

# Toward Industry 4.0 in Surface Mount Technology: Smart Manufacturing in Stencil Printing Operations

Nathaniel Gee, Amanda McGraw, Daniel Hillel, Lev Bergfeld, Sang Won Yoon, and Daehan Won

Department of Systems Science and Industrial Engineering  
Binghamton University,  
Binghamton, NY, USA

Corresponding Author's Email: [amcgraw1@binghamton.edu](mailto:amcgraw1@binghamton.edu)

**Author Note:** Nathaniel Gee, Amanda McGraw, Daniel Hillel, and Lev Bergfeld are senior Industrial and Systems Engineering students at Binghamton University. Dr. Sang Won Yoon and Dr. Daehan Won, professors in the Systems Science and Industrial Engineering Department at Binghamton University, are the Capstone team's advisors.

**Abstract:** As the foremost point of contact in surface mount technology (SMT) operations, the stencil/solder paste printer (SPP) is a major contributor to assembly defects in the printed circuit board (PCB) fabrication process. Initial printing defects lead to reductions in throughput, quality and reliability of the entire downstream system. Because of the high variation in SMT processes, a predictive, real-time machine learning (ML) algorithm to optimize printer settings based on the estimation of printing volumes is a promising solution to improving production performance and process capability. Building upon existing literature, this research discusses the implementation of a lab-trained ML model to predict optimal printing parameters and reduce changeover time within SPP processes through the training and testing of large solder paste inspection (SPI) datasets. To sustain growing market demand for smart electronics manufacturing (SEM), successful development and validation of a dynamic prediction system for optimizing printing parameters provides significant potential for improvements in first pass yield rates and system throughput.

**Keyword(s):** surface mount technology (SMT), stencil/solder paste printer (SPP), printed circuit board (PCB), machine learning (ML), smart electronics manufacturing (SEM), solder paste inspection (SPI)

## 1. Introduction

First developed in the 1960s, an SMT-based assembly line features a series of complex machines that work in series to secure surface mount components (SMCs) onto a PCB (Yi, 2021). The SPP controls the granular deposition of solder paste onto the PCB through the use of a metal stencil, and is a key vulnerability for a variety of printing defects. The performance quality of the SPP is influenced by a variety of printer settings (i.e., stencil parameters, cleaning cycles, etc.) and environmental factors that produce complex relationships between printing results and influential parameters. While existing literature on machine learning applications in SMT operations shows promising real-world potential, a dynamic, predictive method for SPP control remains limited due to large difficulty in estimating printing performance with high accuracy and reliability.

This research focuses on optimizing the changeover time between different size PCBs by analyzing experimental SPI data acquired from a specified design of experiments (DOE) and application of ML methodology. The research team conducts experiments in the Smart Electronics Manufacturing Laboratory (SEML) in the Integrated Electronics Engineering Center (IEEC) at Binghamton University. Specifically, the SPP and SPI are used. All aspects of the SMT process, including experimental design, machine operation, data collection, and statistical analysis, are performed in-house. Development of an AI/ML-integrated SEM platform can significantly improve SMT efficiency and quality, providing real-time optimization techniques and statistical process control (SPC) strategies.

The rest of this document is organized as follows: Section 2 presents a literature review on SMT and prediction modeling, Section 3 introduces the experimental design and research methodology; Section 4 discusses the data collection and experimental results; importance and future works on dynamic SMT optimization is discussed in Sections 5 and 6.

## 2. Literature Review

Advancements in machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) have enabled a wide variety of industries to improve system efficiency and production quality. With a total addressable market size of over \$500 billion in 2021, smart electronics manufacturing is a rapidly growing industry that leverages SMT operations and Internet of Things (IoT) devices to effectively fabricate PCBs of all shapes and sizes. Within a surface mount assembly (SMA) line, a series of SMT machines work in conjunction to make this technology possible. The line consists of three major sequential processes: solder paste printing, pick & place mounting (P&P), and reflow oven heating, with optical inspection machines following the result of each process and ensuring the specifications are met. In layman's terms, the SPP uses a metal blade (squeegee) to push solder across a thin metal stencil and onto the PCB, with the board position verifiably aligned under the stencil. As shown below in *Figure 1*, the stencil printer is the first machine in the SMA line to interact with the base PCBs and functions by controlling the granular deposition of solder paste onto the board, based on a variety of machine settings and input parameters.



