Interface Engineering for Yield and Reliability in Optical Packaging

Adhesive Engineering Challenges from Pluggable Optics to NPO and CPO

Prepared by Daniel Phua

Reviewed by Christina Lee, Felipe Cicaroni Fernandes, Marisa Snapp-Leo, Michael J. Hodgin

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Executive Summary

Advanced packaging is changing optical-module engineering from a collection of independent component-attachment operations into a coupled interface problem. The transition from 800G deployment toward 1.6T and 3.2T-class pluggable modules is occurring alongside broader development of near-packaged optics (NPO) and co-packaged optics (CPO) [1,2,3]. These developments matter not only because aggregate data rates are increasing, but because higher lane rates, greater integration density, increasing thermal loading, tighter optical tolerances and deeper electrical-photonic integration leave less margin for material and process variation.

Within these assemblies, adhesives should be treated as engineered interfaces rather than generic bonding agents. Depending on location, they may secure lenses, isolators, fiber interfaces, photonic integrated circuits, laser or detector packages, PCB's/substrates and housings. At the same time, adhesives can influence cure-induced movement, stress transfer, moisture response, contamination, sealing and manufacturing repeatability.

A material can retain high mechanical strength and yet fail the application functionally. For example, cure shrinkage may misalign an optical component. Temperature-dependent modulus may alter stress and alignment. Moisture may plasticize the polymer, weaken an interface or produce hygroscopic movement while volatile species may migrate toward a cooler optical surface. A narrow dispense or cure window may create unacceptable production variation even when laboratory coupon results appear strong.

This paper presents an interface-engineering method that connects package requirements, failure mechanisms, critical-to-quality characteristics, material attributes, process controls, qualification methods and functional acceptance criteria. EPO-TEK® 353NDP within the PROPEL™ Platform is introduced as a candidate material for an application-demonstration framework, not as proof that one adhesive resolves every package-level risk.

Core engineering message: Reliability is not created by one property. It is designed across the interface, demonstrated in the assembly and controlled in manufacturing.

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1. AI is redefining optical packaging requirements

AI and hyperscale computing continue to drive demand for high-speed optical connectivity. For packaging engineers, however, the more relevant question is how bandwidth, power density and package compression are consuming the optical, thermal and manufacturing margins available to the module designer.

As more functions are integrated through heterogeneous packaging, silicon photonics, advanced substrates and co- or near-packaged optical architectures, electrical, thermal, mechanical and optical interactions among materials and components become increasingly coupled within a smaller physical boundary. This tighter integration creates more critical joints, more direct stress-transfer paths and less tolerance for local shift, contamination, temperature non-uniformity and process variation.

Adhesive performance ultimately has to be judged in the actual package geometry, assembly sequence and available optical margin. A few micrometers of movement that would be irrelevant in a structural bracket may consume a meaningful portion of the coupling, insertion-loss, isolation or beam-pointing budget in a photonic package. Consequently, as package integration increases, interface stability and process predictability become increasingly important to maintaining optical performance and manufacturing yield.

1.1 How integration changes the interface budget

As integration density increases, several engineering margins become coupled. More interfaces create additional stress and contamination-sensitive locations, while tighter optical paths reduce the allowable movement before functional performance is affected. Higher thermal density increases the influence of local temperature gradients and coefficient of thermal expansion (CTE) mismatch, and greater manufacturing automation reduces tolerance for variation in rheology, dispensing, placement and cure. At the same time, service-life reliability requirements increase the importance of retained performance rather than initial material properties alone.

Table 1. Advanced-packaging trends and their interface-engineering implications.

