized, then it is prudent to select a pick-up setting for all ground-fault relays that is larger than the system charging current.

In order to eliminate transient overvoltages associated with an ungrounded system, it is necessary to use a grounding resistor with a let-through current equal to or larger than the system charging current.

What is the minimum acceptable NGR current? Select a pickup setting for the ground-fault relays that exceeds the largest feeder charging current and multiply the operating value by an acceptable tripping ratio. Use the greater of this value or system charging current and select the next-largest available standard let-through current rating.

Resistor Monitors

As discussed in the resistance-grounded systems section, a failure in the neutral-to-ground path will lead to a dangerous situation. Some examples of failure are stolen wires, loose connections, corrosion, and broken resistor elements.

The resistor monitor continuously monitors the path from system neutral to ground for a problem. When a problem occurs, the monitor provides an alarm.

Ground-Continuity Monitors

Ground-check monitors are used to detect problems in equipment ground conductors. The cable powering mobile equipment typically has an extra wire, or pilot wire, routed with the phase conductors. A monitor uses this pilot wire to send a signal to a terminating device in the equipment, where the signal is sent back on the cable ground conductor to the monitor. The monitor continuously monitors this loop for open or short circuits, indicating that a problem has occurred. The monitor provides an alarm for this condition.

As an example, portable loads are grounded via single or multiple conductors in a trailing cable. A ground fault on a portable load will cause fault current to flow through the ground conductors and all other ground-return paths. A hazardous touch voltage can develop when the ground conductor opens and a ground fault develops, assuming there is not enough current to trip a ground-fault relay. If the portable equipment has rubber tires or is not in good contact with earth, then a person who touches the equipment under fault conditions will become part of the ground-return path.

Motor Protection

Overview

Motors are a significant investment and often run critical processes. Motor protection relays are used to protect the windings from damage due to electrical faults and thermal overloads. Adequate motor protection not only prevents motor damage, but also ensures optimal process efficiency and minimal interruption. Cost recovery for protection is achieved by extending the life of the motor, preventing motor rewinds and reducing downtime.

Common Motor Problems

Overload and Overtemperature

Insulation breakdown is a common reason for motor failure. Windings in the motor are insulated with organic materials including epoxy and paper. Insulation degradation occurs when winding temperature exceeds its rating. The National Electrical Manufacturers Association (NEMA) states that the time-to-failure of organic insulation is halved for each 8 to 10°C rise above the motor insulation-class rating. This point is illustrated in **Figure 11**.

Solution: An I^2t Thermal Model provides thermal-overload protection of motor windings during all phases of operation. By integrating the square of the current over time, a thermal model can predict motor temperature and react much quicker than embedded temperature devices. A thermal model takes into consideration the motor service factor, full-load current and class. A dynamic thermal model adjusts the time-to-trip depending on how much motor thermal capacity has been used. **Figure 12** illustrates the adjustment in trip time for different current levels at different levels of used thermal capacity (I^2t).

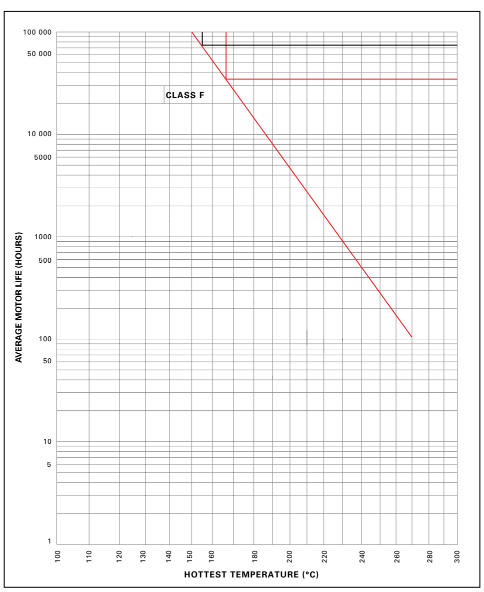

FIGURE 11

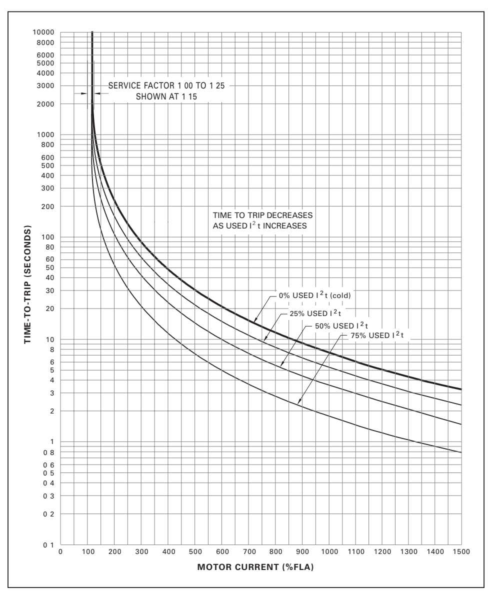

FIGURE 12

A dynamic thermal model allows accurate protection of a motor and allows operations to get the maximum work out of a motor without sacrificing available life. If the motor is hot (high % used thermal capacity) it will trip more rapidly during an overload than if the motor is cold (0% used thermal capacity). In the event of a stall condition, when available motor torque is lower than the torque required by the load, the motor can be de-energized before it overheats.

