

IBM Launches RFID Middleware

The computer and IT giant extends its RFID product lineup with software to manage RFID readers and data.

By Jonathan Collins

Dec. 16, 2004—IBM has released two new software products that extend its RFID offerings all the way to RFID readers and into the devices themselves.

Until now, IBM has turned to partners such as GlobeRanger and OAT Systems to provide its customers with software to connect IBM's enterprise applications and RFID readers. Although those partnerships will continue, IBM's new RFID middleware will compete with those offerings.

"We have many partners who are also competitors, and we will work with them according to specific business and client opportunities," says Ann Breidenbach, director of strategy for IBM's Sensor and Actuator Solutions business unit.

The first of IBM's new offerings is the WebSphere RFID Premises Server, which is also the first software offering from IBM's Sensor and Actuator Solutions business unit, formed in September (see IBM Bulks Up Its RFID Initiative). The offering consists of a bundle of software applications designed to be deployed at remote locations such as retail stores, distribution centers or manufacturing sites. The Server software not only provides connectivity, management and filtering to RFID readers but also enables RFID-collected data to be managed and analyzed.

"Enabling the execution of processes closer to the edge of the network means locations can start to do more than just simple transaction management," says Breidenbach. That capability will enable data collected by RFID readers in stores to drive real-time tracking and analysis of a range of local activities such as stores sales and inventory without having to rely on transmitting data back and forth between the store and a centralized server hosting enterprise applications.

While the RFID Premises Server software pushes data management and analysis out to remote locations, IBM says, it also enables a centralized IT facility to monitor and manage the hardware and software in individual remote locations. That remote management capability means that no additional IT staff will need to be assigned to work at remote locations.

The RFID Premises Server bundles IBM's WebSphere Application Server, DB2 Universal Database software, WebSphere MQ messaging software and Tivoli Systems Management middleware. The server can also connect with specialized third-party applications through IBM's WebSphere Portal and WebSphere Product Center products, which are sold separately.

The software is priced at \$11,000 per two-processor server. So far, it connects to Intermec, Alien Technology, SamSys readers as well as controllers from Arcom, so that RFID data can be integrated into existing control systems such as those used to operate palletizers. IBM says that other reader manufacturers will be added later.

IBM is pushing even deeper into the RFID software market with its other new software release: IBM WebSphere Device Infrastructure, which is middleware that RFID equipment makers can embed in their RFID readers.

"Customers want more intelligent, more sophisticated readers, so they can push processing to the edge of the network," says Breidenbach. By using IBM's middleware, she explains, reader manufacturers will be able to offer data filtering at the reader and, because it is built around Java, provide a platform that can be integrated with other devices such as indicator lights, motion sensors and industrial automation equipment.

RFID vendor Intermec has already integrated IBM WebSphere Device Infrastructure with its new IF-5 Intelligent RFID reader. According to IBM, other reader manufacturers will announce use of its software when they launch their new reader products.

IBM would not give pricing details for the WebSphere Device Infrastructure software, but the company says it will price its software competitively to existing offerings from other software developers.

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