Advanced-packaging trend	Engineering consequence	Interface-engineering implication	Required functional evidence
Higher interface density	More local stress concentrations and contamination-sensitive locations	Adhesion and cleanliness must be evaluated by interface and location	Failure mode, retained adhesion and optical cleanliness
Tighter optical alignment	Smaller dimensional margin for cure movement, creep and thermal drift	Shrinkage, modulus, CTE and cure sequence become coupled CTQs	Alignment shift and insertion-loss change after stress
Greater thermal loading	Larger gradients and stronger CTE-mismatch effects	Thermal stability must be assessed with actual geometry and heat path	Temperature mapping, warpage or positional retention
Higher automation content	Narrower tolerance for rheology and handling variation	Viscosity, thixotropy, dispense response and cure control require defined windows	Capability data for volume, bond line, fillet and cure
Service-life reliability requirements	Small degradation mechanisms can accumulate over time	Humidity, creep, outgassing and interfacial chemistry require retention testing	Retained function, not only initial strength

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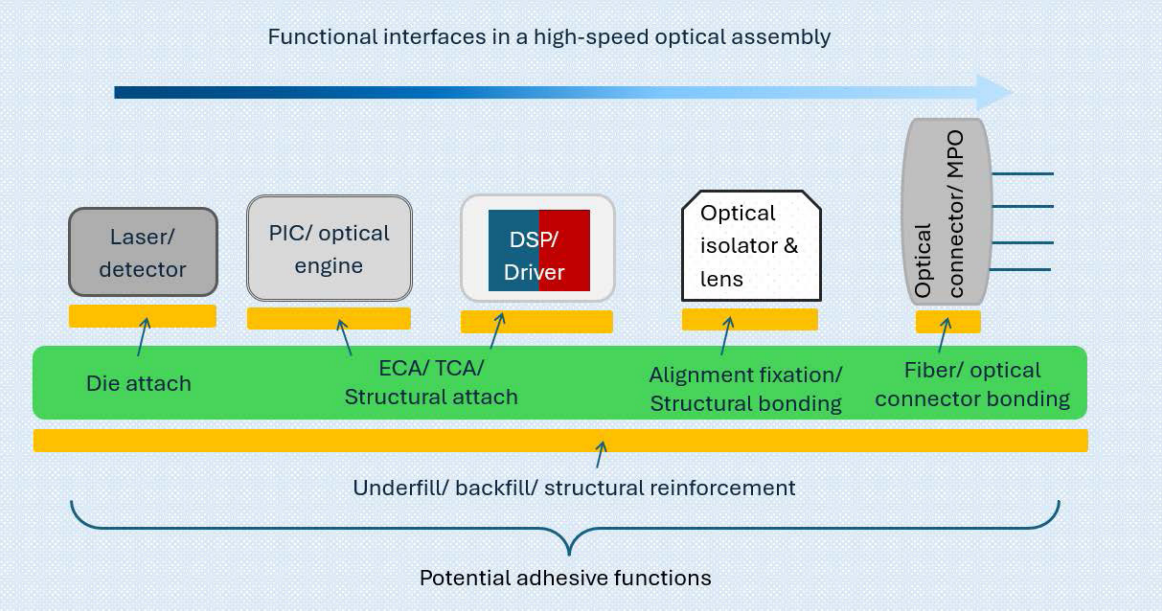
2 Where adhesives matter

As assembly complexity rises, the practical question is not simply where adhesives appear on the drawing. Rather, the more critical aspect of the design is what each bonded interface is required to hold, protect or align, and how loss of control could impact product performance. Lens and prism attachment, fiber-to-ferrule bonding, TOSA/ROSA/BOSA assembly, sealing and backfilling, isolator mounting, laser or detector attachment, and PIC or optical-engine bonding each present a unique combination of geometry, material interfaces, stress paths and functional acceptance requirements.

Table 2 maps representative adhesive-controlled interfaces to their primary engineering concerns and functional endpoints. Figure 1 provides a conceptual view of where these adhesive roles may occur within an optical assembly.

Table 2. Representative adhesive-controlled interfaces, engineering concerns and functional endpoints.

Interface	Primary engineering concern	Functional endpoint
Lens / prism	Optical-axis retention, tilt, decenter and cleanliness	Beam position, focus or coupling efficiency
Fiber-to-ferrule	Capillary flow, void formation, fiber position and end-face cleanliness	Insertion loss, return loss and pull/piston behavior
Optical isolator	Angular stability, stress transfer and contamination	Isolation ratio, insertion loss and positional shift
Laser / detector	Adhesion, thermal path, electrical insulation and cleanliness	Optical output, detector response and die position
Seal / backfill	Coverage, voiding, moisture protection and dimensional stability	Leak/seal integrity, void acceptance and package stability
TOSA / ROSA / BOSA	Compatibility across structural, optical and sealing functions	Transmitter/receiver performance and package integrity



*ECA-Electrically conductive adhesive; TCA-Thermally conductive adhesive

Figure 1. Conceptual illustration of representative adhesive-controlled interfaces in a high-speed optical assembly. Component arrangement is illustrative and does not represent a specific module architecture.