Many old-technology electronic thermal overloads do not take into consideration the values of load current below the full-load current (FLA) pick-up value. Modern overload relays should model currents above and below the FLA pick-up current to achieve maximum output of the motor and maximum life of insulation.

On larger induction motors, blockage or loss of ventilation can cause motor hot spots that current-based protection cannot detect without the use of temperature sensors. Resistance temperature detectors (RTDs) are inexpensive devices installed between the stator windings during manufacturing and may be included on motor-end bearings.

An RTD has a linear change in resistance over its rated temperature range. Using information from an RTD, motorprotection relays can provide protection for loss-of-ventilation, loss-of-cooling, or high-ambient-temperature.

The RTD temperature reading can also be used as an input to the thermal model to improve protection. When hot-motor compensation is enabled, the maximum stator-RTD temperature is used to bias the thermal model by increasing used I^2t when the RTD temperature is greater than the thermal-model temperature.

Overcurrent, Jam and Undercurrent

Overcurrent faults, also referred to as short circuits, can cause catastrophic motor failures and fires. Overcurrents can be caused by phase-to-phase, phase-to-ground, and phase-toground-to-phase faults.

A mechanical jam, such as a failed bearing or load, can cause stalling and locked-rotor current to be drawn by the motor, resulting in overheating.

Undercurrent protection is loss-of-load protection and is required by some codes as a safety measure. A water pump that cavitates can be dangerous. The water typically provides pump cooling. Without the cooling water, case temperature can reach an extremely high value. If valves are opened under these conditions and cold water is allowed to reach red-hot metal parts, the resulting steam pressures can destroy the pump and pose a serious personnel hazard.

Solution: A multifunction motor protection relay has multiple trip and alarm settings for current protection. Overcurrent protection is typically set above locked rotor current and has a minimal delay time. Overcurrent protection may be used to trip a breaker instead of a starter due to the high fault levels. Jam protection is set below overcurrent and has a slightly longer delay time. Jam protection prevents motor heating that would otherwise lead to an overload trip. Jam protection is enabled after the motor is running to avoid tripping on starting current. Undercurrent is set below full-load current to detect loss of load.

Under and Overvoltage

Overvoltages cause insulation stress and premature breakdown. Undervoltages, such as those caused by brownouts, can lead to increased motor heating. Torque developed by an electric motor changes as the square of the applied voltage. A 10% reduction in voltage results in a 19% reduction in torque. If the motor load is not reduced, the motor will be overloaded.

Solution: Under and overvoltage protection are features found in higher-end motor protection relays. Voltage protection can be used proactively to inhibit a start.

Ground Faults

Ground faults are the most common fault and can lead to more serious problems. Ground-fault protection, described elsewhere in this text, is an important consideration in motor loads.

Solution: The motor protection relay should be able to detect low-level ground-fault current when used on a resistance-grounded system.

High-Resistance Winding Faults

Winding-to-winding and winding-to-ground failures inside the motor are difficult to detect using the phase and ground-fault CTs due to low magnitudes of current.

Solution: Differential protection in high-end motor protection relays use multiple CTs to compare the current entering and leaving the winding. If there is a difference in currents then leakage is occurring. This sensitive protection is used on very large or critical motors.

Current and Voltage Imbalance, Phase Loss, Phase Reverse

Older motor protection devices did not consider current imbalance and today it is often overlooked. Imbalance increases negative-sequence current which causes additional rotor heating.

Phase loss is also referred to as single phasing. When a phase loss occurs, negative-sequence current is equal to the positive-sequence current and imbalance is 100%. In this condition, one motor winding attempts to do the work of three, inevitably leading to overheating.

Phase reversal causes the negative-sequence current and voltage to be greater than the positive-sequence current and voltage. Voltage-based protection is advantageous to prevent a start with incorrect sequence. In some applications attempting to spin the motor backwards will result in damage to the load. An example of this is certain impeller designs in downhole pumps.

Solution: Modern motor protection relays use digital signal analysis to measure true-sequence components. These sequence components are used for thermal model calculations and take the extra heating into consideration. Voltage imbalance which drives current imbalance can be used as a start inhibit. Sequence components are also used for calculating imbalance, phase loss and phase reversal.

Motor Jogging

NEMA-designed motors are rated for two starts from cold and one start from hot per hour. Motor jogging refers to excessive starts and can cause overheating. The motor may not get up to full speed and the forced air cooling is not effective.

Solution: Since the thermal model accurately tracks the motor's used thermal capacity at all times, including during starts and between starts, the starts-per-hour feature may not be required.

It is included for compatibility with protection relays that do not have dynamic thermal-modeling capability.

