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Strategic Project Management in Gas Distribution Facilities: A Framework for Enhancing Asset Reliability and Availability

[1] Magnus Okechukwu Kanu, [2] Elemele Ogu, [3] Peter Ifechukwude Egbumokei, [4] Ikiomoworio Nicholas Dienagha, [5] Wags Numoipiri Digitemie

[1] Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd, Nigeria
[2] TotalEnergies Exploration & Production Nigeria Limited, Nigeria
[3] Shell Nigeria Gas (SEN/ SNG), Nigeria
[4] Shell Petroleum Development Company, Lagos, Nigeria
[5] Shell Energy Nigeria PLC, Nigeria

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Corresponding Author: **Magnus Okechukwu Kanu**

Abstract

This review paper explores the strategic project management framework applied to gas distribution facilities, focusing on enhancing asset reliability and availability. It outlines key principles and components of strategic project management, including proactive maintenance, technology utilization, and risk management. The paper discusses common challenges in gas distribution, such as aging infrastructure and operational complexities. It highlights the importance of integrating advanced technologies and data analytics for predictive maintenance. It emphasizes the role of continuous improvement and feedback loops in refining maintenance practices and ensuring long-term system resilience. The review concludes with a summary of the framework's benefits, long-term implications for gas distribution facilities, and future research and implementation recommendations. The strategic project management framework is vital for optimizing asset performance, reducing downtime, and maintaining a reliable energy supply in an evolving sector.

Keywords: Strategic Project Management, Asset Reliability, Predictive Maintenance, Gas Distribution Facilities, Risk Management

1. Introduction

Gas distribution facilities are pivotal in the energy sector, acting as the final link between natural gas producers and end consumers. These facilities are responsible for the safe and efficient gas delivery to residential, commercial, and industrial users, ensuring a steady and reliable energy supply. Given the global reliance on natural gas as a key energy source, the importance of these distribution networks cannot be overstated. They are critical for maintaining energy security and supporting economic activities and daily operations in various sectors. The infrastructure of gas distribution facilities includes pipelines, compressors, storage tanks, and control systems, all of which must function seamlessly to meet demand and maintain operational stability (Brauers, Braunger, & Jewell, 2021) [4].

In gas distribution, asset reliability, and availability are paramount. Reliability refers to the ability of the system to perform its intended function without failure over a specified period, while availability indicates the proportion of time that the system is operational and accessible for use. Together, these factors determine the overall effectiveness of the gas distribution network. High reliability and availability ensure that gas is delivered consistently, minimizing disruptions that could lead to supply shortages, economic losses, or even safety hazards (Emenike & Falcone, 2020) [7]. Conversely, a lack of reliability and availability can result in frequent breakdowns, leading to increased maintenance costs, reduced customer satisfaction, and potential risks to public safety. As such, maintaining high standards of reliability and availability is crucial for the sustainable operation of gas distribution facilities (Asani, Mukherjee, & El-Halwagi, 2021) [2].

Strategic project management (SPM) is essential for achieving and maintaining asset reliability and availability in gas distribution facilities. Unlike traditional project management, which focuses on completing projects on time and within budget, strategic project management emphasizes aligning projects with broader organizational goals and long-term objectives (Agala *et al*., 2024) [1]. In the context of gas distribution, SPM involves a holistic approach to managing assets, resources, and risks to enhance the reliability and availability of the entire distribution network. This approach includes planning and executing projects directly linked to improving infrastructure, optimizing maintenance practices, and adopting new technologies. By integrating strategic considerations into project management, organizations can proactively address potential challenges, mitigate risks, and ensure that their gas distribution facilities are resilient and capable of meeting future demands (Grudz *et al*., 2023) [11].

This paper explores strategic project management's role in enhancing asset reliability and availability in gas distribution facilities. It will examine the challenges these facilities face, particularly in maintaining consistent and reliable operations, and discuss how a strategic approach to project management can address these issues. The paper will also present a framework for implementing SPM in gas distribution, focusing on key elements such as risk management, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement. By analyzing these components, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how strategic project management can contribute to the long-term success and sustainability of gas distribution facilities. The scope of the paper is limited to the management practices and strategies applicable to the gas distribution sector, with a particular emphasis on enhancing the reliability and availability of critical assets.

