

### Introduction

This application note describes how to use a digital potentiometer to generate an adjustable voltage supply using a MAX1776 Step-Down DC-DC Converter. A reference design using the DS3903 is shown that features the ability to produce a regulated supply between 1.25V and 5.50V, and the potentiometer allows the supply to be calibrated to within 1.8% of the desired voltage level. Depending on the current limit settings used with the MAX1776, the design is capable of supplying up to 600mA of current.

The DS3903 is an ideal part for this type of application because the voltage allowed on the potentiometer terminals is 0V to 5.5V independent of the DS3903's supply voltage. This allows the DS3903 to be designed into the feedback loop of the MAX1776 without ensuring that the DS3903's supply level is always greater than the output voltage being generated. Additionally, the DS3903 provides 30PPM/°C stability when used as a voltage divider over temperature, which will minimize the effects of temperature on the performance of the circuit. For further reading on the use of digital potentiometers in power supply designs, AN226 discusses using digital potentiometers with step-up DC-DC converters.

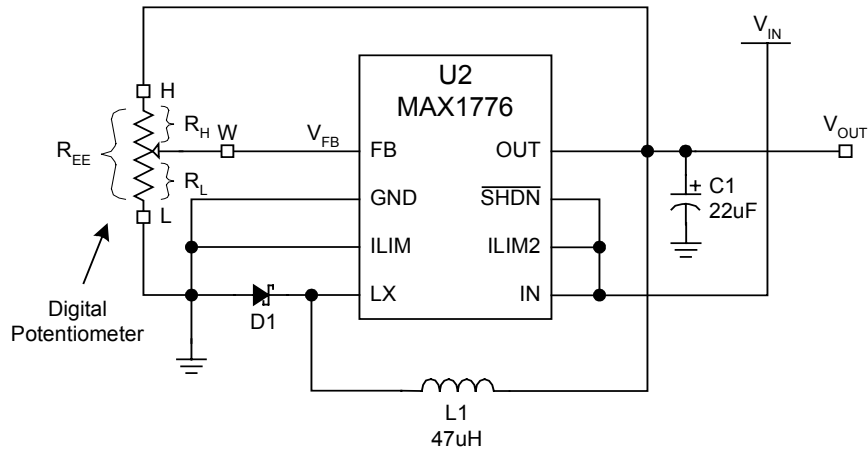
### Benefits of Using a Digital Potentiometers

The primary benefit for using a digital potentiometer for creating an adjustable power supply is that they allow the automation of the calibration process. This is particularly true for 2-wire and 3-wire digital potentiometers because their digital interface is easily computer controlled. When interfaced to a test/measurement system, this allows the voltage supply to be calibrated without introducing a labor-intensive process into the production of the voltage supply circuitry. Other benefits of using digital potentiometers for this type of application include: nonvolatile (NV) position settings; small form factors; several potentiometers per package; low ratio-metric temperature coefficient; and last but not least, they are relatively inexpensive.

### Using the DS3903 with the MAX1776

To generate an adjustable supply, the digital potentiometer is used to set the ratio of the output voltage  $V_{OUT}$ , to the MAX1776's feedback voltage,  $V_{FB}$ . This is done by connecting the output voltage to the high-side terminal of the potentiometer (H), the low-side terminal (L) to ground, and the wiper output (W) to the feedback pin FB, see Figure 1.

## Figure 1. Using a Digital Potentiometer in the Feedback Loop with a MAX1776



The output voltage will be set by adjusting the position of the potentiometer, which will cause the MAX1776 to raise or lower the output voltage until  $V_{FB}$  is eventually maintained within the specified range of  $V_{FB}$  for the MAX1776. The output voltage is shown as function of resistance in Equation 1, where  $V_{OUT}$  is the output voltage,  $R_L$  is the resistance from the wiper to ground, and  $R_{EE}$  is the end-to-end resistance of the digital potentiometer.

$$V_{FB} = V_{out} \frac{R_L}{R_{EE}} \quad \text{Equation 1}$$

$$R_{EE} = \Delta R(\bar{P} - 1) \quad \text{Equation 2}$$

$$R_L = \Delta R(P) \quad \text{Equation 3}$$

$$V_{OUT} = \frac{V_{FB}(\bar{P} - 1)}{P} \quad \text{Equation 4}$$

$$V_{OUT} = \frac{1.25V(128 - 1)}{P} = \frac{158.75V}{P} \quad \text{Equation 5}$$

Equation 2 and Equation 3 show  $R_{EE}$  and  $R_L$  as a functions of  $\Delta R$  and  $P$ , where  $\Delta R$  is the incremental resistance increase per position,  $P$  is the current position setting, and the constant  $\bar{P}$  is the total number of positions for a given digital potentiometer. In the case of the DS3903, its potentiometers are 128 positions each.

