

IBM Announces RFID Privacy Consulting

The computer giant has created a service to help companies establish privacy policies around the use of RFID, and has also announced a new RFID-enabled printer and RFID starter kits.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

June 14, 2005—IBM has announced new products and services for companies deploying radio frequency identification in the retail supply chain. Specifically, it has created an RFID privacy consulting practice, its first RFID-capable label printer and a series of starter kits that combine software and consulting services.

The Armonk, New York-based firm says that to launch its RFID privacy consulting practice, it plans to offer two-day workshops. During these workshops, retailers and other RFID users will develop policies and procedures for addressing consumer privacy with respect to data linked to RFID tags.

Eric Gabrielson, director of worldwide RFID solutions for IBM Global Services, says one thing the workshops will help customers develop is a strong and executable opt-in policy with respect to RFID-tagged goods. Such a policy might be used, for example, to provide consumers the option of keeping alive an RFID tag linked to a product after the item has been purchased. The tag could then be used at a later date to process a warranty.

At the workshops, IBM's privacy consultants will provide information on local and international privacy laws and use principles from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which it says underpin much of the existing privacy legislation.

After completing the workshop, end users will be able to contract IBM's RFID privacy consulting practice to take privacy policy to the implementation level. This could involve devising communication strategies for conveying RFID-related privacy policies once they've been established. The privacy consultants could also help companies design and deploy education and awareness programs for consumers, as well as employees and partnering companies.

Gabrielson explains that the privacy consulting practice for RFID grew out of IBM's security and privacy consulting service, which was started in 1998 to address concerns around security and privacy from an Internet perspective. Internet-based privacy concerns and those surrounding the use of RFID tags, he says, are similar because they both focus on how to handle personal data.

IBM's first RFID-capable label printer, the Infoprint 6700 R40, is a thermal bar code printer that can either be purchased with an RFID upgrade or upgraded after purchase. The upgrade involves the installation of two RFID readers, one to encode an RFID tag, the other to verify that the tag was successfully encoded. Both readers are being manufactured by IBM, according to Doug Oathout, vice president for printing systems.

The RFID-upgraded R40 can print, encode and verify 4-inch smart labels with EPC Class 0, 0+ or 1 UHF RFID inlays. It contains an IBM POWER microprocessor that can support IBM's WebSphere RFID Device Infrastructure and middleware platforms from other providers. Part of IBM's middleware layer, the Device

Infrastructure processes and aggregates RFID tag data and can produce reports based on that data. The Device Infrastructure sends this data to the WebSphere RFID Premises Server, which processes data from all of the readers and printers in an RFID network. The R40 is upgradeable to the EPC Gen 2 standard through firmware, which should be available later this year.

The R40's verification reader prints a large X over smart labels containing dysfunctional inlays and, through a middleware application, either decommissions the EPC number assigned to that tag or reassigns it to another tag. The printer can be linked to the user's network through an Ethernet, coax, twinax, serial or parallel port, each of which comes standard, or through an 802.11 wireless card that must be special-ordered. IBM says the R40 will be available on Sept. 9. The base price for the printer is \$3,025 without RFID capabilities, \$5,525 with the upgrade.

Leveraging its experience garnered from helping nearly 50 early adopters deploy RFID, IBM also announced that it is offering what it calls starter kits. Designed for retailers and consumer product manufacturers, the kits do not include hardware. As such, tags, readers and support infrastructure must be purchased separately. The kits combine software written for specific tasks, such as collecting RFID tag data from a dock portal reader, with IBM consulting to help end users set up their RFID deployment. Other applications for the kits might include reconciling orders, generating shipping reports or managing inventory.

Gabrielson says that to develop the starter kits, IBM's consulting services team worked with its integrated technology services team, which does testing and installation of RFID hardware, to design RFID systems built on best practices and using IBM's WebSphere RFID middleware.

RFID, Gabrielson adds, is just one of many enabling technologies in the consumer-driven supply chain. All of IBM's RFID solutions, he says, are designed to enable its customers to integrate RFID into a broader process optimization and transformation initiative to drive value for both retailers and consumer product manufacturers.

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