Heat Treating with High Power Diode Lasers

Carbon dioxide (CO_2) lasers have been used in heat treating for over 30 years, as replacements for induction or other traditional heat treating techniques. However, limitations in CO_2 laser reliability and cost of ownership have made their use as a heat treating source less than ideal. Over the past few years, a new approach for heat treating based on the high power, direct diode laser has emerged. Direct diode lasers utilize a very different technology than CO_2 lasers to produce light, and in this way overcome the most significant disadvantages of CO_2 lasers. While diode lasers are by no means a panacea for all applications, they offer some compelling advantages in certain, distinct applications. This article reviews the basics of laser heat treating and its optimum uses, and compares CO_2 with diode laser technology.

Benefits of Laser Hardening

In laser heat treating, or case hardening, a spatially well defined beam of intense laser light is used to illuminate a work piece. This light is absorbed near the surface, and causes rapid heating that is highly localized to the illuminated area and which does not penetrate very deep into the bulk material. Depending upon the particulars of the part size, shape and material, the bulk heat capacity of the material typically acts as a heat sink for the extraction of heat from the surface, therefore enabling self-quenching.

The ability to precisely control the physical extent of the illuminated region together with the short timescale of energy transfer into the material give rise to the main benefits of laser surface modification over other techniques. These benefits are rapid processing, precise control over case depth and minimal part distortion. In particular, part distortion is typically low enough so that subsequent processing to restore dimensional accuracy, such as grinding or machining, is not necessary. Furthermore, in some cases, the laser induced surface transformation creates a smaller grain structure due to the rapid quench, resulting in superior wear resistance. In addition, laser heating can yield increased fatigue strength due to the compressive stresses induced on the surface of the component.

The effectiveness of case hardening depends on the hardness of the transformed surface layers, as well as its depth. Maximum case depths and hardness that can be achieved using the latest diode laser system are listed for a variety of metals in the table.

These characteristics of laser hardening contrast significantly and favorably with flame hardening and induction hardening techniques. For example, flame hardening is limited by poor reproducibility, poor quench characteristics and environmental issues. Induction hardening typically produces deeper thermal penetration thus requiring an active quench, both of which lead to undesirable and uncontrollable distortion. The laser heat treating process is also much simpler to design and maintain than induction hardening due to the ability to easily limit heating to the irradiated area. This avoids the need for special coils, flux concentrators, shields or susceptors.

In some cases, laser processing is more easily integrated into manufacturing flow than traditional hardening technologies. In industries that have moved heavily towards Lean manufacturing, this has sometimes forced traditional heat treating to be an outsourced process, since the majority of these methods are batch in nature. In contrast, laser processing is inherently a one piece flow, making it well suited for the Lean manufacturing environment.

Material	Maximum Hardness (Rc)	Maximum Depth (mm)
Carbon Steels		
1080	68	2
1075	68	2
1045	60	1.5
1030	50	0.75
Heat Treatable Alloys		
4140	68	2
4340	68	2
Heat Treatable Stainless Steel		
420	65	1.6
410	50	0.5
Cast Irons		
Gray	65	1
Ductile	55	0.75

Of course, laser heat treating is by no means the optimum approach for all applications. In general, laser heat treating has an advantage over other processes if the part has a specific, limited surface area that needs to be case hardened, or if the part is so large that it is cost prohibitive to heat treat with conventional means. Clearly, the laser is at a disadvantage for bulk heat treating of thick parts, or for applications that require large batch processing. The photograph shows a saw tooth tip selectively hardened by a diode laser, and represents an ideal use of laser hardening.

A saw tooth tip selectively hardened by a diode laser

In addition, obtaining optimum results and maximizing the cost savings from laser heat treating may require changes to the part design and process. For example, when compared to vacuum carbonizing and gas nitriding, the laser process typically requires a change in work piece material to a heat treatable, high carbon content material. In these instances, the advantage of reduced distortion and elimination of post-machining have to be compared to the cost associated with changing material.

Process specifics also have to be carefully considered in order to reap the maximum benefit from laser processing. For example, back tempering can occur when the scanning laser beam overlaps an area previously processed, causing it to again reach the tempering temperature range. The result is that the overlapped area can have lower hardness than the rest of the hardened zone. The solution is to either design the laser scan pattern so as to minimize the extent or degree of back tempering to an acceptable range, or to make sure that back tempering only occurs on non-critical part surfaces. For example, on a gear, the overlap would be designed to occur at the top of the tooth, rather than at the root.