Equation 4 is the result of substituting Equations 2 and 3 into Equation 1, then solving for  $V_{OUT}$  and simplifying the expression. Equation 5, is Equation 4, assuming  $V_{FB}$  for the MAX1776 is constant at its nominal value, 1.25V, and the DS3903 with 128 positions is used.

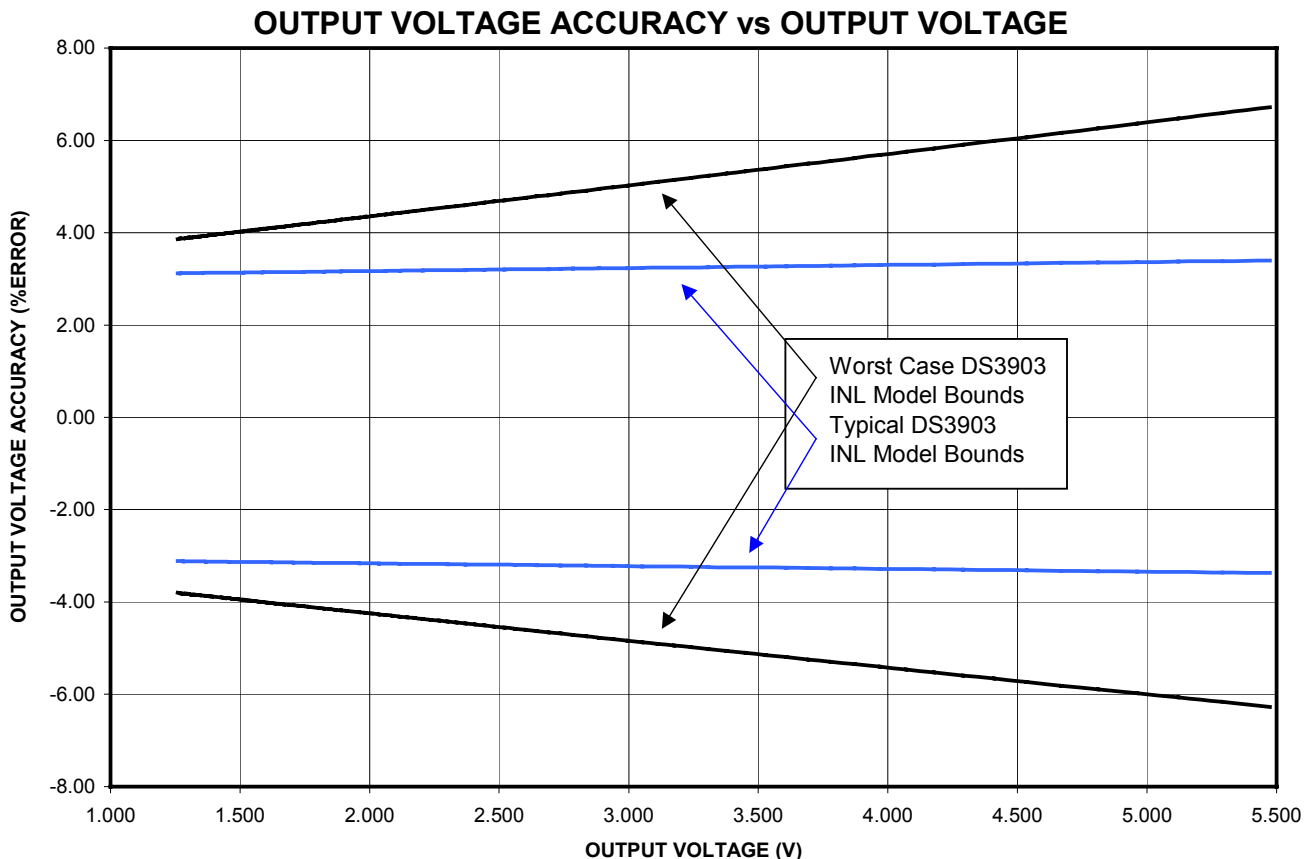
The circuit shown in Figure 2 is a simple circuit that allows the DS3903 to operate from the MAX1776's input voltage ( $V_{IN} = 4.5V$  to  $24.0V$ ), and provide the feedback required to regulate the output. Key elements that make it possible for the DS3903 to operate in this circuit are:



