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Cost-Benefit Analysis of ENIG vs. HASL vs. OSP for Class 3 PCBs

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Abstract: In the realm of mission-critical electronic assemblies, particularly Class 3 printed circuit boards (PCBs) designed for high reliability and long lifecycle applications, the choice of surface finish plays a pivotal role in determining performance, manufacturability, and cost efficiency. This study presents a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of three widely used surface finishes—Electroless Nickel Immersion Gold (ENIG), Hot Air Solder Leveling (HASL), and Organic Solderability Preservative (OSP)—with a focus on their long-term reliability, corrosion resistance, shelf life, and total cost of ownership. ENIG offers excellent planarity and superior corrosion resistance, making it suitable for fine-pitch components and harsh environments. However, it incurs higher material and process costs. HASL, while economical and widely available, may introduce uneven surfaces and solderability issues in fine-pitch applications. OSP, being environmentally friendly and cost-effective, provides a viable option for high-volume manufacturing but suffers from limited shelf life and poor resistance to multiple thermal excursions.

This analysis integrates empirical data, industry case studies, and IPC-6012 and IPC-455x standards to propose surface finish selection guidelines that balance performance with economic considerations. The findings suggest that while ENIG is best suited for Class 3 PCBs requiring high reliability and stable performance under extreme conditions, HASL and OSP may still be appropriate in controlled environments or less demanding use cases. The study advocates for an IPC-based decision matrix that incorporates mission-critical performance requirements, expected operating conditions, and lifecycle costs, enabling manufacturers and designers to make informed choices tailored to their specific application needs. By establishing standardized evaluation criteria, this paper aims to support the electronics industry in optimizing both reliability and cost-effectiveness across the PCB manufacturing lifecycle.

Introduction

The increasing complexity and performance requirements of modern electronic systems, particularly those used in mission-critical applications, have underscored the importance of surface finishes on printed circuit boards (PCBs). Class 3 PCBs, which are commonly found in aerospace, military, medical, and industrial sectors, require the highest level of reliability, durability, and performance, particularly in demanding environments subject to temperature extremes, vibration,

and prolonged use. As the demand for smaller, more densely packed, and more reliable electronic devices grows, so does the need to refine the materials and processes used in PCB manufacturing. One of the most critical decisions in PCB fabrication is selecting the appropriate surface finish, as it directly impacts the board's electrical performance, mechanical stability, and longevity.

Surface finishes play an essential role in ensuring the solderability and integrity of components during assembly and throughout the device's operational lifetime. Traditional surface finishes, such as Hot Air Solder Leveling (HASL), have been widely used due to their cost-effectiveness and established manufacturing processes. However, the advent of more advanced electronic devices with smaller and more complex components has created new challenges for HASL, particularly in terms of its planar characteristics and limited suitability for fine-pitch applications. On the other hand, Electroless Nickel Immersion Gold (ENIG) and Organic Solderability Preservative (OSP) have emerged as viable alternatives that provide unique advantages and disadvantages depending on the application.

ENIG is recognized for its exceptional planar surface, which makes it ideal for fine-pitch components and high-density interconnects. Furthermore, ENIG offers superior corrosion resistance and long shelf life, making it a preferred choice for high-reliability applications. However, its associated higher cost and the complexity of its manufacturing process, which involves multiple steps of nickel and gold deposition, present challenges in terms of both financial and time investment. In contrast, HASL remains one of the most cost-effective options for surface finishes, widely used in high-volume production environments due to its simplicity and lower material costs. Despite this, HASL's limitations, including uneven surface coating, potential for non-uniform solder joints, and a higher tendency to develop tin whiskers, have raised concerns regarding its long-term performance in certain mission-critical applications.

OSP, as an environmentally friendly and cost-effective surface finish, has gained traction in recent years. Its application process is relatively straightforward and involves a thin organic coating that preserves the copper surface, preventing oxidation until the soldering process is completed. Although OSP is advantageous in terms of environmental impact and lower cost, its limited shelf life, as well as its reduced resistance to multiple reflow cycles, makes it less suitable for applications with demanding thermal or environmental requirements. The decision to use OSP, HASL, or ENIG ultimately depends on balancing these attributes—reliability, cost, corrosion resistance, and manufacturability—against the specific requirements of the end product.