Traditional CO_2 Laser Heat Treating

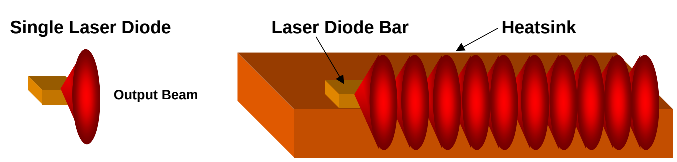
In the past, the CO_2 laser was the most commonly used source for laser heat treating. However, this technology has several significant drawbacks when applied to hardening. The first of these is that CO_2 lasers output at a wavelength of 10.6 µm, which is well into the infrared. This long wavelength light is not well absorbed by virtually any steel or other metal, for that matter. As a result, surfaces for heat treating with a CO_2 laser must first be "painted" with an absorptive coating.

The second drawback is the shape of the CO_2 laser output, which is a well collimated "pencil beam" of a few millimeters in diameter. Since this is much smaller than the typical area to be treated, the beam must typically be expanded to match the processing area and homogenized to eliminate inherent brightness variations.

Another limitation of CO_2 laser technology is that the conversion of input electrical energy to useful light output is relatively low. Higher electricity consumption translates directly into increased operating cost.

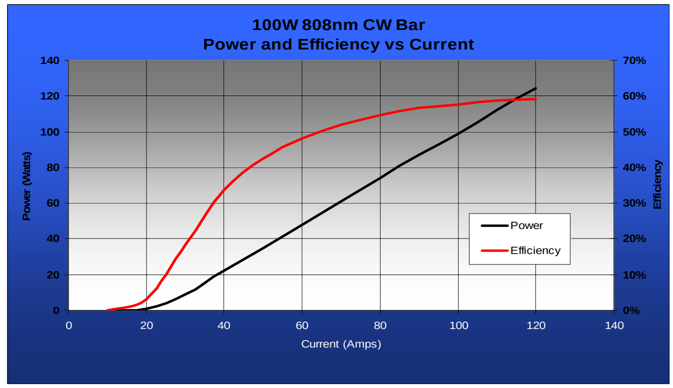
High Power Diode Lasers

The inherent characteristics of CO_2 lasers have limited their ability to fulfill the true potential of laser hardening. In response to the need for a more optimal source for this application, Coherent has developed the HighLight™ series of products, based on high power diode laser technology.



Diode laser bars consist of multiple individual emitters on a single, monolithic substrate, each producing a divergent cone of light.

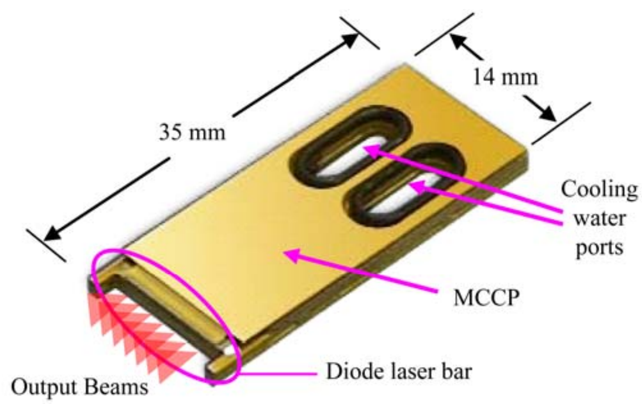
The diode laser is a semiconductor device that directly converts electrical energy into laser light. Typically, higher power diode lasers output in the near infrared, most commonly at either 808 nm or 980 nm. A typical, individual diode laser emitter might produce at most a few Watts of output power. However, numerous emitters can be fabricated on a single, monolithic semiconductor substrate or bar with a total output as high as 100 W. These linear bars can, in turn, be combined in horizontal and vertical stacks to produce high power direct diode laser systems with total output power in the multi-kilowatt range.



This graph of conversion efficiency and power vs. input electrical current shows that diode laser bars are far more efficient than any other laser type

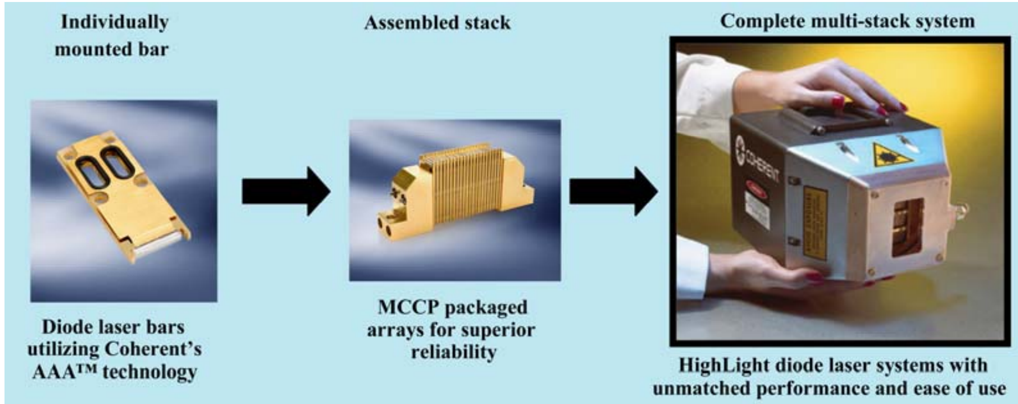
As shown in the graph, the maximum conversion efficiency of transforming input electrical energy into light in diode laser bars is about 59%, which is many times higher than for any other laser type, and about three to four times higher than that of the CO_2 laser in particular. The primary benefit of this high efficiency is that it lowers the operating cost of the system, since less electricity is required to produce a given amount of output power. Of course, this reduced power consumption also decreases the carbon footprint of the laser's operation.

