

# Efficiency and Other Benefits of 208 Volt Over 120 Volt Input for IT Equipment

## White Paper 27

Revision 3

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### > Executive summary

Decisions made regarding the distribution of 208 V or 120 V power to IT equipment can significantly impact overall efficiency of the data center. This paper explores the voltage connection options of 208 volt (V) and 120 V for servers in North America and considers the efficiency implications of these choices. This same discussion applies to the use of 200 V vs. 100 V in Japan.

### Contents

*Click on a section to jump to it*

Introduction	2
Energy efficiency	2
Why 120 V?	3
Why 208 V?	3
What is 240 V?	4
What about 3-phase?	4
UPS systems for 208 V	4
Conclusion	6
Resources	7

## Introduction

This white paper explains why and when 208 V is used instead of 120 V for servers in North America. This same discussion applies to the use of 200 V vs. 100 V in Japan. Of particular interest is how server voltages relate to energy efficiency.

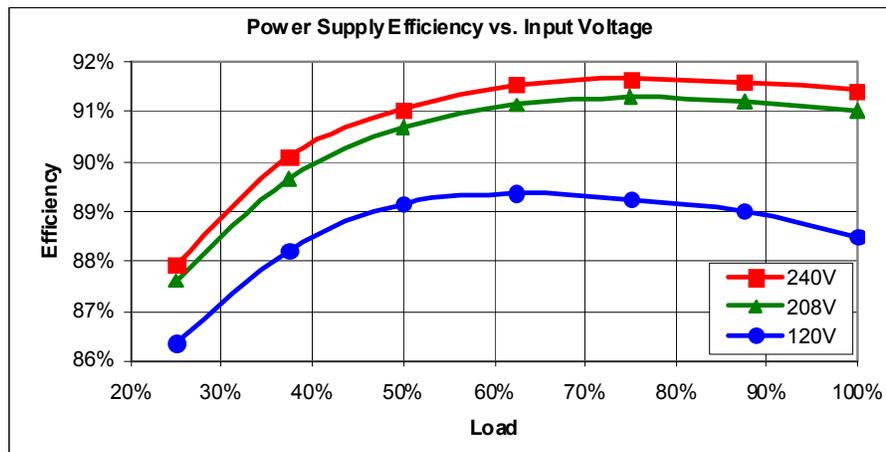
## Background

Most entry level and mid-range servers are configured and shipped with 120 V plugs. However, the servers themselves are designed to accept any voltage worldwide, including 120 V and 208 V. Larger pedestal servers and rack-mount servers tend to be configured with 208 V plugs.

One voltage is sometimes preferred over another for some very specific reasons. The reasons are explained in the following sections.

## Energy efficiency

Power supply energy efficiency is a measure of how much power is lost between the input and output of a server's power supply. Other metrics that measure the overall efficiency of a server, take into account the processing capability of a server per unit of power input. Although related to server power supplies, these efficiency metrics are not discussed in this paper. Server power supplies, when considered as a group, have a significant impact on energy efficiency of a data center. This has prompted some data center managers to specify high efficiency power supplies. The easiest way to improve the efficiency of existing server power supplies is simply to increase their input voltage. **Figure 1** illustrates a 1-3 percentage point improvement in power supply efficiency with increased voltage. This represents a savings of \$4 to \$31 per year per server in electrical cost by doing nothing more than moving equipment to a higher voltage source.



**Figure 1**

Power supply efficiency  
(source: HP)

The reason for the increase in power supply efficiency stems from a basic electrical principle. For a given amount of power, as voltage increases, less current is required. Conversely, as voltage decreases, more current is required to maintain the same amount of power. For example, 120 volts x 10 amps = 1,200 volt-amps. If the voltage is doubled, only half the current is required (240 volts x 5 amps = 1000 volt-amps). The more current that wires, transformers, and other power supply components carry, the hotter those components get. This heat must be carried by the air conditioning system which further increases the amount of electricity required to support a given server.