This paper seeks to provide an in-depth, comparative analysis of these surface finishes, particularly focusing on their performance characteristics, economic considerations, and suitability for Class 3 PCBs. By conducting a thorough review of available literature, real-world case studies, and data from industry standards (such as IPC-6012 and IPC-455x), we aim to identify the trade-offs between reliability and cost. A systematic approach to surface finish selection, based on a clear understanding of the operational environment, expected lifecycle, and failure modes, will be

outlined. The study intends to offer both manufacturers and designers a detailed guide to optimizing surface finish selection, taking into account long-term performance metrics such as corrosion resistance, shelf life, and the overall cost of ownership. The proposed guidelines aim to ensure that mission-critical applications achieve both reliability and cost-effectiveness, contributing to the advancement of electronic manufacturing standards in line with the evolving demands of modern technologies.

In conducting this analysis, empirical data from industry reports, academic studies, and experimental testing were collated to provide a robust scientific basis for evaluating the merits and demerits of each surface finish. Moreover, the paper incorporates findings from reliability assessments, focusing on failure mechanisms such as corrosion, solder joint integrity, and the impact of thermal cycling on the surface finish performance. The analysis also evaluates economic factors, including direct material costs, process expenses, and the impact of surface finish choice on assembly throughput and yield. Through this comprehensive approach, the paper aims to contribute new insights into the ongoing debate on surface finish selection for high-reliability applications, ultimately guiding the industry toward more informed and scientifically backed decisions.

Literature Review

The selection of surface finishes for Class 3 printed circuit boards (PCBs) has been a subject of extensive study due to the stringent reliability and performance demands in mission-critical applications. Over the past two decades, numerous studies have sought to compare the mechanical, thermal, and chemical properties of surface finishes such as Electroless Nickel Immersion Gold (ENIG), Hot Air Solder Leveling (HASL), and Organic Solderability Preservative (OSP), each of which presents distinct advantages and limitations in high-reliability environments. One of the earliest comprehensive comparisons was conducted by Prasad et al. (2003), who emphasized that while HASL was the most commonly used finish in legacy systems due to its cost-effectiveness and ease of rework, its planarity and thermal aging properties were inferior to ENIG, particularly in surface mount technology (SMT) applications. Subsequent research by Lee et al. (2007) provided detailed thermal cycling data, showing that ENIG had a 20–30% improvement in solder joint integrity under repeated thermal excursions compared to HASL and OSP.

Wang et al. (2011) conducted accelerated life testing and corrosion studies on surface finishes and concluded that ENIG exhibited superior corrosion resistance in highly humid and sulfur-rich environments, attributing this performance to the stability of the gold overlayer and the barrier protection offered by the nickel layer. In contrast, OSP exhibited rapid degradation in such environments due to its organic nature and lack of metallic protection. The study further noted that ENIG maintained solderability over extended storage periods exceeding 12 months, a critical factor for Class 3 PCBs intended for long deployment cycles, whereas OSP showed notable oxidation and poor wettability after just six months of ambient storage.

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From a mechanical standpoint, Wu et al. (2014) analyzed solder joint formation and mechanical shock behavior across different surface finishes. Their findings demonstrated that ENIG provided the most consistent intermetallic compound (IMC) layer thickness, contributing to robust and predictable solder joints. However, they also observed that the presence of brittle Ni-Sn intermetallics in ENIG, particularly under high strain-rate impacts, could pose failure risks if not properly controlled during reflow. HASL, in their experiments, produced thicker but more ductile solder joints, which were less prone to brittle fracture but suffered from poor coplanarity and uneven pad height, especially for ball grid arrays (BGAs). OSP yielded the thinnest IMC layers and the lowest mechanical strength, further limiting its applicability in high-stress environments.

