News from RFID Journal LIVE! 2007

At this year's conference, Microsoft announced the general availability of the beta version of BizTalk RFID, while technology vendors talked about moving their products—and customer deployments—from pilot to production.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

May 4, 2007—At this week's RFID Journal LIVE! 2007 conference in Orlando, approximately 2,500 attendees heard a number of first-hand accounts of end users' experiences with RFID deployments in a range of industries and applications.

Carpet manufacturer Shaw Industries discussed its decision to expand its RFID system to 40 distribution centers, based on the satisfactory performance it has seen from RFID tags and readers, as well as a compelling business case for investing further in the technology.

Orlando-based pallet and container provider CHEP relayed several success stories resulting from the release of the hosted offering it announced this year. This offering is designed to help its customers track materials through manufacturing processes, or to track finished products through the supply chain, using RFID-tagged containers or pallets (see CHEP Announces New RFID-Enabled Container-Tracking Service).

CHEP's senior vice president of marketing, Brian Beattie, told conference attendees that a CHEP customer in Brazil has reduced its labor costs, order-processing time and transportation expenses by employing CHEP's service to track containers and their contents within its facilities. Improved product visibility, he said, has enabled the company to reduce the amount of facility space it uses for inventory storage by 30 percent.

The CHEP offering uses a software platform called Track & Trace, made by Quebec-based e-business software provider Cactus Commerce. Cactus developed Track & Trace as an application utilizing RFID data collected by Microsoft's BizTalk RFID platform for managing auto-ID devices. At the conference, Microsoft announced the general availability of the beta version of BizTalk RFID, adding that the first release of the software's final version will take place in the third quarter of this year.

Nearly 10 end users are already making use of the software—which collects data from RFID readers and other auto-ID devices, while also performing basic data processing on the information. Additionally, more than 100 technology providers have built on BizTalk RFID to create their software, hardware or service offerings. Companies can download the beta software from the Microsoft Web site.

Aerospace contract manufacturer Killdeer Mountain Manufacturing is working with Microsoft to use the beta version of BizTalk RFID in collecting RFID tag data for work-in-process automation. Killdeer is linking that data to the manufacturing resource management module that will be part of Microsoft's Dynamic GP (formerly Great Plains) business-management software (see Aerospace Contractor Using RFID to Enable Just-in-Time).

"Our goal in developing BizTalk RFID," Anush Kumar, worldwide product manager for the BizTalk RFID

software, told attendees, "is to make RFID relevant to people within the organizations who use the technology." Kumar explained that solution providers could accomplish this goal by building applications on top of BizTalk RFID and using the software to quickly and easily add RFID readers and other auto-ID hardware devices to a network. "We have been dealing with devices for 20 years, and we know how to make them plug-and-play," he said. "When was the last time you spent more than 30 seconds configuring a mouse?"

RFID hardware providers Alien Technology and Xterprise have developed an asset-tracking system built on BizTalk RFID. The solution, known as iSUM, was demonstrated at the conference and is being used by Intelligent Global Pooling Systems (IGPS). Like CHEP, the Orlando startup offers RFID-enabled pallets for manufacturers, distributors and retailers. IGPS is using ISUM to track and inventory its plastic pallets by monitoring their movements into and out of rental facilities. The software can also automatically generate replenishment orders to ensure that the company's customers always have an adequate number of pallets on hand.

Other vendors have also developed software based on BizTalk RFID, such as 3M, Daenet, HP, Infosys, Kikata, Maximum Data Solutions, TCS and Wipro. Hardware manufacturers that have certified the ability of end users to easily configure their devices using BizTalk include Cathexis, Convergence Systems Limited (CSL), Intermec, Motorola, MTI, Paxar, Printronix, Reva, SATO, Tyco, Ubisense, Unitech, Wavetrend and Zebra.

Not all end users have worked out the kinks in their RFID systems, however. During a CIO roundtable discussion, George Chappelle, CIO of Sara Lee, said poor read rates on some of its perishable food items are making it difficult for the company to reap the types of benefits it had hoped by now to have achieved.

RELATED_ARTICLES "The read rates we're getting from [tags attached to] our frozen or dry foods are in the 70 to 75 percent range," Chappelle said, "but for refrigerated goods, we're only seeing 30 percent read rates because of the condensation that forms on these goods. To get the benefits [of RFID] we need in order to expand our use of the technology in our company, we need to improve that range."

Chappelle noted that Sara Lee did see some improvements in read rates when it moved from using Gen 1 EPC UHF RFID tags to Gen 2, though not as much of an increase as it had expected. He added that the firm is more concerned now with the performance of the tags it purchases than it is with cost, whereas initially it had been more focused on finding low-cost tags.