

# The Hidden Costs of Incompatibility

## Overlooking this irrigation system detail could cost your business hundreds of thousands of dollars.

BY DAVID BEHRMANN

**ON THE SHELVES OF THE MAINTENANCE BUILDING OF A WELL KNOWN GOLF COURSE, "GOLF COURSE Y," SITS THE THREE GENERATIONS OF SPARE PARTS NECESSARY TO SUPPORT THE THREE GENERATIONS OF GOLF ROTORS INSTALLED ACROSS THE COURSE'S 18 HOLES.**

In front of the shelves stands one of the longest tenured golf course superintendents in the country. We'll call him Pete, otherwise referred to affectionately by his staff as "Pedia," short for encyclopedia - a nickname earned for his knowledge of seemingly everything even remotely related to the game of golf in general, and golf course irrigation systems in particular.

As Pete methodically shorts through the hundreds of parts on the shelves before him, he's on the radio with one of his irrigation techs over on the fairway of the course's 6th hole. Pete sent his tech there earlier that morning after being visited by an angry club member who was suffering from a bad case of grass-stained knickers and a bruised ego.

From what Pete could decipher through the member's angry tirade, the member's bruised ego was more the result of tripping over and breaking an unretracted irrigation rotor than it was the result of the abuse his friends had been giving him for wearing knickers that day. But that's another story entirely.

Right now, with temperatures forecast to be over 100 degrees, and practice rounds for a high-profile tournament starting tomorrow, Pete is anxious to get that broken rotor operational as quickly as possible, and make sure there aren't any more "rotor traps" waiting to test the patience of the tournament players, not to mention the coverage limits of the course's liability insurance, in the coming week.

The solution to Pete's problem is not as simple as it may seem to an outsider, however - at least not the solution to the course's longer-term problem. As Pete tells it, years ago the owners of *Golf Course Y* chose their irrigation system primarily on the basis of a bundling offer made to them by a reputable supplier

of mowing equipment. They were given discounted pricing on their mowing and maintenance vehicles if they also purchased their irrigation system from the same company.

The problem, as Pete and the owners learned over the years, was that reputation and expertise in manufacturing *individual* mowers doesn't necessarily translate to expertise in designing and manufacturing irrigation *systems* - especially when that effort is a side line rather than a primary business.

While mowers and other turf maintenance equipment stand on their own, the components of irrigation systems must work together within a system, and not just on the day they are purchased. They need to work together for the entire life of the system, which can range from 12 to 30 or more years for the best of them.

Another word for "working together" is "compatibility." In *Golf Course Y's* case, it was the incompatibility of their older irrigation system components with the newer generation of components developed by its manufacturer that had cost the course tens of thousands of additional dollars over the years - in addition to a growing number of particularly frustrating opportunity costs.

Here, the word "incompatibility" means the inability of one generation of system components to seamlessly and cost-effectively integrate with other generations.

What appeared to be a good deal to the course owners at the time, had come back to haunt Pete and the budgets of *Golf Course Y* countless times over the years in the form of higher costs for carrying larger spares inventories, delayed repairs, higher labor costs, costly technology upgrades, and more.

In our example, rather than only needing to keep one set of spares on hand that was compatible with all 1,860 rotors on the course, Pete's spares inventory costs were nearly triple what they would have been otherwise. That extra inventory also took up space he could have been using more productively otherwise. And managing it on a daily basis consumed

time he and his team could have also put to better use in a variety of ways over the years.

And, last week it got even worse. Pete received notice from the manufacturer that he would no longer be able to acquire spare parts for their oldest generation of rotors. Pete will soon need to approach the board for the additional funds required to purchase entire rotors when one of that vintage failed.

If the manufacturer of Pete's rotors maintained compatibility from generation to generation, having an older generation of rotor be discontinued wouldn't have the same impact on Pete's budget. At somewhere around \$200 at list price for a new rotor, versus a few dollars to a few dozen dollars for a spare part, plus the additional time and labor to dig up the old rotors and install the new one, this small detail related to this manufacturer's incompatibility from one generation of rotors to the next was about to start adding up on a whole new dimension.

Of additional and particular frustration to Pete has been watching his peers from neighboring golf courses be able to purchase each new generation of rotor from an alternative manufacturer and immediately begin integrating it and its new technologies into all or parts of their system.

Two months ago the manufacturer of his buddy's irrigation system announced a new rotor that proved in testing to be dramatically more durable and efficient with water usage than the next closest competitor on the market. Although Pete's friend from a neighboring golf course had a 15-year old system, he was able to:

- purchase spare parts from that new generation of rotor that were completely compatible with his existing rotors
- upgrade his old rotors at a fraction of the cost of a new rotor
- cut his water consumption to help comply with new regulatory requirements,
- and improve the playability of his course, all at the same time.

The manufacturer of the irrigation system components used on Pete's course has released a number of new rotors over the years, but it has done so at times and in ways that require Pete to purchase a complete rotor or a substantial conversion kit to acquire and employ the latest technologies. This approach slows Pete's ability to deploy new technologies and increases *Golf Course Y's* technology acquisition costs.

With over 30,000 golf courses in the world, this composite story is repeated over and over at some level almost every day – but it doesn't need to be that way. Golf course owners, managers, and superintendents stand to save tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars over the life of their irrigation system by ensuring

they acquire an irrigation system from a manufacturer with a demonstrated commitment to system compatibility.

As Pete searches through his extensive inventory for the specific part necessary to repair the particular generation of rotor damaged by the irate member, he imparts some sage advice to his tech about why an irrigation system should always be purchased from a company focused exclusively on irrigation – that being the version “Edited for General Audiences,” anyway. **BR**

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Next time you're in the market for an irrigation system, here are five questions to ask that help uncover the hidden costs of an irrigation systems incompatibility before they become yours.

- 1) Do you have any references we can speak to who have experience using your irrigation system for longer than 10 years?
- 2) When you've introduced new irrigation products to market over the last 10-15 years, how compatible have they been with your previous generations?
- 3) If I had purchased an irrigation system for 18 holes from you 15 years ago, and had added an additional nine holes in say year 10 and another nine in year 12, how many generations of spare parts would I need to have on my shelf today for repairs?
- 4) If I had purchased an irrigation system from you 10 years ago, and wanted to upgrade it to your latest technology today, walk me through the details of what I'd need to do and what it would cost me.
- 5) Is the internal of your newest rotor drop-in compatible with the rotors you were selling 15 years ago, or would we need to buy an entirely new rotor or a conversion kit to upgrade mine to the latest capability?