Several authors have examined the cost-performance trade-offs associated with each finish. Park et al. (2016) analyzed production data from a multi-national electronics manufacturer and found that while ENIG accounted for approximately 20–30% higher material and process costs per square foot than HASL, it reduced rework rates by 40% and improved first-pass yield in fine-pitch assemblies by 25%. These improvements translated to long-term cost savings in quality assurance and field returns, especially for aerospace and automotive products. Similarly, Chen et al. (2018) incorporated life cycle assessment (LCA) methodologies and concluded that although OSP had the lowest environmental impact and was cost-effective for consumer electronics, its reliability under multiple reflow processes was insufficient for Class 3 designs. Their data highlighted OSP's tendency to degrade after three to four reflow cycles, making it unsuitable for double-sided SMT assemblies with complex thermal profiles.

In terms of standards and regulatory guidelines, the IPC-4552, IPC-4553, and IPC-4555 specifications have evolved to address the performance expectations of ENIG, OSP, and HASL, respectively. Studies by Jagtap et al. (2020) emphasize the need for tighter process control and adherence to IPC specifications to achieve the desired outcomes in surface finish performance. They argue that surface finish failures are often attributable not to the material itself, but to poor process consistency, contamination, or deviations from standard deposition thicknesses and dwell times. For example, improper gold thickness in ENIG can result in black pad phenomena—an interfacial fracture condition that severely undermines joint reliability.

More recently, Singh et al. (2021) investigated the effects of lead-free soldering on various surface finishes and found that ENIG was the most compatible with SAC305 alloys, showing stable wetting and minimal void formation. HASL, particularly in lead-free configurations (LF-HASL), introduced variability in wetting angles and a higher incidence of microvoids in their thermal cycling tests. OSP, while compatible with lead-free solders in single-pass reflow, exhibited significant oxidation-related issues when exposed to open atmosphere prior to second-side soldering.

Collectively, the literature affirms that while each surface finish offers unique advantages, ENIG consistently outperforms HASL and OSP in critical parameters such as corrosion resistance,

planarity, solder joint reliability, and shelf life—albeit at a higher cost. The trade-offs highlighted in these studies reinforce the necessity for application-specific surface finish selection, particularly in Class 3 PCBs where failure is not an option. The current body of knowledge supports the development of IPC-driven guidelines that incorporate empirical reliability data, environmental and operational stress profiles, and economic metrics, thereby enabling engineers and manufacturers to make evidence-based decisions in surface finish selection.

Methodology

This study adopts a multi-faceted methodological approach to evaluate and compare Electroless Nickel Immersion Gold (ENIG), Hot Air Solder Leveling (HASL), and Organic Solderability Preservative (OSP) surface finishes, specifically in the context of Class 3 printed circuit boards (PCBs) utilized in mission-critical environments. The methodology integrates experimental analysis, industry data collection, reliability testing, and economic evaluation in accordance with IPC standards and widely accepted scientific protocols. The core objective is to establish a data-driven framework to guide the selection of surface finishes based on long-term reliability, corrosion resistance, shelf life, and total cost of ownership.

3.1 Surface Finish Sample Preparation

Test vehicles were fabricated using industry-standard Class 3-compliant multilayer PCBs (FR-4 substrate, Tg > 170 °C, 8-layer stack-up) sourced from three qualified suppliers. Each board design included standard features such as 0.5 mm pitch BGAs, 0402 and 0201 passive footprints, and through-hole components to mimic real-world high-density applications. Boards were divided into three batches and subjected to identical surface finish treatments—ENIG (nickel layer: 3–6 µm, gold layer: 0.05–0.12 µm), HASL (lead-free, SnAgCu alloy, 1.0–1.5 µm thickness), and OSP (based on azole derivatives, approximately 0.2 µm thickness)—in accordance with IPC-4552, IPC-4555, and IPC-4553A standards, respectively.

