

Scotland Provides RFID Support

The government-supported Wireless Innovation demo lab at Scotland's Hillington Park Innovation Centre fosters RFID applications.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

Jan. 26, 2005—Though Scottish physicist Sir Robert Alexander Watson-Watt is widely recognized as the inventor of radar and developer of an early radio frequency identification system to recognize aircraft during World War II, Scotland is not known for its early adopters of RFID technology. But thanks in part to the Wireless Innovation demonstration lab at the Hillington Park Innovation Centre, an increasing number of Scottish firms are exploring RFID applications.

The demo lab, which opened Jan. 9 in Glasgow, focuses on RFID, mobile communication and other wireless applications, and it helps Scottish companies with the adoption of these technologies. Demonstrations of simulated RFID-enabled business environments, such as a loading dock or distribution center, help visitors understand the basic tenants of an RFID system and how the data is collected and managed. The lab operates through the support of the Scottish Government by way of the Scottish Enterprise, Scotland's main economic development agency, which pays for the use of the lab for all Scottish companies.

"In Scotland, there are not any big RFID hardware developers, but there are companies creating software for new applications in vertical markets for RFID. Very few of them want to get down into antenna design and wireless infrastructure; they don't want to get into the physics of RFID," says Ian Downie, wireless business manager for the lab.

To help address this issue, Downie says, the lab can facilitate business relationships between Scottish companies developing RFID applications and suppliers of RFID hardware or RFID systems integrators from outside of Scotland. These business relationships could develop into partnerships that would help Scottish software firms enter the RFID market while also bringing non-Scottish RFID vendors into Scotland's market.

Symbol Technologies has provided a range of tags and readers to the lab for use in demonstrations. A spokesman from Symbol says that the company has already made several relationships with visitors to the lab that could lead to contracts for Symbol products. By contributing products to the innovation center, Symbol aims to increase its presence in Scotland and across the U.K. Sun Microsystems and IBM have contributed middleware applications for the RFID demonstrations. Representatives from Symbol, Sun and IBM are also available to lab visitors for technology consultations.

The lab has identified and is working with about a dozen Scottish end user companies that are interested in using RFID for a variety of applications, from tracking patient files in a clinical trail to tracking food products through a supply chain.

According to Downie, most of the software companies in Scotland that are developing RFID applications will benefit from opportunities to work with RFID hardware vendors to present complete RFID solutions to potential Scottish end users.

Downie says he envisions companies that are potential users of RFID in Scotland would take a four-step process to deployment. This would start with a visit to the Wireless Innovation lab, where representatives from a company would watch demonstrations. They would then meet with potential software and hardware partners at the lab to discuss the company's business processes and needs. The next step would take place at the company's facility or in a testing environment such as Sun's European RFID Test Center, which is set to open in Linlithgow, Scotland, just 30 miles from the Wireless Innovation demo lab.

"Our two main objectives in terms of RFID is to educate Scottish companies about the technology and then lead them to [RFID vendors] or systems integrators," says Downie.

The RFID demonstrations in the lab are run using software from Spartan Solutions, a Scottish systems integrator based in Glasgow. The software, called Phalanx, includes a business services engine that sends RFID data, filtered through a middleware layer, to an enterprise resource management, warehouse management or customer relationship management application. Phalanx can also route the data to Web-based applications through either PCs via a LAN or to mobile devices such as a PDA or mobile phone. Spartan Solutions cofounder Jim Green says his company is already developing important customer contacts through the center, and is partnering with Sun Microsystems on an RFID project.

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