2. Challenges in Gas Distribution Facilities

2.1 Common Challenges Faced in Maintaining Asset Reliability and Availability

Gas distribution facilities are integral to delivering natural gas to end consumers, yet maintaining the reliability and availability of these systems is fraught with challenges. Among the most pressing issues are the complexities associated with the infrastructure, which often spans vast geographical areas and includes many interconnected components. These components—pipelines, valves, compressors, and metering systems—must operate harmoniously to ensure continuous gas flow. However, these networks' sheer scale and intricacy can lead to difficulties in monitoring, maintaining, and repairing assets on time (Ekechukwu, Daramola, & Olanrewaju, 2024) [5].

Operational challenges further complicate the picture. The dynamic nature of gas distribution, where demand can fluctuate significantly based on seasonal, industrial, or residential factors, places additional strain on the system. A significant hurdle is ensuring the distribution network can adapt to these changing demands without compromising reliability. Moreover, coordinating maintenance activities without disrupting supply is a perpetual balancing act, requiring careful planning and execution to minimize downtime and maintain service continuity. Additionally, human factors play a role in these challenges. The workforce responsible for maintaining these systems often operates under significant pressure, needing to make quick decisions in the face of complex technical problems. Skills shortages and the aging workforce in the energy sector can exacerbate these issues, leading to potential gaps in expertise and experience that are critical for maintaining high standards of reliability and availability (Babayeju, Adefemi, Ekemezie, & Sofoluwe, 2024; Olaleye, Oloye, Akinloye, & Akinwande, 2024; Sofoluwe, Ochulor, Ukato, & Jambol, 2024a) [3, 24, 29].

2.2 Impact of Aging Infrastructure, Environmental Factors, and Operational Complexities

Aging infrastructure represents one of the most significant challenges to the reliability and availability of gas distribution facilities. Many countries' gas distribution infrastructure was built several decades ago. It was not designed to meet the demands of today's energy consumption patterns or the stresses imposed by modern operational requirements. Over time, pipelines can corrode, valves may wear out, and control systems can become outdated, all contributing to a decline in system performance. The older the infrastructure, the more prone it is to failures, leading to unplanned outages, increased maintenance costs, and safety hazards (Esiri, Jambol, & Ozowe, 2024; Tula, Babayeju, & Aigbedion, 2024b) [10, 31].

Environmental factors also pose considerable risks to gas distribution infrastructure. Natural events such as earthquakes, floods, and landslides can damage pipelines and other critical components, disrupting gas supply and endangering public safety. Even less severe environmental conditions, such as temperature extremes or soil movement, can long-term impact the system's integrity. For instance, pipelines exposed to fluctuating temperatures may experience thermal expansion and contraction, leading to stress fractures or leaks over time. Additionally, external corrosion, influenced by soil composition and moisture levels, is a persistent challenge in maintaining pipeline integrity (Ogbu, Eyo-Udo, Adeyinka, Ozowe, & Ikevuje, 2023) [21].

Operational complexities add another layer of difficulty in ensuring the reliability and availability of gas distribution networks. Balancing supply and demand in real-time requires sophisticated control systems and constant monitoring. Any failure in these systems can lead to imbalances that might cause pressure drops, supply disruptions, or even safety incidents like explosions or gas leaks. Moreover, integrating new technologies, such as smart meters or automated control systems, into existing infrastructure can be challenging. While beneficial in improving efficiency and monitoring, these technologies often require significant upgrades to existing systems, which can be costly and time-consuming (Ikevuje, Anaba, & Iheanyichukwu, 2024) [12].

2.3 Risks Associated with Poor Asset Management and Their Consequences

Poor asset management in gas distribution facilities can have severe and far-reaching consequences. At the most basic level, inadequate maintenance and oversight can result in the gradual degradation of system components, leading to frequent breakdowns and unplanned outages. Such failures disrupt the gas supply and increase operational costs, as emergency repairs often require more resources than planned maintenance activities. The cumulative effect of poor asset management is a cycle of deteriorating reliability, where each failure further strains the system, increasing the likelihood of future incidents (Onwuka & Adu, 2024; Ozowe, Sofoluwe, Ukato, & Jambol, 2024) [26, 27].