The small size of diode lasers makes them easier to integrate into workstations. It also means that they produce their waste heat in a relatively small physical area. As a result, they can be effectively cooled with a small volume of circulating water and a chiller.



A single diode laser bar mounted on a MCCP

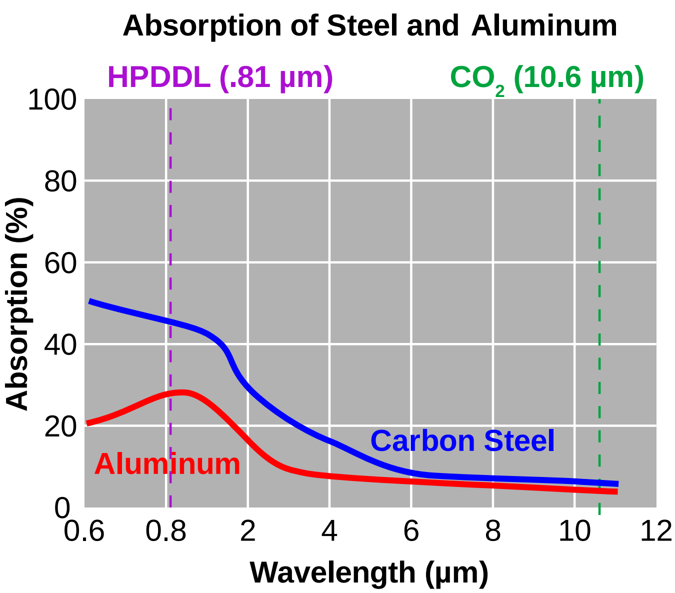
The photo shows a mounting configuration for diode laser bars called a Micro Channel Cooled Package (MCCP). Here, the diode laser bar is mounted on to a plate that contains internal channels for water circulation. The MCCP contains two large water ports, one for input and one for output, which each have an o-ring at their edge. These o-rings provide a water tight seal when two MCCPs are placed against each other face to face. This enables multiple MCCPs to be stacked together and water circulated through the entire assembly. The next photo shows the power scaling progression from individual MCCP mounted diode laser through assembled stack, through to an integrated, multi-stack assembly that can deliver as much as 4 kW of power.



Coherent is the only vertically integrated supplier of high power diode lasers, producing everything from the wafer level through to finished systems

Diode Laser Advantages

The Coherent HighLight diode laser system addresses all the previously mentioned disadvantages of CO_2 lasers for heat treating. Specifically, the shorter output wavelength of the diode laser is very well absorbed by metals, as shown in the following graph. This eliminates the need for surface preparation, as well as the environmental compliance costs associated with emissions, clean up and disposal of the chemicals utilized in the painting process. It also makes the diode laser a substantially more efficient source for heat treating, thus lowering electrical power consumption.



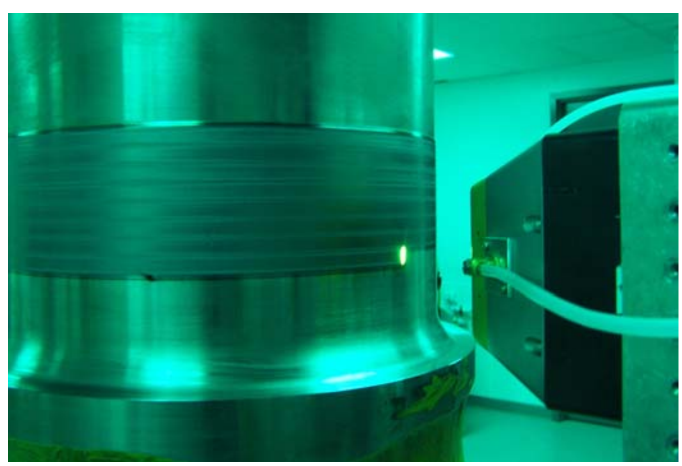
Absorption as a function of wavelength for carbon steel and aluminum

The shape of the output beam from a HighLight laser is also well matched to the needs of many heat treating tasks. Specifically, the HighLight laser incorporates rugged optics that integrate all the individual laser beamlets into a single beam with a nominal cross-section of 1 mm x 12 mm beam. And this extended beam shape has a relatively uniform intensity over most of its area. This is much more useful than the small, non-uniform output beam from a CO_2 laser. Furthermore, other output dimensions are also currently available (6 mm x 12 mm, 8 mm x 12 mm, and 12 mm x 12 mm).