### Supply Accuracy

Supply accuracy is being defined as error that can be expected in setting the supply to a particular voltage by calculating the digital potentiometer's position using Equation 5. Equation 5 assumes the MAX1776 has a typical feedback voltage ( $V_{FB} = 1.25V$ ) and ideal Integral Non-Linearity (INL) characteristics for the DS3903's potentiometer. In reality, the MAX1776's feedback voltage is a  $\pm 3\%$  value, and the data sheet value for the INL of the DS3903 is  $\pm 1$  LSB. Because the output voltage is determined by the multiplying  $V_{FB}$  by the 1/ratio of the potentiometer, any error associated with INL is multiplied by the ratio of  $V_{OUT}/V_{FB}$  as well. Figure 3 shows the output accuracy as a function of the desired output voltage using both worst case and typical (based on the typical operating characteristic in the DS3903's data sheet) INL models for the potentiometer. This curve was calculated using Equation 4 with the worst case  $V_{FB}$  (either 1.212V or 1.288V for low and high bounds respectively) and  $R_L$  adjusted by  $\pm 1$  LSB or the typical INL value of  $\pm 0.090$ LSB. The output voltage's accuracy in most cases will not be important because the potentiometer's precision will be what effects the supply's accuracy after calibration.

**Figure 3. Output Voltage Accuracy as a Function of Desired Output Voltage**



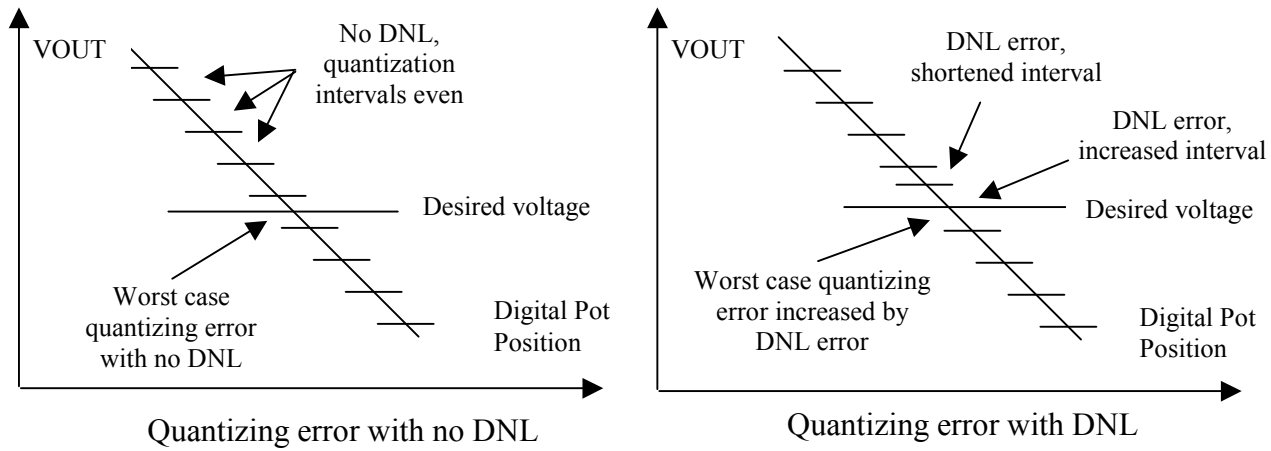
### Supply Precision

Supply precision determines the resolution that can be used to calibrate the supply to the desired output voltage. To analyze supply precision,  $V_{FB}$  is assumed to be constant for a given part, and the quantizing error due to the discrete steps of the digital potentiometer including differential non-linearity (DNL) is evaluated. It must be assumed that either the worst case or typical DNL will always affect the discrete step about the desired voltage. Figure 4 shows the effects of DNL on supply precision.

To calculate a supplies precision, Equation 1 is used, and  $R_L$  will be adjusted to account for the DNL such that  $R_L \pm DNL$  causes an increased quantization interval. The calibration error is  $\frac{1}{2}$  the quantization interval.