From a safety perspective, the risks are even more significant. Gas leaks, which can result from damaged pipelines or faulty equipment, pose serious environmental and human life hazards. Explosions and fires resulting from gas leaks are among the most catastrophic risks of poor asset management. These incidents can cause loss of life, significant property damage, and environmental harm, leading to severe legal and financial repercussions for the responsible organizations. Moreover, poor asset management can have a detrimental impact on the reputation of gas distribution companies. Repeated failures and safety incidents can erode public trust, leading to increased scrutiny from regulators and the public. This loss of trust can sometimes result in stricter regulatory oversight, fines, or even the revocation of operating licenses. The financial implications of these outcomes are considerable, as companies may face increased operational costs, legal liabilities, and reduced market share (Esiri, Babayeju, & Ekemezie, 2024a; Olanrewaju, Daramola, & Babayeju, 2024) [8, 25]. In addition to these immediate risks, poor asset management can hinder the long-term sustainability of gas distribution facilities. Without strategic investments in maintenance, upgrades, and modernization, the infrastructure will continue to degrade, escalating costs and diminishing returns. In the long run, this could result in costly overhauls or replacements of entire network sections, which could have been avoided with more proactive asset management practices.

3. Strategic Project Management Framework

3.1 Key Principles and Components of Strategic Project Management in the Context of Gas Distribution

Strategic project management (SPM) in gas distribution facilities is a comprehensive approach beyond the traditional confines of project management. It is centered on integrating project activities with the organization's broader strategic goals, particularly enhancing asset reliability and availability. The key principles of SPM in this context involve a combination of foresight, flexibility, and alignment with long-term objectives, ensuring that every project contributes to the overall efficiency and sustainability of the gas distribution network (Kwakye, Ekechukwu, & Ogbu, 2023) [15]. One of the fundamental components of SPM is the thorough understanding of the asset lifecycle. This involves recognizing the stages of design, construction, operation, maintenance, and eventual decommissioning of assets and aligning project activities accordingly. Each stage of the asset lifecycle presents unique challenges and opportunities, and strategic project management ensures that these are addressed to enhance the longevity and reliability of the infrastructure. For instance, during the design and construction phases, SPM focuses on building resilience in the system, using materials and technologies that can withstand environmental stresses and operational demands. During the operation and maintenance phases, the emphasis shifts to optimizing performance through regular monitoring, preventive maintenance, and timely upgrades (Jambol, Ukato, Ozowe, & Babayeju, 2024) [14].

Another critical component of SPM is the incorporation of technological advancements. In the rapidly evolving energy sector, leveraging technology is essential for maintaining the competitiveness and efficiency of gas distribution facilities. Strategic project management facilitates the integration of advanced technologies, such as predictive analytics, Internet of Things (IoT) sensors, and automated control systems, into the existing infrastructure (Lead). These technologies enable real-time monitoring and analysis of asset conditions, allowing for proactive maintenance and swift responses to potential issues before they escalate into major problems. By embedding these technologies into the project management framework, organizations can enhance the reliability and availability of their assets, ultimately improving the overall performance of the gas distribution network (Kwakye, Ekechukwu, & Ogundipe, 2024a; Sofoluwe, Ochulor, Ukato, & Jambol, 2024b) [16, 30].

3.2 Alignment of Project Objectives with Organizational Goals for Asset Reliability

The success of any strategic project management initiative in gas distribution facilities hinges on the alignment of project objectives with the overarching organizational goals, particularly those related to asset reliability and availability. This alignment ensures that all projects, regardless of scope or scale, contribute to the sustained efficiency and dependability of the gas distribution network (Ogbu, Ozowe, & Ikevuje, 2024b) [23]. To achieve this alignment, it is crucial to establish clear, measurable objectives for each project that directly support the organization's strategic priorities. For instance, if the organization aims to reduce unplanned outages by 20% over the next five years, every relevant project should include specific targets and deliverables contributing to this objective (Ogbu, Ozowe, & Ikevuje, 2024a) [22]. This might involve projects focused on upgrading aging infrastructure, implementing new monitoring technologies, or enhancing maintenance protocols. Organizations can effectively channel their resources and efforts toward achieving long-term asset reliability by ensuring that project objectives are closely tied to these strategic goals (Nunes, Abreu, & Saraiva, 2021) [19].