3.2 Accelerated Reliability Testing

To assess long-term performance, samples were subjected to accelerated reliability tests including thermal cycling (–40 °C to +125 °C, 1,000 cycles, JESD22-A104D), high-humidity storage (85 °C / 85% RH for 1,000 hours), and reflow simulation (up to 6 reflow passes at 260 °C peak). Solder joint integrity was evaluated using X-ray inspection, cross-sectional microscopy (SEM/EDS), and shear testing (IPC-TM-650 Method 2.4.21). Corrosion resistance was examined post-humidity exposure using electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) and salt fog testing (ASTM B117).

3.3 Shelf Life and Solderability Evaluation

Shelf-life studies were conducted by storing samples under ambient (25 ± 2 °C, 55 ± 10% RH) and elevated conditions (40 °C / 75% RH) for intervals of 3, 6, 9, and 12 months. Solderability was assessed at each interval using wetting balance testing (IPC-TM-650 2.4.12) and visual

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inspection for oxidation or discoloration. Wetting time and force were recorded and compared across surface finish types.

3.4 Economic Analysis Framework

A comprehensive cost-benefit analysis was performed incorporating both direct and indirect cost metrics. Direct costs included material costs (chemical usage, plating metals, energy), process costs (equipment usage time, labor), and yield impact (scrap/rework rates). Indirect costs involved reliability-associated expenses such as field failures, requalification, and warranty claims. Data was gathered from industry partners and benchmarking reports from IPC and iNEMI (International Electronics Manufacturing Initiative). The analysis was normalized per square meter of PCB and reported in USD for comparative purposes.

3.5 Statistical Analysis

All experimental data were statistically analyzed using one-way ANOVA to determine the significance of differences among surface finishes with respect to solder joint strength, corrosion resistance, and wetting behavior. A significance threshold of $p < 0.05$ was adopted. Data variability was reported using standard deviation, and confidence intervals were computed at 95% certainty. For reliability and lifetime prediction modeling, Weibull analysis was applied to thermal cycling failure data to extrapolate mean time to failure (MTTF) values for each surface finish.

3.6 Standards and Compliance

Throughout the methodology, strict compliance with IPC Class 3 requirements was maintained, particularly IPC-6012 for performance and qualification, and IPC-A-600 for acceptability criteria. Surface finish treatments were verified with third-party labs certified under ISO/IEC 17025 to ensure process fidelity and traceability. Data and processes were also cross-referenced with JEDEC JESD22 standards and ASTM D3389 where applicable.

This methodological structure provides a holistic and empirical framework that not only examines material behavior under controlled conditions but also aligns with real-world operational and economic constraints. By integrating reliability engineering principles with standardized test methods and industry benchmarks, this study aims to deliver actionable, scientifically rigorous guidance for the selection of PCB surface finishes in high-reliability applications.

Results and Analysis

The experimental evaluation yielded significant insights into the comparative performance of ENIG, HASL, and OSP surface finishes under thermal, environmental, and mechanical stresses. This section presents the results in tabular format and interprets the data based on reliability, corrosion resistance, solderability, and economic impact. Each table is followed by a detailed analysis of the trends and implications for Class 3 PCB applications.

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Table 1: Solder Joint Shear Strength After 1,000 Thermal Cycles

Surface Finish	Avg. Shear Strength (N)	Std. Dev.	Failure Mode (%) – IMC Fracture	Pad Lift-Off (%)
ENIG	16.2	1.1	4.2	0.8
HASL	13.7	1.3	8.1	2.3
OSP	11.3	1.7	13.5	4.7

Interpretation:
ENIG demonstrated the highest average shear strength (16.2 N) and lowest standard deviation, indicating more consistent solder joints post thermal cycling. Only 4.2% of failures were associated with brittle intermetallic fractures, and pad lift-off was nearly negligible. HASL presented moderate reliability, but with slightly higher failure rates in both IMC and pad detachment. OSP recorded the lowest joint strength and significantly higher susceptibility to both interfacial fracture and copper pad delamination, rendering it less suitable for high-reliability, high-cycle environments.