As adhesives take on roles beyond simple mechanical attachment, several material and process characteristics can directly influence long-term interface stability. Understanding these interactions is essential to preserving the performance of precisely engineered optical interfaces throughout manufacturing and service life.

2 Where adhesives matter (continued)

2.1 Critical adhesive & process considerations for reliability

2.1.1 Moisture resistance

Moisture-related failure is not a single mechanism. Depending on adhesive chemistry, cure state, substrate, bond geometry and exposure duration, water may cause reversible plasticization, hygroscopic expansion or reductions in glass transition temperature (Tg) and modulus. Irreversible hydrolysis may also weaken the adhesive-substrate interface and contribute to corrosion, ionic effects or crack growth along voids, filler interfaces and surface defects.

The first warning may be creep, fracture-path migration, bond-line growth or optical-axis walk rather than complete debonding. Extended 85°C/85% RH exposure is meaningful only when the critical application-specific parameter is measured and retained performance, data spread and fracture location are reported.

2.1.2 Outgassing mechanism

Optical contamination can come from residual low-molecular species, cure by-products, thermal desorption, transport through an enclosed cavity. Other mechanisms such as condensation on a cold surface, silicone or ionic carryover, particulate release, or deposit growth under optical power can also interfere with optical clarity and performance. ASTM E595 [5] is a useful first-pass screen for total mass loss (TML) and collected volatile condensable material (CVCM), but it does not reproduce every atmosphere, temperature gradient, enclosed volume or illuminated surface inside a transceiver. Location-dependent contamination mechanisms should therefore be considered when evaluating materials used near the optical path.

For materials nearby to lenses, filters, fibers, laser facets or detectors, the screening should be supplemented where appropriate by witness-glass exposure, transmission tracking, surface microscopy, targeted chemical analysis and post-stress optical function.

2.1.3 Adhesion strength

Initial die shear, lap shear or pull strength confirms that a joint was formed under one defined condition. Nevertheless, it does not reveal cure-induced movement, retained angular stiffness, the initiation of peel or cleavage, long-term creep, aged fracture paths, optical cleanliness or insertion-loss stability. Strength is therefore one rung in the evidence ladder, not the definition of reliability.

3 Selecting the right adhesive beyond initial bond strength

To achieve precise and reliable interfaces, engineers must look beyond identifying the "best adhesive." For the package engineer, the practical choice is not one "best adhesive," but a material-and-process combination that preserves sufficient functional margin in the intended architecture. This requires translating the application into failure mechanisms, measurable CTQs, material attributes, process controls and acceptance criteria.

Table 3. Selected adhesive characteristics, interface influence and engineering cautions.

Material characteristic	Interface influence	Engineering caution
Tg / modulus	Positional stiffness and thermal stability	Excess stiffness can increase stress transfer
CTE / cure shrinkage	Cure movement and thermal displacement	Must be considered with package geometry
Rheology	Wetting, flow, bond-line formation and fillet control	Excessive flow or insufficient wetting can reduce process margin
Outgassing / cleanliness	Contamination risk near optical surfaces	Screening alone does not establish package cleanliness
Adhesion	Mechanical integrity	Initial strength does not prove aged functional retention

4 Processing matters

In precision optical build, process control is part of material qualification, not a hand-off to manufacturing after chemistry selection. A candidate that behaves well on a lab coupon but cannot be thawed, metered, placed, cured and inspected with repeatable geometry is not production-ready.

Achieving consistent yield and reliability in optical packaging depends not only on material selection, but also on control across the entire assembly process. Material handling and dispensing influence material consistency and bond geometry, while accurate placement and alignment are critical to optical performance. Bond-line control and cure conditions further affect dimensional stability and interfacial defects that could compromise performance or long-term reliability. These interconnected steps should therefore be considered as part of an integrated materials-and-process strategy.