Another key aspect of alignment is the integration of feedback mechanisms within the project management process. Regular reviews and evaluations of project outcomes allow organizations to assess whether the project objectives are being met and how they contribute to the overall goals of asset reliability. These evaluations provide valuable insights that can be used to refine future projects and adjust strategies as needed. For example, suppose a project aimed at reducing pipeline corrosion is successful. In that case, the strategies and technologies used in that project can be replicated or adapted for other parts of the network. Conversely, suppose a project does not achieve its intended outcomes. In that case, the lessons learned can inform adjustments in project planning and execution to better align with organizational goals (Esiri, Babayeju, & Ekemezie, 2024b; Kwakye, Ekechukwu, & Ogundipe, 2024b) [9, 17].

Furthermore, stakeholder involvement is a critical factor in ensuring alignment. Engaging key stakeholders—including executives, project managers, engineers, and field operators—early in the project planning process ensures a shared understanding of the project's objectives and how they fit within the broader organizational strategy. This collaboration helps to identify potential conflicts or misalignments early on, allowing for adjustments that keep the project on track toward supporting asset reliability and availability (Ochulor, Sofoluwe, Ukato, & Jambol, 2024) [20].

3.3 Integration of Risk Management, Resource Allocation, and Stakeholder Engagement in the Framework

Effective strategic project management in gas distribution facilities requires the seamless integration of risk management, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement into the project management framework. These elements are interdependent and collectively contribute to the successful execution of projects that enhance asset reliability and availability. Risk management is a cornerstone of strategic project management, particularly in gas distribution, where the stakes are high due to system failures' potential safety, environmental, and financial implications. A robust risk management strategy involves identifying, assessing, and prioritizing risks at every project lifecycle stage. This includes the obvious technical risks, such as equipment failures or supply chain disruptions, and external risks, like regulatory changes, market fluctuations, and environmental hazards. By proactively addressing these risks, organizations can develop contingency plans and mitigation strategies that minimize the impact on project outcomes and ensure that asset reliability is not compromised (Ozowe, Ukato, Jambol, & Daramola, 2024) [28].

Resource allocation is another critical element of the SPM framework. Strategic project management requires a thoughtful approach to deploying resources—both human and financial—in a way that maximizes efficiency and effectiveness. This involves assigning the right people with the right skills to the right tasks and ensuring that financial resources are allocated to support the organization's long-term goals. For example, prioritizing investment in technologies that enhance predictive maintenance capabilities can yield significant returns in terms of reduced downtime and lower maintenance costs. Effective resource allocation also requires flexibility, allowing organizations to reallocate resources as needed in response to changing circumstances or emerging risks (Lovallo, Brown, Teece, & Bardolet, 2020) [18].

Stakeholder engagement is integral to the success of strategic project management, particularly in complex, large-scale projects like those in gas distribution facilities. Engaging stakeholders—from senior leadership to frontline operators—ensures a shared vision and commitment to the project's objectives. This engagement facilitates better communication, fosters collaboration, and helps to align the interests of different parties with the project's goals. Moreover, involving stakeholders in decision-making enhances transparency and accountability, which is crucial for maintaining trust and ensuring that projects are completed successfully and sustainably (Ekechukwu & Simpa, 2024; Jambol, Sofoluwe, Ukato, & Ochulor, 2024) [6, 13].

4. Enhancing Asset Reliability and Availability

4.1 Strategies for Proactive Maintenance and Timely Interventions

Enhancing asset reliability and availability in gas distribution facilities requires a strategic focus on proactive maintenance and timely interventions. Unlike reactive maintenance, which addresses issues only after they arise, proactive maintenance involves anticipating potential problems and taking preemptive measures to prevent them. This approach is vital in gas distribution, where system failures can lead to severe consequences, including supply disruptions, safety hazards, and costly repairs.

One of the key strategies for proactive maintenance is implementing a comprehensive maintenance plan tailored to the specific needs of the gas distribution network. This plan should be based on a detailed understanding of the asset lifecycle, including the typical wear and tear associated with different components and the factors that can accelerate their deterioration. By identifying the most critical assets and understanding their failure modes, organizations can prioritize maintenance activities to focus on the areas that pose the greatest risk to reliability and availability.