Figure 1: Illustration of general SMA line (He et al., 2021)

As a result, SPP performance largely affects first-pass yield rates of PCBs, which is observed through the analysis of inspection data from the SPI machine (Park et al., 2019). Inspection data used in this research are considered as sequential observations for each PCB run through the printer. For every SMT stage passed in the SMA line, the repair cost of defective PCBs increases by over 500% (Wang et al., 2021). Research shows the SPP accounts for more than 50% of solder paste defects in the entire SMA process (Park et al., 2019), making it a vulnerability and critical bottleneck within the system (Khader & Yoon, 2018). Common types of solder paste defects include excessive/insufficient volume, offset components, bridging, and tombstoning (PCBA, 2019).

To mitigate printing defects, extensive studies have been conducted to understand correlations between printing factors and their dynamic relationships. Many confounding factors like high natural process variation and large amounts of noise in datasets degrade the integrity of experimental findings (Wang et al., 2021). However, a recent paper by Khader and Yoon mentions that the most influential factors on printing results include printer settings, cleaning cycle, printing direction, squeegee parameters, and environmental conditions like temperature, humidity, and solder paste viscosity (Khader & Yoon, 2018) (Wang et al., 2021). Printer settings such as printing speed (PS), printing pressure (PP), and separation speed (SS) are adjustable parameters whose optimal values may change depending on a variety of inputs and environmental conditions, and various optimization studies on these settings have been conducted in the past decade (Park et al. 2019). Relationships between printing parameters have been modeled in past research with techniques such as Neural Networks (NN), Random Forest Regression (RFR), and Support Vector Regressor (SVR) (Park et al., 2019).

To determine the optimal printer settings, nonlinear optimization models are developed, as well as online and offline machine learning algorithms to train and test predictions (Park et al. 2019). Online learning is a relatively new paradigm in which prediction algorithms are updated based on real-time system inputs and has been extensively studied in other data stream applications such as the healthcare and banking industries (Park et al., 2019). Offline learning, which has been the conventional method for ML application, makes use of a static dataset for interpretation and analysis. In a recent study by Hongya Lu et al., researchers found that the offline SVR model, which learns from short-term memory feedback loops, demonstrated excellent prediction performance with  $R^2$  values of 92% and 81% for volume averages and standard deviations (Park et al. 2019). Alternatively, the Online Sequential Extreme Learning Machine (OSELM) model showed impressive learning efficiency but had lower accuracy than SVR (Park et al., 2019). The findings emphasize the incredible potential of ML applications within SEM for robust dynamic control of SMT operations.

### 3. Experimental Methodology

#### 3.1 Experimental Objective

The research team investigates whether similar optimal printing settings can be used between different sized boards (i.e., MOM4 & MOM2) containing similar sized components (0402M, 0603M, 1005M). The SPI machine analyzes the printing results and compares them to pre-defined printing tolerance levels for the SPP and specific board type, provided in a manufacturer JOB file loaded into the machine program. By implementing offline ML strategies based on literature findings and backed by data-driven experimentation, the student team will work to develop a dynamic ML model to predict optimal printing parameters based on feedback from SPI results, functioning to optimize changeover times, minimize PCB defects, and increase throughput and first pass yield rates in the SPP.

#### 3.2 Design of Experiments (DOE)

The research team implements a set of standard guidelines and procedures to reference during experiments run in the SEML. With numerous factors affecting printing performance, the DOE is crucial in identifying correlations between significant parameters and minimizing external sources of error. In this experimentation, the three significant printing parameters being investigated include printing speed (PS), printing pressure (PP), and separation speed (SS).

Relationships between printing parameters and their impact on printing performance is evaluated by comparing results for MOM4 (large) and MOM2 (small) board type PCBs, both single-sided FR-4 (woven glass and epoxy) circuit boards. The large board has dimensions of  $length \times width \times thickness = 160mm \times 150mm \times 1mm$ , and the small board has dimensions of  $length \times width \times thickness = 90mm \times 80mm \times 1mm$ . *Figure 2(1)* on the left shows a physical comparison of the two boards placed alongside one another, and *Figure 2(2)* shows the layout positioning for each component group in the MOM4 PCB.