Motor Protection and the NEC®

The NEC® requires the motor to be protected by overload devices against excessive heating due to overload and failure to start (Article 430 Section III). Article 430, Section IV also specifies the use of devices to protect against overcurrents such as short circuits and grounds. Both of these NEC® requirements and many additional functions can be met with the use of a multifunction motor protection relay.

Article 430.32 (A)(4) requires the use of a protection device having embedded temperature detectors that cause current to the motor to be interrupted when the motor attains a temperature rise greater than marked on the nameplate in an ambient temperature of 40°C for motors larger than 1500 hp.

The NEC defines minimum requirements and is intended to provide protection from fire. Protection relays can provide many enhancements above simple fire protection.

Communications

Network communications can be added to a motor protection relay to allow remote metering of currents, voltages and temperatures. Data logging is a useful feature for troubleshooting and comparing event sequences with process stages. Analysis of information can often show operational issues.

Arc-Flash Protection

The Consequences of Arc Flash

Arcing and arc flashes are uncontrolled, intense, luminous discharges of electrical energy that occur when electric current flows across what is normally an insulating medium. The most common cause of arc faults is insulation failure. These failures may be caused by defective or aging insulation material, poor or incorrect maintenance, dust, moisture, vermin, and human error (touching a test probe to the wrong surface or a tool slipping and touching live conductors).

Arc-Flash events are dangerous, and potentially fatal, to personnel. According to OSHA, industrial Arc-Flash events cause about 80% of electrically-related accidents and fatalities among qualified electrical workers. Even if personnel injuries are avoided, Arc Flash can destroy equipment, resulting in costly replacement and downtime.

Arc-Flash Safety Standards

NFPA 70E, Handbook for Electrical Safety in the Workplace, outlines the practices and standards that companies should follow to protect workers and equipment from Arc Flash and other electrical hazards. It specifies practices designed to make sure that an electrically safe work condition exists.

In Canada, CSA Z462, Workplace electrical safety, specifies safe workplace practices. There are also various provincial regulations pertaining to electrical safety.

The NFPA 70E and the CSA Z462 hold both employers and their employees responsible for creating a workplace for electrical workers that is not just safe but puts in place the best possible processes and procedures that are fully understood, practiced and enforced for optimal results.

Using Arc-Flash relays is one way to protect the functional reliability of the distribution board and at the same time comply with the requirements of NFPA 70E and CSA Z462.

Arc-Flash Mitigation

NFPA 70E goes into great detail on procedures to avoid electrical shock and Arc-Flash events. Sometimes, though, it's necessary to work on live circuits. For these cases, NPFA 70E specifies approach distances and use of personal protection equipment (PPE).

Current limiting fuses or current-limiting circuit breakers help protect against arc flashes. They allow only a certain amount of energy to pass before they open a circuit. Because an Arc Flash can draw a fraction of bolted-fault current, circuit breakers cannot be relied upon to distinguish between the arcing current and a typical inrush current.

High-resistance grounding (HRG) is another technique for protecting against arc flashes. If a phase faults to ground, then the resistance limits current to just a few amps; not enough to cause downtime by tripping the overcurrent protection device, and not enough to allow an Arc Flash. It is important to remember that while resistance grounding prevents Arc Flash from phase-to-ground shorts, it has no effect on phase-to-phase shorts.

Another way to mitigate the dangers of arc flashing is by redesigning the switchgear. Switchgear cabinets can be designed to contain and channel energy away from personnel during an Arc Flash.

Arc-Flash relays

Arc-Flash relays are microprocessor-based devices that use optical sensors to detect the onset of a flash. The sensors are strategically placed in various cubicles or drawers inside the switchboard.

Installing an Arc-Flash relay to rapidly detect a developing arc flash greatly reduces the total clearing time and the amount of energy released through an arcing fault. In turn, there is less damage to equipment and fewer and less severe injuries to nearby personnel.

In 2014 the NEC revised paragraph 240.87 and made arc flash mitigation compliance simpler and less expensive. The updated code allows for two new methods:

- An energy-reducing active arc flash mitigation system
- An approved equivalent means

An arc flash relay fulfills the mitigation requirement. Using light sensors, it directly detects the light emitted as an arc flash begins and in less than 1 ms, sends a trip signal to the breaker feeding the affected panel or enclosure. This stops the arc and minimizes the danger by helping reduce the amount of energy released.

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Littelfuse products and services enhance the safety and productivity of electrical systems. Along with protection relays, generator controls and alarm monitors, we offer current-limiting fuses to decrease Arc-Flash exposure, and fuse holders and fuse covers to reduce incidental contact and improve safety. Additional technical information and application data for Littelfuse protection relays, generator and engine controls, fuses and other circuit protection and safety products can be found on www.littelfuse.com. For questions, contact our Technical Support Group (800-832-3873).

Specifications, descriptions and illustrative material in this literature are as accurate as known at the time of publication, but are subject to changes without notice. All data was compiled from public information available from manufacturers' manuals and data sheets.

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