Condition-based maintenance (CBM) is another effective strategy for enhancing asset reliability. CBM involves monitoring the actual condition of assets in real-time and performing maintenance only when necessary rather than on a fixed schedule. This approach reduces the likelihood of unexpected failures while also optimizing maintenance costs. For example, instead of replacing a pipeline segment based on a predetermined time interval, CBM allows operators to continuously assess the pipeline's condition and intervene only when signs of degradation, such as corrosion or pressure anomalies, are detected.

Timely interventions are critical to the success of proactive maintenance strategies. Once a potential issue is identified, it is essential to act quickly to prevent it from escalating into a major problem. This requires a well-coordinated response plan with clear procedures for diagnosing issues, mobilizing resources, and executing repairs. In addition to technical expertise, timely interventions depend on effective communication and coordination among different teams and external stakeholders, such as contractors and suppliers.

To support proactive maintenance and timely interventions, organizations must also invest in training and skill development for their workforce. As gas distribution networks become more complex and technologically advanced, the skills required to maintain and repair these systems are also evolving. Ensuring maintenance personnel have the latest knowledge and tools is essential for maintaining high asset reliability and availability standards. Regular training programs and access to up-to-date technical information and resources can significantly enhance the effectiveness of proactive maintenance efforts.

4.2 Utilization of Technology and Data Analytics for Predictive Maintenance

The utilization of technology and data analytics is transforming the way maintenance is conducted in gas distribution facilities, with predictive maintenance emerging as a key approach to enhancing asset reliability and availability. Predictive maintenance leverages advanced technologies, such as the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), and big data analytics, to predict when equipment will likely fail and schedule maintenance activities accordingly. This approach reduces the risk of unexpected failures and optimizes maintenance resources, leading to cost savings and improved system performance.

IoT devices, such as sensors and smart meters, play a crucial role in predictive maintenance by providing real-time data on the condition of assets. These devices can monitor various parameters, including temperature, pressure, vibration, and flow rates, critical indicators of equipment health. For example, a sudden increase in pipeline vibration detected by sensors could indicate the onset of mechanical wear or a potential leak, prompting immediate inspection and maintenance. By continuously collecting and analyzing data, IoT devices enable operators to detect early signs of deterioration and take corrective action before a failure occurs.

Data analytics and AI further enhance the predictive maintenance process by analyzing vast amounts of data to identify patterns and trends that may not be immediately apparent. Machine learning algorithms can be trained to recognize equipment's normal operating behavior and detect deviations that could signal an impending failure. For instance, an AI system could analyze historical data on pipeline corrosion rates, combined with environmental factors such as soil composition and humidity, to predict which pipeline sections are most at risk of corrosion and should be prioritized for maintenance.

Integrating predictive maintenance into the strategic project management framework also supports better decision-making. By using predictive analytics, organizations can develop more accurate maintenance schedules, allocate resources more efficiently, and reduce the frequency of unnecessary maintenance activities. This improves asset reliability and availability and extends the lifespan of equipment, reducing the need for costly replacements. Moreover, predictive maintenance can enhance safety and regulatory compliance in gas distribution facilities. Organizations can minimize the risk of accidents, leaks, and other safety incidents by identifying and addressing potential issues before they lead to failures. This proactive approach also helps companies comply with regulatory requirements related to asset management and safety, reducing the likelihood of fines and legal liabilities.

4.3 Role of Continuous Improvement and Feedback Loops in Enhancing Reliability

Continuous improvement and feedback loops are essential to any strategy to enhance asset reliability and availability in gas distribution facilities. Continuous improvement involves an ongoing effort to enhance processes, systems, and practices for better performance. In the context of gas distribution, this means regularly assessing the effectiveness of maintenance strategies, identifying areas for improvement, and implementing changes that lead to more reliable and efficient operations.

One of the key tools for continuous improvement is feedback loops, which involve collecting data on maintenance activities and outcomes, analyzing this data, and using the insights gained to refine future practices. For example, after completing a maintenance project, an organization might gather feedback from the technicians involved, review the performance of the repaired equipment, and analyze any unexpected challenges or delays that occurred during the project. This information can then be used to adjust maintenance procedures, improve training programs, or invest in new tools and technologies that address the issues identified.