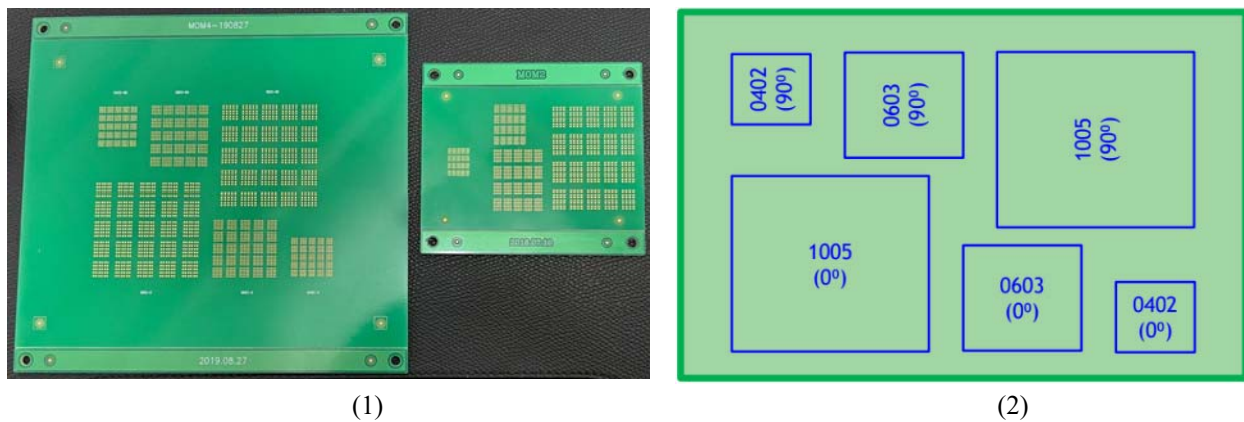


Figure 2: (1) Photo of large and small PCBs (2) Large board component positioning (He et al., 2021)

Testing the two different PCB dimensions with similar component pad sizes of 0402mm, 0603mm, and 1005mm allows the team to test various SPP inputs - PS, PP, and SS, and compare SPI results between experiments to identify patterns and correlations. Other factors such as printing direction and cleaning cycle are kept constant between experiments to minimize unnecessary noise in the data and its impact on results. *Table 1* illustrates the experimental settings, materials, and specifications used in the DOE.

Table 1: DOE Specifications

Factor	Specifications
Printer Settings	Printing Speed (PS): 45 mm/s Printing Pressure (PP): 60 N or 6 kgs Separation Speed (SS): 3 mm/s
Board Type	Large & Small
Printing Direction	Forward & Backward, Single Stroke
Squeegee	300 mm blade
Cleaning Cycle	(2) vacuum dry   (4) vacuum wet
Other	Room Temperature & Humidity

## 4. Results and Analysis

### 4.1 Data Collection

Experimental inspection data was collected via comma-separated value (CSV) format through a USB output from the SPI machine. The dataset consists of various parameters such as PCD IB, Pad ID, Volume (%), and Result (good, error warning, error), dealing with the SPP and its relative printing quality for each PCB run in the experiment. After initial data processing of the raw SPI output, Python and Minitab software were used to interpret the results and create data visualizations.

### 4.2 Statistical Analysis

Solder paste volume percentage is a direct measure of the printing process transfer efficiency and is the target metric for dynamic prediction models and performance tracking. It is calculated by the SPI's evaluation of the inspected value for each pad component relative to the pre-defined tolerances specified by operators. In the SEMML, printer tolerances between 50% and 150% are deemed acceptable; values between 50% - 75% and 125% - 150% are denoted with a warning. Values are recorded and subsequently passed or failed for each pad location on the PCB run by the SPI and are used to populate the Cpk calculations, which measure process consistency relative to the target value (100%) and ability to remain within specification limits. Once more experimental data is collected with varied input parameters, the inspection results will be fed into an offline support vector machine (SVM) algorithm for supervised learning and parameter optimization.

Pareto analysis was conducted using Minitab to determine the relative distribution of each printing result in the dataset. Prior to analysis, all data entries for the smallest pad size (0402) components were filtered out of the dataset in an effort to reduce the natural level of process noise. *Figure 3(1)* below shows an example of the results generated from one of the team's experiments, in which around 61% of all entries were classified by the SPI as good, and a remaining 32% were either classified as insufficient / excessive solder deposition warnings (denoted with a preceding "W."), or bridging errors (denoted with a preceding "E."). *Figure 3(2)* displays the results of an Anderson-Darling normality test run on the inspection results distribution. Since the calculated  $p$ -value of 0.072 is greater than the significance level of the alpha value (0.05), the test fails to reject the null hypothesis, indicating a non-normal distribution with high skewness and kurtosis. This analysis conveys the asymmetric nature of the printing results as a function of the high process variability.

