

VACUUM PUMP LUBRICANTS

Field of the Invention

- 5 The invention relates to vacuum pump lubricants and in particular lubricant systems and compounds for lubricating the bearings in vacuum pumps.

Background to the Invention

- 10 Vacuum pumps typically comprise an impeller in the form of a rotor mounted on a rotor shaft for rotation relative to a surrounding stator. The rotor shaft is supported by a bearing arrangement that may comprise two bearings located at or intermediate respective ends of the shaft. One or both of these bearings may be a rolling bearing.

- 15 A typical known rolling bearing comprises an inner race fixed relative to the rotor shaft, an outer race and a plurality of rolling elements located between the races for allowing relative rotation of the inner race and the outer race. To prevent mutual contact between the rolling elements, they are often guided
20 and evenly spaced by a cage. Adequate lubrication is essential to ensure accurate and reliable operation of rolling bearings. The main purpose of the lubricant is to establish a load-carrying film separating the bearing components in rolling and sliding contact in order to minimise friction and wear. Other purposes include the prevention of oxidation or corrosion of the
25 bearing components, the formation of a barrier to contaminants and the transfer of heat away from the bearing components.

- 30 The lubricant is generally in the form of either oil or grease (a mixture of oil and a thickening agent). However, certain lubricants are not suitable for certain vacuum pump configurations and certain applications on which the vacuum pump is operating. In particular some industrial applications require the vacuum pump to operate without causing any contamination in the

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chamber that the pump is evacuating. As a result, hydrocarbon oils having a low vapour pressure might be considered as suitable for use within the vacuum pump mechanism. However, the vacuum pump designer also has to consider the chemistry of gases that pass through the pump during
5 evacuation of a chamber. Thus, a lubricant has to be selected that would not react chemically with the gases passing through the pump. Further considerations also need to be given to the operating temperature of the pump. Lubricants have an optimum operating temperature parameter window and some lubricants are known to degrade if they are exposed to operating
10 temperatures above a threshold.

For example, in the manufacture of certain semi-conductor products an ultra-clean environment is required in the process chamber. This can be achieved by utilising so-called dry vacuum pumps where the pump's swept volumes are
15 free from any sealing fluid used to seal the gap between the pump rotor and stator. Such dry vacuum pumps also use ball bearings to facilitate rotation of the rotor shaft. The bearings are also required to operate in an environment of reduced pressure. Thus, synthetic lubricants are used to lubricate the bearings in order to try and prevent contamination of the evacuated chamber
20 that may otherwise occur if certain hydrocarbon lubricants were used to lubricate the bearings. Furthermore, the chemical stability and operating temperature range of certain synthetic lubricants makes this type of lubricant an attractive proposition for use in vacuum pumps. Suitable synthetic
25 lubricants having a suitably chemical inert nature for use in semiconductor processing applications include compounds that are collectively known as perfluoropolyether (PFPE). Additionally, some PFPE compounds are known to have a suitably low vapour pressure, making such compounds suitable for vacuum applications. An example of such a compound is sold under the registered trademark FOMBLIN.

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However, the known synthetic lubricants currently used in vacuum applications exhibit relatively poor lubrication properties compared to

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hydrocarbon compound lubricants (which are not suitable for use in vacuum pumps, as described above). As a result, conventional steel bearings do not provide the best performance when PFPE lubricants are used. Hence, different bearing materials can be used to improve bearing life and robustness. For instance, ceramic ball bearings have been found to provide adequate performance when used in conjunction with PFPE lubricants. Such ceramic bearings are however relatively expensive compared to metal or steel bearings. Furthermore, the use of ceramic bearings can constrain the design of pump components and operational characteristics due to different bearing performance compared to steel or metal bearings.

Summary of the Invention

There is a desire to reduce the cost of vacuum pump bearings and lubricants.

In order to address this desire, the present inventive concept is directed to a vacuum pump comprising a rotor and a stator, wherein the rotor is supported by metal bearings (such as steel bearings) to allow relative rotation of the rotor with respect to the stator. A liquid PFPE lubricant compound is provided to lubricate the bearings, wherein the lubricant further comprises a solid lubricant that is in suspension in the liquid lubricant. The solid lubricant can comprise any of graphite, graphene and molybdenum disulphide. In other words, the inventive concept encompasses a lubricated bearing arranged to support a rotating shaft in a body under sub-atmospheric conditions, wherein a lubricant used to lubricate the bearing comprises liquid PFPE lubricant having a low vapour pressure, and a solid lubricant that is held in suspension in the liquid lubricant. The solid lubricant may comprise any of graphite, graphene and molybdenum disulphide.

More particularly there is provided a vacuum pump comprising: a rotor mounted inside a stator; at least one roller bearing arrangement disposed on a shaft of the rotor to allow rotation of the rotor with respect to the stator; and

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a lubrication supply arranged to supply a lubricant compound to the roller bearing, wherein the lubricant compound comprises a liquid and a solid component, the liquid component comprising a PFPE lubricant, the solid component comprising one or more of graphite, graphene or molybdenum sulphide held in suspension within the liquid component.

In another aspect of the present invention there is provided a vacuum pump lubricant comprising a solid and a liquid component, the solid component forming a suspension in the liquid component, wherein the liquid component is a PFPE lubricant and the solid component is any one of graphite, graphene or molybdenum sulphide.