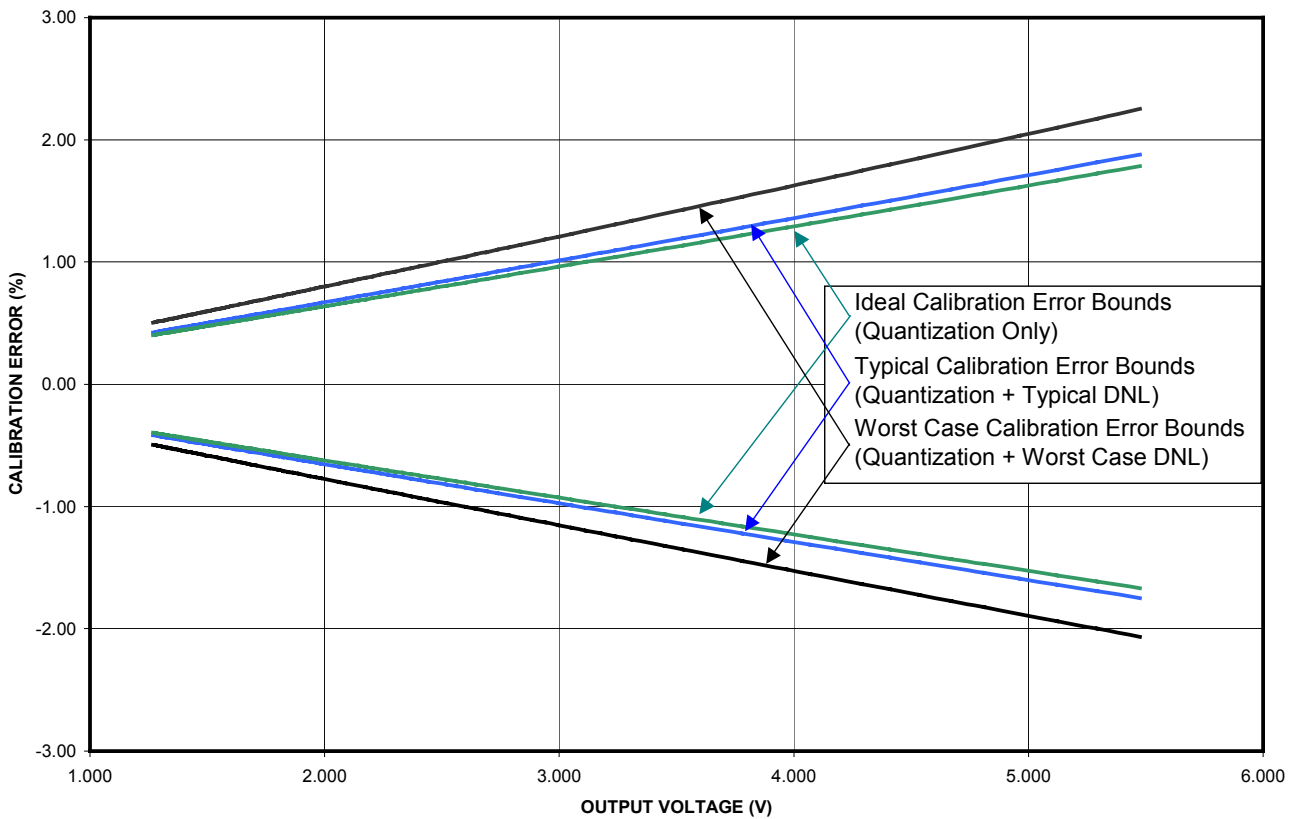
Figure 5 shows the example circuit's (Figure 2) worst case calibration error as a function of the output voltage.

**Figure 4. Analyzing Supply Precision Considering Quantization Error and DNL**



**Figure 5. Calibration Error Due to Supply Precision as a Function of the Desired Output Voltage**

**CALIBRATION % ERROR vs OUPUT VOLTAGE**



**Temperature Performance**

One of the advantages of using digital potentiometers in this type of a feedback loop is that digital potentiometers provide very good performance over temperature when they are used as voltage dividers. This is a direct result of the fact that the materials that make up the resistive elements within a digital