A conceptual fiber/V-groove example, based on mechanisms reported in the literature, illustrates why these process variables cannot always be considered independently. UV exposure geometry around the fiber can create shadowed

4
Processing matters
(continued)

regions[1] and variations in degree of cure[2]. Combined with cure shrinkage[3] and residual stress[4], these local differences may create vulnerable interfaces that develop into delamination[5] during subsequent reliability exposure. The example demonstrates why cure conditions should be assessed within the actual assembly geometry rather than from nominal material or equipment settings alone.

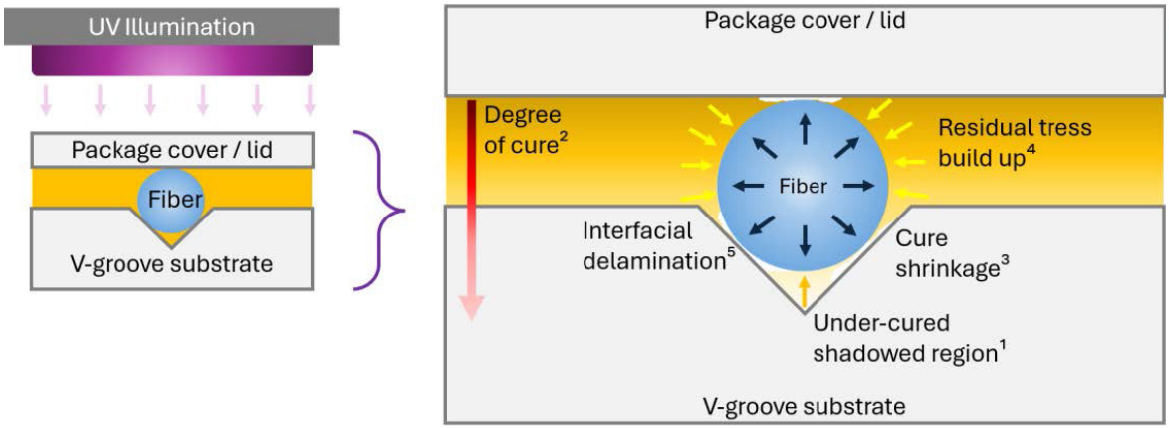


Figure 2. Conceptual illustration of process-induced interface variation in a UV-cured fiber/V-groove assembly. Numbered callouts in the text correspond to the mechanism labels shown in the diagram. The uneven-cure and interfacial-delamination concept is based on mechanisms reported by Uddin et al. [6].

4.1
Process variables that influence interface quality

The V-groove example illustrates that interface quality is determined not only by the adhesive itself, but also by how the material interacts with the assembly geometry and process conditions. Similar interactions can occur throughout optical-package manufacturing. The goal is not to prescribe a universal recipe. It is to identify which process stages materially affect bond geometry, cure state, dimensional stability and functional reliability.

Table 4. Process stages influencing interface quality in optical-package manufacturing.

Process stage	Influence on the interface	Engineering consideration
Material handling	Material consistency	Rheology / cure state
Dispensing	Bond volume and coverage	Voids / overflow
Placement & bond line	Position and interface geometry	Alignment / stress
Cure	Degree of cure and shrinkage	Residual stress / under-cure
Inspection	Interface quality	Process variation / defects

Manufacturing principle: Reliable products are achieved through the combination of material performance and process capability. Because handling, dispensing, placement, bond-line formation and cure are interconnected, variation at one stage can influence the final interface. The material specification and production process should therefore be developed together and finalized only after the required functional performance has been demonstrated.

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5 Application demonstration framework: laser-side optical isolator assembly

EPO-TEK® 353NDP within the PROPEL™ Platform is used here as a candidate for exercising the interface-engineering method in a demanding advanced optical packaging build. Figure 3 provides a conceptual representation of the optical path through a laser-side isolator assembly; the exact component construction and sequence may vary by supplier and package design.