In addition to operational improvements, feedback loops can also inform strategic decision-making. For instance, if data from multiple projects consistently shows that certain types of equipment are prone to early failure, the organization may decide to invest in higher-quality materials or redesign the system to reduce these vulnerabilities. Similarly, predictive maintenance data indicates that certain environmental conditions accelerate asset degradation. To mitigate these risks, the organization might implement additional protective measures, such as corrosion-resistant coatings or enhanced monitoring systems.

The role of continuous improvement in enhancing reliability also extends to the broader organizational culture. Encouraging a culture of continuous improvement means fostering an environment where employees at all levels are empowered to suggest ideas for enhancing processes and are recognized for their contributions. This can lead to greater engagement and ownership of the reliability goals and more innovative solutions to complex challenges. Finally, continuous improvement efforts should be aligned with the organization's strategic objectives to ensure that they contribute to long-term asset reliability and availability. This requires regular review and adjustment of the continuous improvement initiatives to ensure they remain relevant and effective in the face of changing operational demands and technological advancements. By focusing on continuous improvement, gas distribution facilities can build a resilient and adaptable infrastructure to meet current and future challenges.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The strategic project management (SPM) framework enhances asset reliability and availability in gas distribution facilities. Integrating key principles such as proactive maintenance, technology utilization, risk management, and stakeholder engagement ensures that every project aligns with the organizational goals of sustaining and improving infrastructure performance. Proactive maintenance, supported by predictive technologies and data analytics, enables the early identification of potential issues, reducing the likelihood of unexpected failures and costly repairs. The strategic alignment of project objectives with organizational goals ensures that each project contributes to the overall efficiency and resilience of the gas distribution network. Additionally, incorporating continuous improvement practices fosters an environment where processes are regularly refined to meet evolving operational demands, further enhancing reliability and availability.

The benefits of this framework are substantial. By prioritizing the health and performance of critical assets, organizations can reduce downtime, extend the lifespan of equipment, and ensure a consistent and reliable energy supply. The framework also supports cost optimization by enabling more targeted and efficient use of resources, reducing unnecessary maintenance activities, and preventing major system failures. Furthermore, by integrating stakeholder engagement and feedback loops, the SPM framework promotes transparency, accountability, and collaboration, essential for successfully executing complex projects in the gas distribution sector.

The long-term implications of implementing the strategic project management framework in gas distribution facilities are profound. As gas distribution networks age and become more complex, a robust and adaptable management approach becomes increasingly critical. By adopting the SPM framework, organizations can build a resilient infrastructure capable of withstanding current and future challenges. This resilience is essential for maintaining a reliable gas supply and meeting the energy sector's growing regulatory and safety requirements.

Over time, the continuous application of the SPM framework will lead to the development of more advanced maintenance practices, enhanced use of technology, and improved stakeholder relationships. As organizations refine their project management strategies, they will be better equipped to anticipate and respond to emerging risks, such as climate change, technological advancements, and shifting market dynamics. This adaptability will be key to sustaining the long-term reliability and availability of gas distribution networks, ensuring that they can continue to meet the needs of consumers and businesses alike.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

While the strategic project management framework offers significant benefits, there are areas where further research and implementation efforts are needed. One area of focus should be developing and integrating more advanced predictive maintenance technologies. As artificial intelligence and machine learning continue to evolve, there is significant potential to enhance the accuracy and effectiveness of predictive analytics in gas distribution. Research into these technologies could lead to new tools and methodologies that improve the ability to predict and prevent asset failures.

Another recommendation is the exploration of best practices for stakeholder engagement in the context of strategic project management. Given gas distribution projects' complex and often interdisciplinary nature, effective communication and collaboration among stakeholders are critical. Future research could examine the most effective ways to engage stakeholders at different stages of the project lifecycle, ensuring that their insights and expertise are fully leveraged to enhance project outcomes.

Finally, organizations should consider the potential for applying the strategic project management framework to other areas of the energy sector. As the energy landscape continues to evolve, with increasing emphasis on sustainability and renewable energy sources, the principles of SPM could be adapted to manage the transition and integration of new technologies and infrastructures. This could provide valuable insights and strategies for maintaining reliability and availability across a broader range of energy systems.

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