

OPC DataHub Offers Advanced Tunnelling of Process Data

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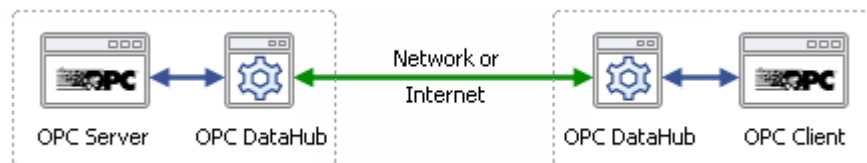
In today's process control environment, OPC is becoming the protocol of choice. There are many OPC Servers offered by companies specializing in connectivity and PLC, DCS, and equipment manufacturers often offer an OPC server interface as part of their product suite. This allows software vendors to create 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 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. Using OPC over DCOM also requires more network traffic than some networks can handle because of bandwidth limitations or due to the high traffic already on the system. To overcome these limitations, Software Toolbox and Cogent offer 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. Part of the problem is it is very hard to find any documentation on DCOM. Software Toolbox has DCOM tutorials based on years of experience to help, but it can still be a challenge when Windows Updates reset DCOM or add new setting that break a working system. 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. Keeping your production network on a closed system has historically been one way of protecting it, but with the demands to share data across systems this is becoming less practical. Firewalls are used to protect network to network data, but DCOM configuration in these situations is even more difficult to get working.

Tunnelling with the OPC DataHub eliminates DCOM usage between PCs 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 major problems associated with using the DCOM protocol.



Tunnelling data using the OPC DataHub

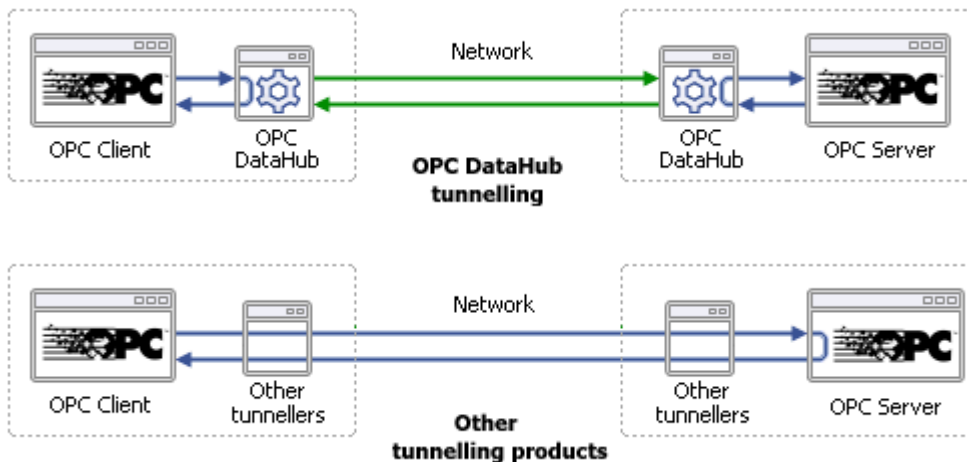
The OPC DataHub offers this tunnelling feature by effectively 'mirroring' data from one OPC DataHub running on the OPC server computer, to another OPC DataHub running on the OPC client computer as shown in the image above. This method results in very fast data transfer between OPC DataHub nodes.

Better Network Communication

When a DCOM connection is broken, there are very long timeout delays before either side is notified of the problem, due to DCOM having hard coded timeout periods which can't be adjusted by the user. In a production system, these long delays without warning can be a very real problem. Some OPC Clients and OPC Client tools have internal timeouts to overcome this one problem but this approach does not deal with the other issues discussed in this paper.

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. Systems with slow polling rates over long distance lines can benefit from the user-configurable timeout also because DCOM timeouts might have been too short for these systems.

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 a 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.

OPC DataHub	Other tunnelling products
<p>The OPC DataHub keeps all OPC transactions local to the computer, thus fully protecting the client programs from any network irregularities.</p>	<p>Other products expose OPC transactions to network irregularities, making client programs subject to timeouts, delays, and blocking behavior. Link monitoring can reduce these effects, while the OPC DataHub eliminates them.</p>
<p>The OPC DataHub mirrors data across the network, so that both sides maintain a complete set of all the data. This shields the clients from network breaks as it lets them continue to work with the last known values from the server. When the connection is re-established, both sides synchronize the data set.</p>	<p>Other products pass data across the network on a point by point basis and maintain no knowledge of the current state of the points in the system. A network break leaves the client applications stuck with no data to work with.</p>

<p>A single tunnel can be shared by multiple client applications. This significantly reduces network bandwidth and means the customer can reduce licensing costs as all clients (or servers) on the same computer share a single tunnel connection.</p>	<p>Other tunnelling products require a separate network connection for each client-server connection. This increases the load on the system, the load on the network and increases licensing costs.</p>
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These features make it much easier for client applications to behave in a robust manner when communications are lost, saving time and reducing frustration. Without these features, client applications can become slow to respond or completely unresponsive during connection losses or when trying to make synchronous calls.

