

# RFID Can Benefit Retail Workers, Says ILO

The International Labor Organization believes retail workers could potentially gain from the technology's deployment—but to make that a reality, employees and employers must work together.

By Rhea Wessel

Nov. 15, 2006—As RFID technology and applications become more widespread, they have the potential to impact organizations' labor requirements dramatically, particularly in the retail sector. The nature of that impact is the focus of two reports from the [International Labor Organization \(ILO\)](#), which held a three-day meeting at its Geneva headquarters in September to discuss the implications of RFID on retail employees. The ILO, a specialized United Nations organization, formulates international labor standards and frequently campaigns against forced labor, child labor and poor working conditions worldwide; it also tackles industry-specific problems.

[Social and Labor Implications of the Increased Use of Advanced Retail Technologies](#), a 63-page report published before the meeting, summed up how radio frequency identification is currently being utilized, and how it will likely be used in retail. The document concluded that some retail jobs may be lost in the transition to RFID, but that many workers could be moved from routine warehousing tasks to customer-service jobs. With appropriate training, the report states, RFID could be implemented in such a way that raises productivity, increases customer satisfaction and leads to better conditions and benefits for workers.

The second report, [Notes on the Proceedings: Social and Labor Implications of the Increased Use of Advanced Retail Technologies](#), was the culmination of three days' worth of discussion at the meeting between delegates representing governments, employers and workers. The delegates concluded that employees and employers must work together to ensure that the costs and benefits of RFID in the retail sector are shared.

Employers stressed that to stay competitive, they need to take advantage of new technology, with the support of workers. The latter acknowledged that innovation is a "matter of survival" for employers, but added that they want to ensure the industry will continue to generate jobs. "The spirit of the meeting was quite clear," says John Sendanyoye, a retail expert for ILO who managed the conference and the writing of the reports. "Everyone understood that there must be gains on both sides for these changes to be sustainable." Sendanyoye added. "It was about balancing enterprise flexibility, worker security and employability in the context of introducing advanced retail technology."

Representatives from more than 30 governments attended the meeting, including those from Japan, Greece, France, the United Kingdom and more than 10 developing countries. Neither the United States nor Germany sent representatives. Fifteen spokespeople from the retail industry also contributed to the process. Among them were representatives of German retailing giant [Metro](#) and the [National Retail Association of Australia \(NRA\)](#).

RELATED\_ARTICLES Workers' interests were represented at the meeting by numerous groups, including the [United Food and Commercial Workers International Union](#) and the [Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft \(Ver.Di\)](#), an independent trade union for German workers employed in more than 1,000 trades and

professions.

The meeting was successful in fulfilling its goal of helping workers and employers find a compromise so both sides can gain from the introduction of RFID in retail, Sendanyoye says. "Young people and women are the typical retail workers," he notes, "and there's a high turnover in the industry. New technologies can disrupt employment relations and may lead to faster turnover." Harmonious industrial relations, he says, are the key to solving this difficulty.

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