As a result, these aspects of the present invention provide a cost effective solution to the problems discussed above. The solid component held in suspension within the liquid lubricant enables the use of metallic roller bearings because the solid lubricant forms a layer of material on the moving parts of the metal bearings such that the operational life of the bearing is greatly extended when compared to the use of metal bearings lubricated by low vapour pressure synthetic lubricants. In other words, the addition of the solid lubricant in the PFPE vacuum lubricant enables vacuum pumps to use metal (steel) roller bearings as opposed to the more expensive ceramic bearings that have been used to date. As a result, the cost of making and running vacuum pumps that incorporate the present invention can be reduced significantly.

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Detailed Description

Embodiments of the present invention are now described by way of example. The skilled person understands that the inventive concept is not limited to the embodiments that we describe herein and other alternative embodiments can be used without leaving the scope of the general inventive concept.

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FOMBLIN ® is a known synthetic PFPE lubricant that can be used in vacuum applications. In particular, this lubricant is used in vacuum pumps to lubricate roller bearings disposed between the pump's rotor and stator. Typically however, FOMBLIN ® is most effective in vacuum pump applications when
5 used in combination with ceramic bearings in order to achieve adequate bearing performance.

We believe that FOMBLIN ® can now be used effectively in vacuum pumps having metal or steel roller bearings when a solid lubricant is added in
10 suspension into the FOMBLIN ®. The addition of the solid lubricant is thought to provide an additional lubrication layer between the steel bearing components so that the operational life of the steel bearings is prolonged to an extent that it is now economically viable to use steel bearings in vacuum pump applications.

15 The solid lubricant can comprise graphite in a powdered form, molybdenum disulphide or graphene. The solid lubricant is held in suspension within the liquid lubricant (for example, FOMBLIN ®). The ratio of solid to liquid lubricant depends on the pump design and the industrial application that the pump is
20 used in. For example, the use of a pump on a relatively harsh semiconductor manufacturing process, where highly corrosive gases pass through the vacuum pump during processing, then a higher/lower concentration of solid lubricant may be required when compared to a relatively lighter duty cycle. Additionally, if the vacuum pump is running continuously over a long periods
25 of time (for example, several months or even years), then more solid lubricant may be required when compared to a pump that has a relatively lighter duty cycle. The ratio of solid lubricant to liquid PFPE would be in the region of concentrations levels 0.001% to 10% by volume of solid materials to liquid lubricant or more specifically a range of 0.01% to 1% depending on
30 applications for the vacuum pump.

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In a vacuum pump, the lubricant described above can be circulated throughout the components requiring lubrication within a lubrication supply and recirculation circuit. The liquid lubricant containing the solid lubricant held in suspension is stored in a lubricant reservoir from where it can be delivered
5 under gravity or by means of a suitable lubricant pump to a bearing that requires lubrication.

Typically the bearing is disposed on a rotor shaft to allow rotation of the rotor when it is mounted in the pump's stator. The bearing is a known ball bearing
10 arrangement comprising an inner and outer race with ball bearings disposed between the races. A cage is used to locate and maintain appropriate spacing between the steel balls and allow the bearing to function in the usual manner. Lubricant is required on the balls to maintain operation of the pump between service intervals.

15 Thus, the lubricant (comprising both solid and liquid components) is supplied to the bearings and returned to the lubricant reservoir through a lubricant circuit. As a result, the lubricant is able to continually circulate to the components that require lubrication. In order to maintain the solid lubricant in
20 a suspension within the liquid a means to agitate the lubricant might be needed. The agitation means may comprise a driven stirrer, or the recirculation of the lubricant can be designed to pass over a component that causes turbulence in the flow of lubricant to stir the suspension and hence keep the solid lubricant in suspension.

25 Other types of synthetic lubricant can be used and the invention is not limited to FOMBLIN®. Other suitable lubricants include those that are sold under the brands KRYTOX® and KLUEBER®. Additionally, modified or different solid lubricants can be used in suitable powdered form. For example, in the case of
30 graphene, the graphene may be functionalised with appropriate molecule groups or molecular chains to aid dispersion of the graphene in the PFPE oil. For instance, fluorinated long chain hydrocarbons, possibly including

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fluorinated organothiol, might be suitable, depending on the requirements. Furthermore, the graphite suspension can comprise powdered graphite, or graphite formed into nanostructures such as spherical fullerenes (so-called bucky-balls) or cylindrical fullerenes such as carbon nano-tubes.

Claims

1. A vacuum pump lubricant comprising a solid and a liquid component,
wherein the solid component is held in a suspension in the liquid
component, and wherein the liquid component is a perfluoropolyether
(PFPE) lubricant and characterised in that the solid component is
graphene which, for improved dispersion in the liquid component, is
functionalised with fluorinated long chain hydrocarbons including
fluorinated organothiol.
2. A vacuum pump comprising:
a rotor mounted inside a stator;
at least one roller bearing arrangement disposed on a shaft of the rotor
to allow rotation of the rotor with respect to the stator;
a vacuum pump lubricant according to claim 1, and
a lubrication supply arranged to supply the lubricant to the roller
bearing
3. A vacuum pump according to claim 2, wherein the roller bearing
arrangement comprises metal ball bearings disposed between inner
and outer races, said races being made from metal.
4. A vacuum pump according to claim 2, wherein the liquid component
comprises a PFPE compound having a low vapour pressure for use at
sub-atmospheric pressures.
5. A vacuum pump according to claim 2, wherein the functionalised
graphene comprises, between 0.001% to 10% of total weight of the
lubricant.

6. A vacuum pump according to claim 5, wherein the functionalised graphene comprises, between 0.01% to 1% of total weight of the lubricant.