

Using VFDs On GFCI Devices

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The National Electrical Code, or NEC, continues to expand protection requirements for safety reasons resulting in an increase in Ground-Fault Circuit-Interrupter (GFCI) outlets being used in more environments. As a result, the Variable Frequency Drives (VFDs) industry is finding more instances of VFDs being powered from GFCIs. VFDs introduce high frequency harmonic content which may cause nuisance tripping on some GFCI devices. This paper is intended to assist anyone that needs to use a VFD on a circuit with GFCI protection. KB Electronics has developed special VFDs suitable for use with most GFCIs*.

* Please contact KB Electronics with information regarding your specific GFCI.

What is a VFD?

A VFD (also termed adjustable frequency drive, variable speed drive, AC drive, adjustable speed drive, micro drive, motor control, or inverter drive) is a power conversion device that will accept normal fixed branch circuit voltage of (115V or 230V) and frequency (50 Hz or 60 Hz) and allow the operator to control the speed of an induction motor (AC Motor) by varying the output voltage and frequency. A simplistic version of a typical VFD system is shown in Figure-1.

In addition to operator controllability, the VFD with soft start/stop features offers extended equipment life, increased performance, reduced maintenance, protection from excessive currents and voltages, as well as energy savings.

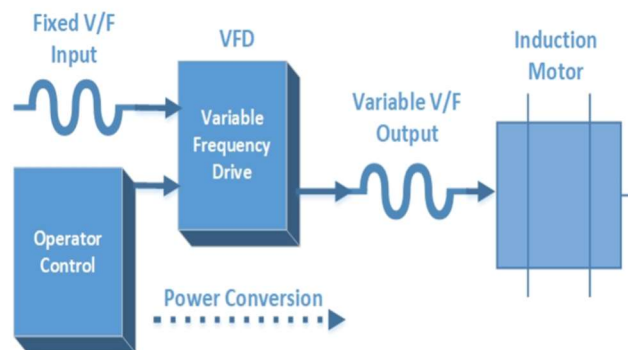


Figure-1: Typical VFD System

What is a GFCI?

A GFCI (shown in Figure-2) is a circuit breaker device which is designed to protect people from hazardous shock or electrocution by shutting off an electric power circuit when it detects current flowing in a way that it is not meant to, such as through water or a person.



Figure-2: Typical GFCI Outlet

The GFCI is intended to protect people from electrical shock, therefore, it is completely different from a fuse in the sense that it needs to shut off the electric power circuit at a low current, typically no more than 5 mA, in a quick amount of time (less than 1/10 of a second).

The GFCI does this by measuring and comparing the amount of current flowing in the ungrounded (hot) and grounded (neutral) conductors of the circuit. If the GFCI detects an imbalance in the circuit, it immediately shuts off the circuit.

Why Nuisance Trips Occur with Standard VFDs

Standard VFDs, when powered from GFCI outlets, can cause the GFCI to trip due to the leakage currents generated from the high switching frequency of the VFD's power devices and the harmonics associated with them. These high frequency leakage currents are not at the base frequency of the drive output which is normally 50 Hz or 60 Hz. These high frequency leakage currents, typically greater than 4 kHz, may cause the GFCI to trip because the GFCI is designed to work with 50 Hz or 60 Hz frequency inputs, not this higher value.

The high switching frequency of the VFD's power devices induce more capacitive-coupled currents, since a capacitor approximates a short circuit at high frequencies. This creates common-mode noise, referred to as leakage current, which travels through ground and can cause the GFCI to trip. The path to ground is made through the motor bearings or auxiliary equipment bearings.

In addition to the high switching frequency of the drive, there can be many other contributing factors which cause the GFCI to trip. Some drives have built-in filters which couple additional leakage current to earth ground. Other drives use external filters and replacing them with a low leakage filter may help.

One way to help determine if the GFCI tripping is occurring from the input filter or the VFD output is to remove either the input filter or the motor and observe if the GFCI still trips. For example, if the input filter is easily removed and doing so

prevents the GFCI from tripping, the source of the leakage currents tripping the GFCI was largely from the input filter.

Another method is to disconnect the motor. If doing so prevents the GFCI from tripping the contributing source of leakage current is most likely from the output stage of the VFD. However, most often than not, the GFCI is tripping from a combination of the two and improvements on both the input and output will help.

Long motor power cables can also create noise spikes. These long leads add more capacitance which increases noise spikes from the fast switching power devices of the VFD. Use a VFD rated cable with the shortest leads possible when connecting the motor power cables. A choke on the VFD's motor outputs may help reduce noise spikes.

In addition, ensure that motor cables are properly shielded, sized, routed, terminated, and grounded at both the motor and drive.

KB's GFCI Solution

KB's engineering team has studied VFDs powered from a variety of GFCI devices. A solution has been created which considers all contributing factors to get a best-case scenario that successfully works with most GFCIs.

KB investigated switching frequencies and developed custom switching frequency algorithms to reduce audible noise and leakage currents. High frequency noise spikes and ringing were reduced by modifying our proprietary power circuits for optimal results. In addition, output chokes, low leakage filters, and shielded cable were introduced, if needed, to find a GFCI solution.

Conclusion

KB has had great success providing VFDs that work with GFCIs for numerous original equipment manufacturers (OEMs). KB offers a full range of motor controls (shown in Figure-3) which can be customized to work with GFCIs. Let KB Electronics provide a solution for you.



Figure-3: VFDs Available from KB Electronics