## Why 120 V?

Convenience is the overwhelming reason why 120 V is utilized in the data center and why virtually all small and departmental servers are installed with 120 V plugs. U.S. electrical codes require that habitable space be wired with 120 V receptacles with a receptacle for every 10 feet of exposed wall. Therefore, 120 V is almost always available at any office site. However, typical 120 V building wiring has a serious and fundamental limitation: the majority of wall receptacles are rated at 15 amps (15A) and a growing number are rated at 20 amps (20A).

The 15A rating of 120 V office power is very important and a significant limitation. Underwriters Laboratory (UL) specifies that a single piece of electronic equipment is not permitted to continuously draw more than 80% of a receptacle's rating, or 12 amps for a 15A circuit. This places a limit of about 1,440 volt-amps (volts x amps) on a standard 15A receptacle.

Most new servers have power factor corrected supplies with nearly a 1 to 1 correlation between volt amps and watts. Thus the maximum corresponding watts available through a receptacle is 1,440 watts - which is the maximum power that a server can draw from a single 15A plug. Due to the losses of the server power supply, this corresponds to about 1,250 watts of power supply output rating in the server. Note that high efficiency power supplies would provide more than 1,250 watts output due to lower losses.

Therefore, the maximum power supply configuration typically seen for a server operating from 120 V with a single 15A power plug is a server with a 1,250 W power supply system. However, services with a rating of 20A 120 V are becoming more popular in commercial environments. For 20A 120 V service, 16A or 1,920 volt-amps or watts is the maximum of power supply output rating in the server due to losses.

Server power supplies can offer redundancy. When a server has two power cords, each power cord and power supply must be sized to support the entire server.

It is possible to wire special 120 V receptacles for 30 amp service, but this is very unusual and requires larger wires and an electrician. Therefore, it is impractical and typically not used for large servers.

It should be noted that a server configured for the maximum power draw described above would use the entire capacity of the 120 V circuit. **If additional devices like a monitor, PC, backup device, or RAID subsystem were required then the user would need to supply these from a second circuit which in some cases may require that an additional wire be installed from the AC power distribution panel.**

Although 120 V is convenient, it presents a major disadvantage to energy constrained data centers. Many data center operators who are trying to reduce their electric bill fail to realize that 120 V circuits are less efficient than higher voltage circuits.

## Why 208 V?

Power capacity is the primary reason for deploying 208 V and is the reason why many enterprise servers are designed to accept 208 V. In fact, almost all IT equipment can accept a wide voltage range from 100 V up to 250 V. The most common ratings for 208 V receptacles are 20 amp and 30 amp, corresponding to about 3,600 and 5,400 watts, respectively, of power supply output rating in a server. Very few servers are manufactured that require greater power ratings (except for some large enterprise class servers). For these very large servers, the input power is either hard-wired or multiple 30A 208 V cords are provided.

Based on the previous discussion regarding 120 V, any server that draws more than the power supply output level of 1,920 watts (20A 120 V service), will naturally need to use

208 V. Therefore, users should expect this and understand that the use of the higher voltage is driven by fundamental electrical principles.

In addition to the fundamental need to use 208 V at higher power, there are other practical reasons why 208 V is advantageous.

Rack systems frequently combine a heterogeneous mix of equipment. It happens to be the case that typical rack configurations draw in the range of 1,600 to 5,000 watts. This is a poor match to the 120 V limitation of 1,440 W available, but an excellent match to 208 V service at either 20 amps or 30 amps. Therefore a single power connection per rack is all that is required at 208 V where as many as three connections might be required at 120 V. This issue is discussed in depth in White Paper 29, *Rack Powering Options for High Density*.

 Related resource  
**White Paper 29**  
*Rack Powering Options for High Density*

The trend towards more energy efficient data centers makes 208 V even more advantages because a given server will draw less current at 208 V than at 120 V. The less current a server draws, the less heat is produced. Therefore it's wiring devices, fusing, and switches will run cooler which will reduce their long-term risk of degradation or failure, as well as decrease the costs associated with cooling. In fact, there is great interest in the data center industry to move towards 230 volts distribution which will further reduce losses. This topic is covered in depth in White Paper 128, *Increasing Data Center Efficiency by Using Improved High Density Power Distribution*.