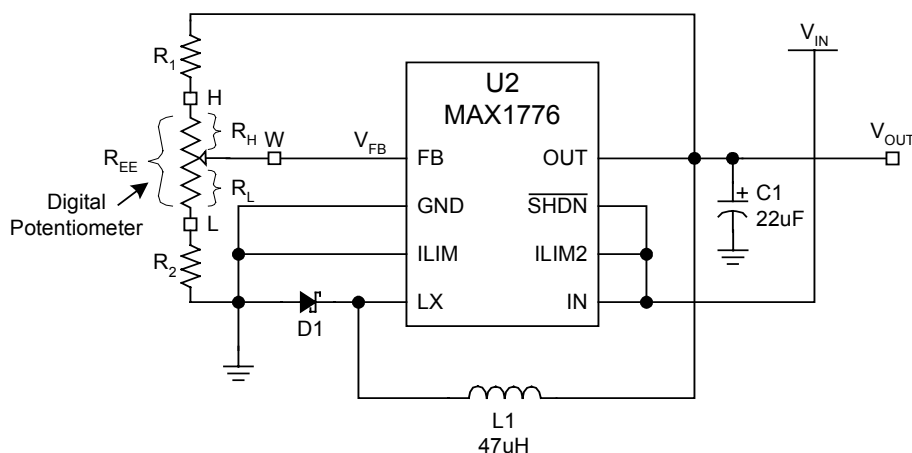
potentiometer are matched within a single die. Looking at the  $V_{\text{OUTPUT ACCURACY vs. TEMPERATURE}}$  typical performance curve in the MAX1776's data sheet, it shifts approximately -1.1% to +0.7% over the -40°C to +85°C temperature range. Most all of Dallas Semiconductor's digital potentiometers provide  $\pm 30$  PPM/°C temperature stability when used as a voltage divider. If the worst case scenarios are analyzed, the DS3903 will only add another 0.2% ( $30 \text{ PPM/}^\circ\text{C} \times (25^\circ\text{C} - (-40^\circ\text{C})) = 1950\text{PPM} = 0.195\%$ ) error to the temperature performance of the circuit. Typically the DS3903's voltage divider temperature coefficient is approximately 15 PPM/°C, so this effect would only typically cause a 0.1% change in the output voltage. When compared to external resistors that will each have their own temperature coefficients, the digital potentiometers are generally superior.

## Techniques to Improve the Circuit's Precision

With the design shown in Figure 2, only 99 of the 128 positions will produce output voltages under 5.5V. A simple improvement that dramatically improves the circuit's precision is to add resistors between the potentiometers low terminal and ground, and the high terminal and output voltage, see Figure 6. By calculating intelligent values for  $R_1$  and  $R_2$ , it becomes possible to use all the positions of the potentiometer to adjust the output voltage over a smaller range (e.g. all 128 positions adjust between 3.0V and 3.6V). Because there will be more positions of adjustment working over a smaller range, the precision of the circuit is greatly enhanced. One thing that must be carefully accounted for is that  $R_{\text{EE}}$  has a wide tolerance. Generally digital potentiometers specify  $R_{\text{EE}}$  as  $\pm 20\%$ , and additionally  $R_{\text{EE}}$  will shift over temperature.

Another easy way to improve the performance of the circuit is to choose a digital potentiometer that has more positions such as the DS1845. The upside of choosing the DS1845 is that it offers 256 positions instead of 128. The downside of choosing the DS1845 is that it requires that the potentiometers be operated within the supply level of the DS1845. Thus, the circuit may have to be operated from a regulated 5V supply, and require that the output voltage is less than 5V. This may be practical in some instances, and it is an easy way to adapt the circuit to specific needs.

## Figure 6. Improving the Circuit's Precision by Adding External Biasing Resistors



## Conclusion

This application note provides an example design using a digital potentiometer in the feedback loop of a step-down DC-DC converter, and a discussion of how to analyze the accuracy, precision and temperature performance of the circuit. Using digital potentiometers in power supply circuitry is beneficial in applications because it can reduce the circuit's size, calibration time, in many instances the overall component cost.

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## Dallas Semiconductor/Maxim Contact Information

***Company Addresses:***

Maxim Integrated Products, Inc

120 San Gabriel Drive

Sunnyvale, CA 94086

Tel: 408-737-7600

Fax: 408-737-7194

***Dallas Semiconductor***

4401 S. Beltwood Parkway

Dallas, TX 75244

Tel: 972-371-4448

Fax: 972-371-4799

***Product Literature / Samples Requests:***

(800) 998-8800

***Sales and Customer Service:***

(408) 737-7600

***World Wide Website:***

[www.maxim-ic.com](http://www.maxim-ic.com)

***Product Information:***

<http://www.maxim-ic.com/MaximProducts/products.htm>

***Ordering Information:***

<http://www.maxim-ic.com/BuyMaxim/Sales.htm>

***FTP Site:***

<ftp://ftp.dalsemi.com>

***Email Support:***

MixedSignal.Apps@dalsemi.com