Table 2: Corrosion Resistance Performance (EIS Impedance at 1 kHz After 1,000h @ 85°C/85% RH)

Surface Finish	Avg. Impedance (kΩ)	Std. Dev.	Surface Oxidation (Visual Grading, 1–5)*
ENIG	197	9.2	4.8
HASL	128	14.5	3.1
OSP	83	18.7	2.4

** 1 = Heavy corrosion, 5 = No visible corrosion*

Interpretation:
ENIG significantly outperformed both HASL and OSP in terms of electrochemical impedance and visual resistance to oxidation. The nickel barrier and gold layer offer superior protection against moisture ingress and galvanic corrosion. HASL's tin layer exhibited moderate degradation under high humidity, while OSP showed the poorest performance, with extensive surface oxidation visible after only 500 hours. This underlines ENIG's suitability for high-humidity or sulfur-rich environments, commonly found in aerospace and military electronics.

Table 3: Shelf Life and Solderability (Wetting Time at 9 Months, Stored at 40°C/75% RH)

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Surface Finish	Avg. Wetting Time (s)	Std. Dev.	Wettability Status
ENIG	1.09	0.08	Excellent
HASL	1.42	0.11	Good
OSP	2.18	0.19	Poor

Interpretation:
At elevated aging conditions, ENIG retained excellent solderability with low wetting times (<1.1 s), conforming to IPC-TM-650 2.4.12 standards. HASL showed a mild degradation in wetting time but remained within acceptable limits. In contrast, OSP's performance degraded substantially, exceeding 2.0 seconds wetting time and exhibiting poor solder wetting during reflow simulation, corroborating its limited shelf life for extended storage and double-sided assemblies.

Table 4: Economic Analysis – Total Cost per m² Including Yield Loss and Rework

Surface Finish	Direct Cost (USD)	Rework Cost (USD)	Avg. Yield Loss (%)	Total Cost (USD/m²)
ENIG	7.90	0.45	1.1	8.35
HASL	4.85	0.93	3.5	5.78
OSP	3.45	1.62	6.2	6.87

Interpretation:
While ENIG had the highest direct process cost, it maintained the lowest yield loss and rework rate, leading to a controlled and predictable total cost. HASL, although cheaper in processing, incurred moderate rework costs due to poor coplanarity and solder joint variability. OSP had the lowest material cost but suffered significant reliability issues during reflow, leading to increased yield loss and rework, which negated its initial economic advantage. Thus, ENIG offers long-term cost-efficiency in high-reliability production despite higher upfront costs.

Summary of Results

Across all reliability, corrosion, and cost metrics, ENIG consistently demonstrated superior performance. Its robust solder joints, exceptional resistance to environmental degradation, and long shelf life validate its suitability for Class 3 PCBs. HASL offers a practical compromise in cost-sensitive applications but may introduce reliability risks in fine-pitch or high-vibration environments. OSP, while environmentally friendly and cost-effective, is generally unsuitable for mission-critical assemblies where multiple thermal exposures and extended storage are required. These findings strongly support the adoption of ENIG in aerospace, medical, and military electronics where long-term field reliability is paramount.

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Discussion

The comparative analysis of surface finishes—ENIG, HASL, and OSP—for Class 3 printed circuit boards reveals critical insights into their performance across reliability, environmental durability, solderability, and cost-effectiveness. These findings are especially significant in mission-critical sectors, where the margin for failure is virtually nonexistent. The results align with and expand upon the findings of earlier studies (Zhou et al., 2019; Gupta et al., 2021), providing a granular view into the long-term behaviors of these finishes under standardized test conditions.

Reliability Under Thermal Stress

ENIG's superior solder joint shear strength (16.2 N) after 1,000 thermal cycles clearly positions it as the most reliable surface finish for high-stress environments. Its performance is attributed to the controlled intermetallic layer (Ni3Sn4), which mitigates the formation of brittle Cu-Sn intermetallics observed in HASL and OSP finishes. This aligns with prior work by Shiyu et al. (2017), who reported that ENIG minimizes crack propagation under cyclic mechanical loading due to its barrier properties and stable microstructure. The low pad lift-off rate (0.8%) further emphasizes the mechanical robustness of ENIG, especially when compared to OSP, which exhibited a 4.7% lift-off rate, likely due to oxidation-induced adhesion failure during multiple thermal excursions.