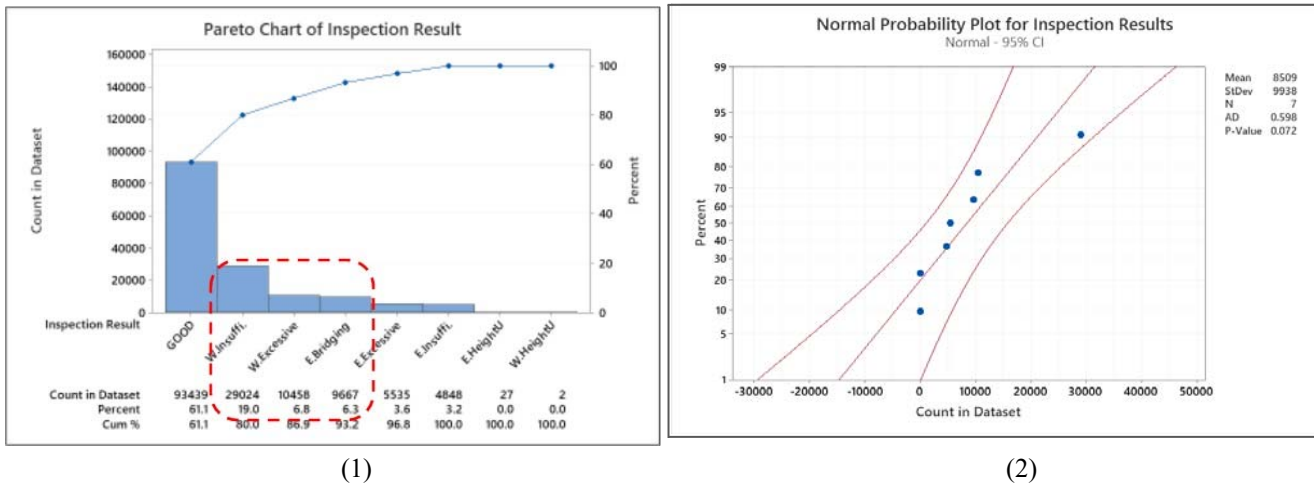


Figure 3: (1) Pareto analysis of printing results & (2) Anderson-Darling probability plot

After various software were used to process and organize the inspection data, run charts were created to visualize relationships between the average volume transfer efficiency, standard deviation, and Cpk. *Figure 4(1)* displays a time series plot for the average volume transfer efficiency (VTE) calculated for each individual PCB in one of the team's DOEs, and *4(2)* highlights the Cpk values for each PCB. The red lines on the figures indicate the total aggregate averages for the experiment.

Based on findings, overall averages for both metrics were found to be around 116% for average VTE and 1.25 for overall Cpk, indicating high process variability. As shown in *Figure 4(2)*, only 5 of the 22 boards in this experiment had Cpk values above 1.33, the general industry standard. Average values over 100% indicate excessive solder paste deposition, which can lead to downstream printing errors in SMT processes such as solder bridging and tombstoning. These errors incur high manufacturing costs and material waste if left untreated, further emphasizing the importance of stable, high-performance SMT processes.