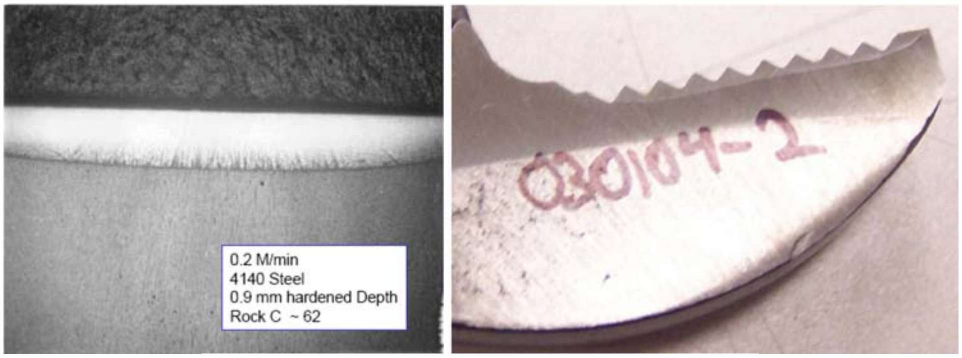
Most importantly, HighLight lasers offer a substantial cost advantage over CO_2 lasers. One reason for this is that their electrical efficiency (conversion of input electrical energy to useful light output) is about three to four times higher than that of the CO_2 laser. This translates directly into lower operating cost. Additionally, the HighLight has instant "on" capability so there is no standby power consumption. And even larger savings results from reduced maintenance costs, which are orders of magnitude smaller for the HighLight as compared to CO_2 lasers. Maintenance downtime is also minimized because the physically compact HighLight laser can be more rapidly replaced than bulkier CO_2 lasers, and replacements can even be shipped via overnight courier services. The table (next page) details the total cost of owning and operating the two laser types, and shows that the HighLight costs about half as much over a five year period. The HighLight also offers simplified integration over CO_2 lasers. Its electrical efficiency and small size enables multiple lasers to be powered from the same power supply, which allow simultaneous, multi-beam heat treating. The small size and the ability to illuminate the surface at a distance facilitates the integration of the laser into CNC machining equipment so that the heat treat step can be performed immediately after machining.

Heat Treating with Diodes Lasers

For the majority of laser hardening applications, the HighLight output beam illuminates an area that is smaller than the total area to be processed. Thus, either the work piece or the beam is scanned in order to achieve total coverage. A typical implementation of this approach, in this case for a truck spindle, is shown in the photograph.


The laser beam is scanned over the part in order to heat treat large areas

The next two photos show how diode laser hardening delivers very localized results that are uniform and consistent. On the left is a cross section showing a uniform, hardened layer in 4140 steel. On



Typical heat treating results with the HighLight laser.

the right is a tool jaw (material SAE 1075) heat treated with the HighLight laser.

In conclusion, the Coherent HighLight laser is a unique source for heat treating that delivers a number of advantages over traditional technology, as well as other laser sources. In particular, the HighLight laser offers attractive cost of ownership characteristics, and its small size and output characteristics make it easy to integrate directly with existing production equipment.

Cost of Ownership for a Coherent 4000L diode laser system vs. a CO_2 laser

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	$/hr
FreeSpace Diode Laser (Coherent 4000L)[1]						
Capital cost[2]	$53,350	$53,350	$53,350	$53,350	$53,350	
Refurb cost					$80,000	
Electric Consumption ($)3	$1,665	$1,665	$1,665	$1,665	$1,665	
PM	$3,500	$3,500	$3,500	$3,500	$3,500	
Total	$58,515	$58,515	$58,515	$58,515	$138,515	$35.82
CO_2 Laser (6kW Flowing Gas) [1]						
Capital cost[1]	$60,000	$60,000	$60,000	$60,000	$60,000	
Refurb cost	$20,000	$20,000	$20,000	$20,000	$20,000	
Electric Consumption ($)[2]	$6,240	$6,240	$6,240	$6,240	$6,240	
PM	$10,000	$10,000	$10,000	$10,000	$10,000	
Total	$96,240	$96,240	$96,240	$96,240	$96,240	$46.27

1. Coherent estimates. Subject to change without notice.
2. 5 year straight line depreciation.
3. Based on electricity cost of $0.05/kW/hr for 8 hours/day, 5 days/week.