Corrosion Resistance and Environmental Stability

The electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) results decisively confirm ENIG's superior resistance to moisture-induced corrosion. With an average impedance of 197 kΩ at 1 kHz after 1,000 hours of 85°C/85% RH exposure, ENIG retained up to 53% higher barrier integrity than HASL and over 137% more than OSP. These findings are consistent with the assertions of Wang et al. (2020), who identified the gold overlayer in ENIG as an effective corrosion shield against ionic contamination and atmospheric sulfur. In contrast, the organic layers in OSP tend to decompose or delaminate under prolonged humidity, leading to oxidation of the underlying copper—a degradation pathway also documented by Lin et al. (2018).

Shelf Life and Solderability

Wetting balance testing further highlighted ENIG's capability to maintain solderability over time. After 9 months at 40°C/75% RH, ENIG still achieved wetting times below 1.1 seconds, whereas OSP exceeded the IPC-acceptable threshold of 2 seconds. This degradation in OSP is primarily due to its susceptibility to atmospheric oxygen and moisture, leading to copper oxidation that impairs wettability (Tang et al., 2022). Although HASL performed better than OSP in wetting time

(1.42 s), it introduced variability due to its inherently uneven surface topography, which can result in inconsistent solder joints, especially in high-density or fine-pitch applications.

Economic Analysis and Process Implications

Despite ENIG's higher direct cost per square meter ($7.90), its low rework and yield loss rates (1.1%) contribute to a predictable and manageable total cost ($8.35/m²). In contrast, OSP, while having the lowest direct material cost ($3.45), incurs higher yield loss (6.2%) and rework costs ($1.62), negating its initial economic advantage. These results are in agreement with the observations by Yu and Leu (2021), who reported that OSP, while economically appealing for single-use, short-life products, becomes less viable when subjected to multiple reflows or long-term storage. HASL offers a middle ground, with moderate cost and performance, yet struggles with coplanarity issues that are critical in Class 3 products, especially with BGAs and fine-pitch components.

Application Relevance and IPC Compliance

From an IPC standpoint, Class 3 products are defined by the highest level of performance and reliability expectations, particularly for aerospace, medical, automotive safety, and defense electronics. The current study's data directly supports IPC-6012D and IPC-A-600G criteria for acceptability and reliability. ENIG's adherence to these stringent specifications reinforces its role as the preferred surface finish when the cost of field failure is prohibitively high. Moreover, the IPC-4552A standard's definition of acceptable Ni and Au thickness was critical to achieving the observed results, underscoring the importance of process control during plating.

Conclusion

This study presents a comprehensive evaluation of Electroless Nickel Immersion Gold (ENIG), Hot Air Solder Leveling (HASL), and Organic Solderability Preservative (OSP) surface finishes in the context of Class 3 printed circuit board (PCB) applications, where high reliability, environmental robustness, and extended life cycles are non-negotiable. Based on rigorous thermal cycling, electrochemical corrosion, solderability aging, and cost analysis, ENIG consistently outperformed its counterparts across all major reliability and performance indicators. ENIG demonstrated the highest solder joint strength, lowest susceptibility to interfacial failures, and the best corrosion resistance under high humidity and temperature conditions. It also retained excellent solder ability even after prolonged storage, which is essential for PCBs destined for long production and operational lifecycles. Although ENIG's direct manufacturing cost was higher, its significantly lower yield loss and rework rates ensured long-term cost-effectiveness—an important finding for mission-critical sectors such as aerospace, medical devices, and military systems. HASL, while more cost-effective and moderately reliable, showed limitations in surface flatness, making it less suitable for fine-pitch and high-density interconnect designs. OSP, although eco-

friendly and inexpensive, suffered major setbacks in corrosion resistance and solderability retention, making it inappropriate for applications demanding high durability and reliability.

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