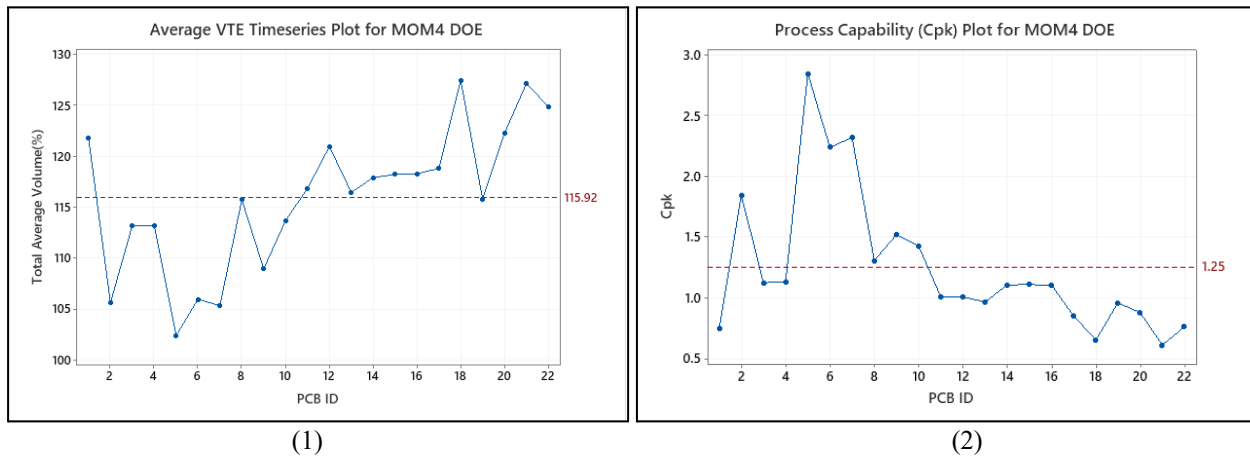


Figure 3: Run charts for (1) Average VTE & (2) Process capability

### 5. Discussion

With the high complexity and variability of SMT operations in electronics manufacturing, developing new methods and best practices to improve process capability is vital for real-time quality control measures. Finding software solutions to mitigate risks across boards with varied dimensions allows for high-performance throughput and yield standards to be met. In a production process of high-mix, low-volume (HMLV) products, it can take hundreds of PCBs to be printed and inspected before quality parameters can be determined (Kocsi et al., 2020). This insufficiency often

raises questions about the repeatability and reliability of processes and deliverables (Kocsi et al., 2020). However, with the assistance of an intelligent software system capable of evaluating real-time data from the SPI, an optimization model for the printing process can be formulated to suggest optimal parameters, saving valuable time by reducing the changeover rate (CR) between various PCBs.

Specifically, CR is the rate at which a system can effectively and efficiently alter machine settings and process control requirements from one product to another until a qualifying product is achieved (Lee et al., 2017). In an HMLV environment, having a high CR is essential to attain a competitive edge within an emerging market. Low CR is subject to higher costs, dysfunctional scheduling, low productivity, and quality-control issues (Kocsi et al., 2020). The ability to conduct a swift changeover between alternate PCB types provides increased quality performance and cost reduction benefits, allowing manufacturers to allocate resources towards further process advancements. Leveraging new technologies and tracking key performance metrics is necessary for improving SEM strategies.

Moving forward with the team's machine learning strategy, a low-code Python package called PyCaret will be implemented as more experimental data continues to be collected. PyCaret evaluates datasets with multiple algorithms simultaneously, automating workflows and highlighting the most accurate and precise algorithms in terms of target parameters. This package reduces the amount of code needed for conventional ML analysis during the underwriting process, allowing the team to leverage multiple algorithms, calculation metrics, and data visualizations at a faster rate.

The use of AI/ML and Industry 4.0 methodologies to optimize the SMA processes has the potential to significantly improve existing SMT operations in terms of yield and throughput. Industry 4.0 introduces an SEM paradigm where machine-to-machine (M2M) interaction takes place, using advanced, interconnected computational power to improve product quality, productivity, sustainability, and cost reduction techniques (Wang et al., 2018). An intelligent software platform can provide actionable predictions based on current SPP inputs and outputs along with historical data. These insights allow for the optimization of manufacturing controls to reduce changeover time, increase throughput, and improve printing quality. Ultimately, an intelligent system will allow further advancements to be made in SEM operations toward streamlining SMA processes. A true end-to-end system integration highlights the future vision of an interdependent, robust, and resilient smart manufacturing system

## 6. Conclusion

With the high demand for electronic components and the maturity of SMT within electronics manufacturing, one of the essential foundations is process reliability (Yi, 2021). To reduce defects on the SMT line, increases in experimental research & development allow for the planning, testing, and implementation of innovative AI/ML solutions. With the rapid growth of PCB usage in the SEM industry, precision and accuracy are of the utmost importance in optimizing printing parameters. By collecting and analyzing inspection data from the SPI, a smart system interface can be constructed to predict SPP defects in real-time and suggest optimization parameters to minimize errors. A solution to the high defect rates evident in SMT processes is valuable to the future development and optimization of the SMT line and reduction of CR. With sufficiently large training sets, online and offline ML models such as Support Vector Regression (SVR), Random Forest Regression (RFR), and Online Sequential Extreme Learning Machine (OSLM), can be developed and compared in terms of Root Mean Square Error (RMSE), Mean Absolute Error (MAE), R2, etc. A system for identifying changes in real-time data and improving the accuracy of ML algorithms in the presence of noise and natural process variation is a critical focus area in increasing the performance of dynamic prediction modeling for manufacturing processes. These findings emphasize the crucial role of robust and resilient SMT networks within the global manufacturing industry, along with the promising potential of integrating machine learning strategies to increase system performance, quality, and the future of smart electronics manufacturing. For future works relating to this research, combining online and offline ML algorithms can potentially improve noise filtering and adaptiveness of dynamic SPP control.

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