

Standards Progress—It's All Relative

Although the pace of RFID standards development has been swift, it may also be too slow.

Sometimes, the perception of how quickly things are moving is as important as the reality. The notion of time can be quite relative.

This year marks the centennial anniversary of Albert Einstein's "magic year" of 1905, when the scientist authored several of his most famous papers, including his revolutionary Special Theory of Relativity. Perhaps his notion of time and its relativity might be a helpful reference as one looks at the current state of RFID standards. The RFID standards process—and the speed at which standards are formulated, ratified and adopted by the market—should be viewed both in terms of the process itself and the general perception of that process.

When compared with lengthy, multiyear standards-development efforts, the process of RFID standards adoption can be seen as progressing quite well. But to those awaiting a particular standard, the time needed to formulate the standard, resolve the associated issues (including related intellectual property claims) and ratify the standard will likely never be short enough. We will always hear arguments for faster execution of standards activities. And given the number of "moving parts" required for a complete RFID solution, it's not unreasonable to believe that the market would indeed be well served by processes that aid the emergence of standards—which, in turn, quickly make their way into commercial products.

To date, most RFID standards have focused on areas that signal the continuing maturation of the work being done within RFID's physical environment. That work is a crucial foundation to delivering the real value of RFID. Thus, the market has anxiously watched for the arrival of standards such as EPCglobal's Gen 2 and the Application-Level Events (ALE) interfaces, the latter of which is expected shortly.

Clearly, the advancement of the Gen 2 and ALE standards is good news. But as participants in the process, we must recognize that like time, the perception of progress is relative, perhaps reflective of one's involvement in the process. Vendors participating in the standards effort should also recognize that a reasonable and amicable resolution of the intellectual property issues and the active promotion of the standards are also important. We must not let the current RFID momentum—championed by such public stalwarts as Wal-Mart, the Department of Defense and Kimberly-Clark—wane in the face of lengthy deliberations or battles among vendors. RFID can provide benefits to organizations now, and the market is best served by cooperative efforts.

Part of this advocacy is driven by the fact that more standards activity is coming, including that for the EPC Information Service (EPC-IS) standard for data management. EPC-IS will likely become the cornerstone to intercompany and intracompany RFID data sharing. It is the crucial foundation that will enable organizations to transform low-level data into the kind of business-relevant information that applications in supply chain management, retail and manufacturing can exploit. Without active promotion of EPC-IS, we are likely to see proprietary approaches whose disparate adoption will only hinder the implementation of the kind of standards-based systems that facilitate interoperability. So standards like ALE are but the beginning. One might argue that in terms of driving business value with RFID, the important work remains ahead.

Tremendous creativity is being applied to the many physical challenges associated with deployment of an RFID infrastructure. But to move early deployments beyond closed-loop implementations or tactical slap-and-ship compliance, we should hope that equal creativity can be devoted to the standards effort and the resolution of associated IP issues. Though not dismissive of the importance of intellectual property, we hope that creativity can continue to be applied to solutions that will help promote broad market adoption.

It is in that context that the notion of time warrants attention. Though typical standards processes (like ISO) may take two to four years, we must try to accelerate RFID standards activity such that participating vendors and customers see the common benefit to a quicker resolution of IP concerns. We all share a common goal. With a common understanding of that goal, the market will flourish.

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