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Our TechFlash focus this month offers suggestions on newer software tools that let builders rely on off-the-shelf software to do their HMI customization. Contributing Editor Loren Shaum reports.

By Loren Shaum, Contributing Editor

For all its basic elements, what really makes a machine tick is the programming of the intelligent elements. For larger, more-flexible machines, there can be many software packages to play. A vision-code software scenario for machine builders is a HMI package from one supplier, a soft PLC package from a second, a motion package and/or a vision package from yet another--each based on its own unique code. Machine builders too often are stuck with customizing drivers to make machine elements talk to each other.

It can help if certain HMI, logic, and motion functions are consistent from machine to machine, with some of the previously developed functions portable to new machines.

"We use PC-based technology, so we buy a Visual Basic and OPC server license for each application," says Dave Cleveland, president, Timberline Automation, Littleton, Colo. "We develop the HMI in VB, and use the OPC server to talk to the specified PLC." Timberline, a machine control and vision integrator, transports very little code from one application to another, but has developed functional kernels to build onto each application. "Most of our HMI screens have a similar look and feel, but are

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and use the OPC server to talk to the specified PLC." Timberline, a machine control and vision integrator, transports very little code from one application to another, but has developed functional kernels to build onto each application. "Most of our HMI screens have a similar look and feel, but are different for each application, particularly vision projects," Cleveland says. "We must provide operator access to image adjustments without allowing them into the main program. This requires a VB interface from our vision supplier, Cognex, to implement, and it's unique for each installation. However, we have to become more efficient, so we're looking for standard, modular software packages that connect to anything."

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Timberline is considering products from Hursco Automation Ltd. (HAL), a global supplier of PC-based machine controls. HAL provides machine controllers that include HMI, IEC-compliant soft PLC and SCADA software, plus drivers for multiple fieldbus networks and various Ethernet platforms, says Jacob Pien, HAL's president.

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