The purpose of the illustration is not to imply adhesive bonding between the internal optical elements. Rather, it provides functional context for the package-level interfaces surrounding the optical path, where adhesive may be used to retain the isolator or lens position, manage stress transfer into brittle optical components, withstand temperature and humidity exposure, and maintain cleanliness near optically sensitive surfaces. These requirements make the assembly a useful example for connecting material and process characteristics with retained optical performance.

This example is intended to illustrate the interface-engineering framework rather than represent a completed application qualification.

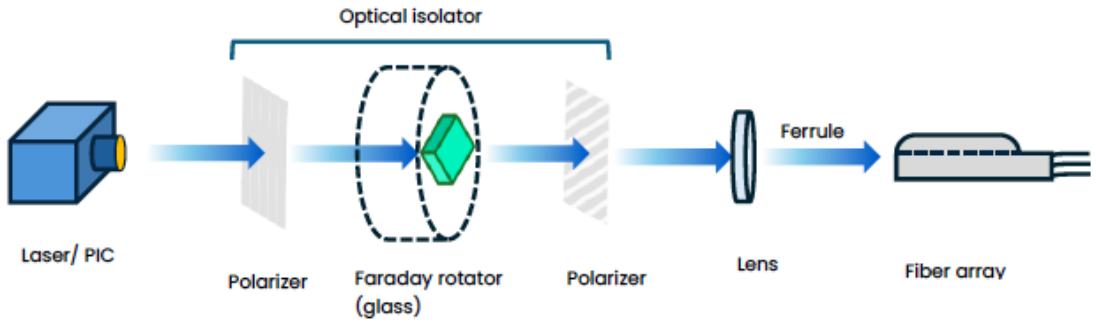


Figure 3. Conceptual illustration of a laser-side optical isolator assembly used to highlight package-level interface requirements; exact component architecture varies by supplier and design.

6 Manufacturing integration, yield and future outlook

Manufacturing yield is influenced by the interaction of package design, component quality, equipment, materials, process control, inspection and test. Adhesive selection alone does not determine yield; however, the bonded interface can either reduce or amplify variation through changes in bond geometry, cure behavior, stress, alignment and contamination. The practical goal is to expose these interface effects early enough that they can be measured and controlled before they appear as qualification failures or field issues.

6 Manufacturing integration, yield and future outlook (continued)

Looking forward, advanced packaging and photonic integration will continue to place greater demands on these interfaces. Higher integration density, tighter optical tolerances, increasing thermal loads and greater manufacturing automation are reducing the margin available for material and process variation. Industry roadmaps from IEEE, SEMI and OIF [1,3,4] similarly point toward continued development in heterogeneous integration, integrated photonics, co-packaged optics, advanced manufacturing, contamination control, test and yield improvement. As packaging architectures evolve, interface materials will increasingly be judged by retained function and manufacturing consistency, not by isolated datasheet properties.

Conclusion

As optical packaging moves toward higher integration density, tighter alignment tolerances and greater thermal and manufacturing complexity, the number of critical interfaces increases while the margin for positional drift, contamination and process variation decreases.

Adhesives can provide attachment, alignment fixation, sealing, stress shaping and process stabilization. The same joint can also introduce cure movement, CTE-driven stress, moisture-induced property shift, interface degradation, contamination, voiding or line variation.

Selection should therefore not be driven by the highest initial strength, Tg or any other isolated datasheet number. A stronger approach connects package requirements to interface definition, credible failure paths, measurable CTQs, material response, process control, qualification evidence and functional acceptance.

The laser-side isolator build is a useful demonstration platform because it combines mixed materials, tight alignment, contamination sensitivity and direct optical pass/fail outputs. For EPO-TEK®, the useful work begins beyond the datasheet: translating package requirements into an evidence-based material and process window with the customer's design, process and reliability teams.

Engineering takeaway: Material selection should not begin with the highest Tg, strength or lowest outgassing value. It should begin with the function the interface must preserve, the failure mechanisms that can consume that margin, and the material-and-process combination required to control them. The resulting interface must then be verified in the application and controlled in manufacturing.

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For more information or to discuss your application, contact your regional contact.

- **Americas: techserv@epotek.com**
- **EMEA: sales de@epotekeurope.com**
- **APAC: info@padhesive.com.cn • info@padhesive.com**