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. It is a significant advantage having these features built into the OPC DataHub. Other methods of data encryption can require complicated operating system configuration and the use of more expensive server PCs, which are not required for use with the OPC DataHub.

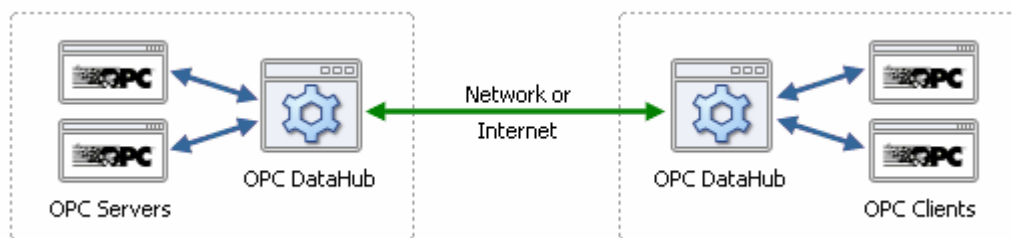
Advanced OPC Tunnelling

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.

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

Non-Blocking

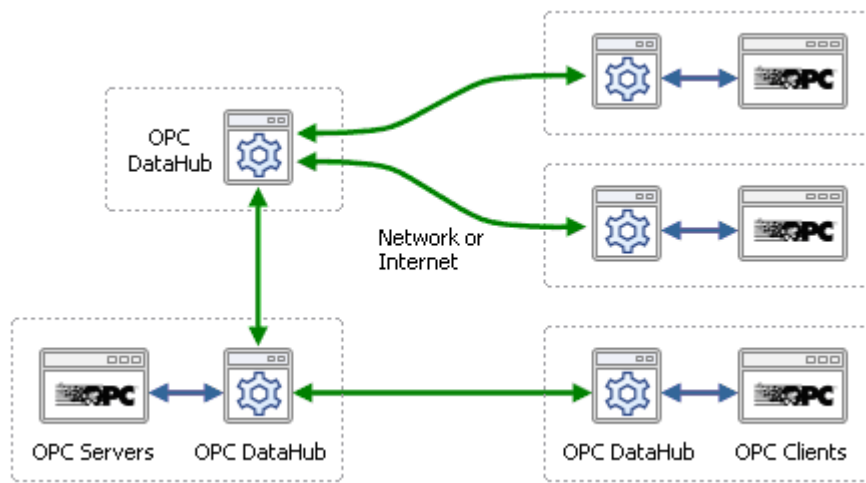
While it may seem simple enough to replace DCOM with TCP/IP for networking OPC data, the OPC DataHub also replaces the inherent blocking behaviour experienced in DCOM communication. Client programs connecting to the OPC DataHub are never blocked from sending new information. Some vendors of OPC tunnelling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

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.



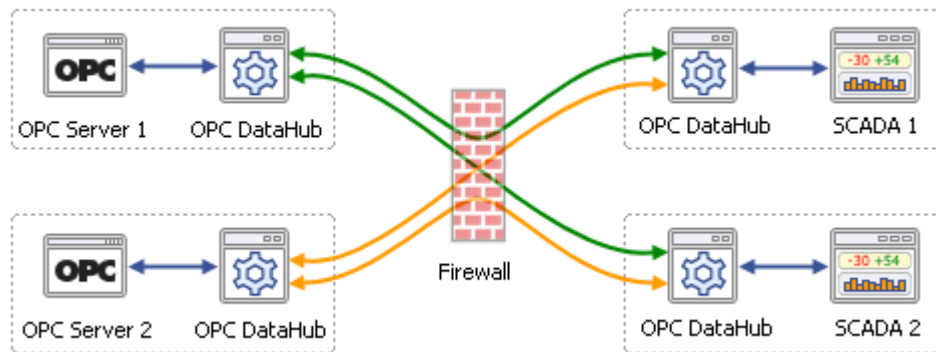
Connecting OPC to Linux using the OPC DataHub

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 (available from Software Toolbox at: <http://www.softwaretoolbox.com/opcdatabus>). 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 Software Toolbox

Since 1996, Software Toolbox has served over 7,000 clients in 70+ countries around the world in the automation industry with drivers, components, development tools, and HMI/SCADA add-ins/enhancements. Software Toolbox is an OPC Foundation member and presents as part of the OPC Road Show. Customers include many Fortune 500 companies as well as small plants and facility users.

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.