 Related resource  
**White Paper 128**  
*Increasing Data Center Efficiency by Using Improved High Density Power Distribution*

An advantage of using 208 V is that usually each 208 V wall receptacle has its own circuit breaker. This means that the malfunction of a different load cannot trip the server's breaker. In 120 V installations, it is very common for a single breaker to feed a number of receptacles. This means that in a 120 V installation a number of unexpected points may exist where an overload can trip the server's breaker. Most MIS professionals have heard of a case where cleaning personnel have tripped the breaker feeding critical computer loads.

Another advantage of 208 V is that the common power receptacles are locking using the twist-lock type plug, which reduces the chance of dislodging them. Furthermore, the quality of the contacts in 208 V receptacles is generally higher than 120 V receptacles, which greatly reduces the chance of intermittent connections.

## What is 240 V?

In residential installations in North America and in some limited business installations, 240 V is available instead of 208 V. Virtually all equipment that operates from single-phase 208 V will also operate from 240 V. All of the same advantages relative to 120 V apply.

## What about 3-phase?

Very few servers today require 3-phase power. There are many sites, which simply do not have 3-phase power available. Also, the 3-phase voltage in the rest of the world is much different than that in the USA, making it more difficult to design global products. However, both 120 V and 208 V single phase can be easily derived from North American 3-phase voltage by simple wire connections; 120 V single phase is just the voltage from one of the three phases to neutral, while 208 V single phase is the voltage between two of the three phases.

## UPS systems for 208 V

Users must take the server operating voltage into account when selecting a UPS. No "universal" UPS exists that operates with all combinations of voltage. Four output voltage options are shown below in **Table 1**.

**Table 1**  
*Voltage options*

Facility voltage (UPS input)	Equipment voltage (UPS output)	Example UPS	UPS power range
120 V	120 V	Smart-UPS	750 VA – 3000 VA
208 V	208V (with 400 VA of 120 V for aux equipment)	Smart-UPS "T" Series	3000 VA – 5000 VA
208 V	208 V, 120 V	Symmetra LX	4000 VA - 16 kVA
208 V 3-phase 480 V 3-phase 600 V 3-phase	208 V 3-phase, 208 V, 120 V	Symmetra PX / MW, Galaxy	10 kVA – 1,600 kVA

For servers requiring 208 V, the appropriate UPS is selected based on the level of power required. Where multiple product lines provide the power level required, the choice can be based on product features.

## Conclusion

When weighing data center power distribution options, 208 volts offers a number of technical advantages. Only when 208 V is deployed can higher power servers plug into standard NEMA outlets. Technically, 208 V is a superior choice for powering computing equipment when compared with 120 V due to lower current draw and higher power efficiency. However the ubiquitous nature of 120 V wiring in North America and 100 V in Japan make these lower voltages preferred by users. This has given rise to the situation where lower powered small business or departmental servers are powered by 120 V, while larger and enterprise class servers are powered by 208 V.



### About the author

**Neil Rasmussen** is a Senior VP of Innovation for Schneider Electric. He establishes the technology direction for the world's largest R&D budget devoted to power, cooling, and rack infrastructure for critical networks.

Neil holds 19 patents related to high-efficiency and high-density data center power and cooling infrastructure, and has published over 50 white papers related to power and cooling systems, many published in more than 10 languages, most recently with a focus on the improvement of energy efficiency. He is an internationally recognized keynote speaker on the subject of high-efficiency data centers. Neil is currently working to advance the science of high-efficiency, high-density, scalable data center infrastructure solutions and is a principal architect of the APC InfraStruXure system.

Prior to founding APC in 1981, Neil received his bachelors and masters degrees from MIT in electrical engineering, where he did his thesis on the analysis of a 200MW power supply for a tokamak fusion reactor. From 1979 to 1981 he worked at MIT Lincoln Laboratories on flywheel energy storage systems and solar electric power systems.



## Resources

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### Increasing Data Center Efficiency by Using Improved High Density Power Distribution

White Paper 128



### Rack Powering Options for High Density

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