

# RFID Implementation Is an Art

The former head of RFID trials at Gap and Abercrombie & Fitch says many variables make deployment tricky.

By Jonathan Collins

June 14, 2006—RFID technology may be ready for deployment, but according to Neco Can, it also requires a good deal of ingenuity and support to implement. Can spearheaded item-level RFID trials at U.S. clothing retailers [Gap](#) and [Abercrombie & Fitch \(A&F\)](#).

"RFID is not a science, but an art," Can told attendees at the [RFID Networking Forum](#) in London last month. "You won't believe what we learned [working with RFID]. No one knows everything about RFID, and every day [working with the technology], we would learn something new."

In one RFID trial, Can recalled, the test portal was unable to deliver a near 100 percent read rate on UHF-tagged clothing items, as required to make the testing of any RFID application viable. The systems integrators on the project recommended adding two additional interrogator (reader) antennas to the four already installed. However, this step would require adding a second reader to every portal, further driving up any deployment costs dramatically.

According to Can, his team found that if they placed an inch-tall metal strip on the floor across the portal threshold, they could achieve the required level of read accuracy. "It worked because it shook up everything that had to be read in the load as it was wheeled over the strip, and it cost just a few dollars," said Can. A similar process was also used on the rollers of a conveyor. "By putting little curves in the rollers," he added, "it would shake the box and improve read rates dramatically."

In 2001, Can was the director of Gap's project-management office, heading an RFID pilot that provided an inventory accuracy of up to 99.6 percent. Despite the success of the pilot in both improving in-store inventory and increasing sales, a host of factors caused the company to choose not to invest immediately in RFID tagging. The experience has led Can to believe that any RFID project within a company needs full support at the highest levels of management.

"You need to get the highest guy behind you—not the CIO, but the CEO," said Can. "Getting support for RFID is hard because it's like an SAP implementation: For the first four years, there were no good stories about SAP implementations; then, everybody loved it. The same will apply to RFID."

At Abercrombie & Fitch, Can served as senior director of application development while the company was planning its own RFID trial. Ultimately, he said, management deemed the trial results flawed because the performance in RFID trial stores was too good.

From April to September of last year, A&F tagged jeans in a number of its stores. According to Can, the trial proved that by improving inventory, a firm can also increase sales. "The target was to sell an extra seven pairs of jeans per store, per month," he said. The result, he claimed, was an additional 13 pairs a week. The retailer

would not confirm details of its RFID trial.

Can, now vice president at systems integrator Attevo, maintained that his experience at both retailers shows that tags don't have to be much cheaper than they are now to deliver a return on investment from RFID. "For Gap, it was 17 cents, and at A&F, it was 24 cents per tag," he said.

RFID offers clothing retailers a fast and accurate way to know exactly what inventory is either being delivered or available on the shop floor, Can explains. Using handheld readers, 40 units in a box can be read at almost 100 percent read rates within two to three seconds, while 1,000 units on shelves can be read with close to 100 percent accuracy in just a minute.

Still, Can stressed that RFID deployment remains an art. This, he said, is due to the many variables that must be managed to ensure adequate tag read rates. By way of example, he added, "Staff members using handheld readers are different heights, so you don't always get the same read every time."

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