

European Commission Works on RFID Policy

Europe's executive branch is holding a series of meetings with representatives from academia, industry and government agencies to provide a pan-European approach to adopting RFID.

By Jonathan Collins

Mar. 14, 2006—The European Commission (EC) has initiated a wide-ranging initiative designed to help speed the adoption of RFID across the European Union (EU), as well as ensure that privacy and data security issues are also addressed.

As the European Union's executive body, the EC has the right to initiate legislation. Last year, it began gathering and analyzing information concerning RFID technology and its uses. "We were convinced that the European Commission should take an initiative to open the debate, raise the awareness of the issues and move toward an integrated approach throughout Europe," says Gérald Santucci, head of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Enterprise Networking unit of the European Commission's Information Society and Media Directorate-General. "A consistent European approach is both necessary and crucial to ensure that the key architectural decisions that may be made about RFID are done with Europe as an acknowledged, credible and respected stakeholder."

Over the next five months, the EC plans to hold a series of workshops, and to organize an online forum where the public can post comments. In November or December, the commission hopes to issue final policy guidelines to the European Parliament and Council.

The first workshop, "From RFID to the Internet of Things," was held in Brussels last week. Approximately 250 attendees participated, drawn from academia, industry and regulatory bodies. The workshop's agenda was to provide a broad overview of RFID, its potential uses and requirements, and some of the security and privacy issues its use demands.

Although details for the remaining workshops have yet to be finalized, the second will address potential RFID applications and emerging trends, and is likely to take place at the beginning of May. This workshop will cover RFID in industry verticals, including the health-care and pharmaceutical markets, transportation and logistics, product lifecycle applications and others.

The third workshop will address consumer and end-user issues and should take place at the beginning of June. The chief topics covered will be data protection and privacy, as well as security and ethical concerns. It will also explore apprehensions about the perceived effects of RFID use on health and labor practices.

"The technology brings new unprecedented security issues," says Santucci. "We are just getting used to spam mail and a digital footprint that is out of our control, but this is nothing compared with the risks linked to RFID and future generations of these technologies. It will be essential to find a consensus at this workshop between all stakeholders."

The fourth workshop, which might be organized during the second half of June, will be on frequency

spectrum requirements, while the fifth, to be organized in the first week of July, will address interoperability, standards and intellectual property rights.

All workshops will be held in Brussels. The European Commission says it will take stock of the requirements and options identified by the participants in the workshops, and use them in drafting a working document on RFID outlining the EC's role and objectives. By September, this draft document—consolidating the conclusions and recommendations of the workshops—will be posted to the Commission's [Your Voice in Europe](#) Web site, where the general public and interested parties can provide comments and raise questions related to using RFID in Europe. The results of this online consultation will be decisive in formulating the final policy guidelines the commission plans to publish by year's end.

The EC adds that it also seeks to foster the use of RFID by European businesses, particularly small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs). "Today, there exists a number of barriers to widespread use of RFID by SMEs, including limited budgets, cost, lack of in-house expertise, lack of access to the most advanced technologies, and lack of information on systems, databases and business processes needed to reap the benefits of RFID implementations," Santucci says. "This situation is not tenable because recent research suggests that RFID offers tremendous opportunities for SMEs—for instance, throughout the transport, health-care and pharmaceuticals industries."

While concentrating on developing policies regarding RFID use in Europe, the EC says it is also stepping up efforts to join with the United States and Asian countries in defining globally accepted RFID interoperability standards, data-privacy practices and ethical principles when applying the technology.

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