

Two Studies Describe the RFID Workforce

A pair of reports released last week provides insights into the industry's emerging workforce. One says RFID vendors and integrators face a shortage of RFID professionals, while another indicates end users prefer workers with industry-specific hands-on experience.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

June 7, 2007—Last week, the [Computing Technology Industry Association](#) (CompTIA), a nonprofit organization providing certifications for technology professionals, released the results of its annual survey of RFID technology resellers, value-added resellers, solution providers, systems integrators and others directly involved in the delivery of IT products and services. In addition, [RFID Tribe](#), an association for RFID professionals, revealed its completion of a 60-page report on the results of a survey it conducted with 100 members currently offering or planning to soon offer RFID integration and deployment services, most based on Electronic Product Code (EPC) technology.

While the available pool of RFID talent is getting bigger, CompTIA reports, it's still not sufficient to meet the current demand for qualified RFID professionals. However, says Steve Ostrowski, CompTIA's corporate public relations manager, the degree to which the need for workers is undermining RFID technology's growth appears to be waning. Slightly less than 70 percent of CompTIA survey respondents said they believe employers currently have an insufficient pool of RFID talent from which to hire. Of that group, Ostrowski states, 68 percent indicated the lack of workers skilled in RFID is negatively impacting the adoption of the technology. "But that's down from the year before," he notes. "In last year's survey, four out of five respondents said it would hinder [RFID] adoption."

Still, opinions on the topic seem highly variable, as only 53 percent of the 2005 survey respondents who deemed the talent pool too low also considered its size a hindrance to adoption. "It's hard to say why the attitude about this is changing, because we speak with different people each year," Ostrowski adds. But it's likely that another year of experience deploying the technology is showing that factors other than talent are creating obstacles to deployment.

In another part of the survey, respondents were asked to name the top three obstacles their firms face today, in terms of growing their RFID service offerings. Those surveyed said the top obstacle is gaining customers (RFID end users). In fact, nearly half of the respondents said they have not yet completed any permanent RFID deployments. The second biggest obstacle identified was an insufficient talent pool, followed by technological problems during RFID system implementation.

The RFID Tribe report takes a broader view of the RFID industry, concentrating not just on the growth of EPC-based applications, but also on the more-established uses of the technology, from mass-transit fare systems and highway toll collection to manufacturing automation and uniform-tracking applications. Based on current RFID-related employment trends, the report predicts, the global RFID workforce will grow to 1 million people by 2017. This will include RFID professionals deploying passive supply chain applications with UHF tags, active real-time location systems for asset tracking, and near-field communication projects aimed at consumer and business applications, as well as transportation and logistics applications.

The study analyzes the current RFID workforce by function (executives, sales and marketing, engineering, research and development), as well as by segment, defined as end-users, vendors, academia, government and quasi-governmental organizations, and geography.

Key findings from the RFID Tribe study, according to Mark Johnson, the association's president, included a markedly high turnover rate among RFID professionals and the emergence of Asia as the region holding the most promise of growth for RFID career seekers.

Johnson found that RFID end users are putting more stock into a firm's past experiences installing and maintaining RFID systems than in the number of its employees able to brandish RFID training certificates from CompTIA and other organizations. He notes that while RFID training and certification plays an important role in growing and maturing the RFID industry, end users would rather hire people with hands-on experience.

"Professional skills certifications do not equate to effectiveness in RFID implementations," Johnson says. "Passing a certification test does not insure that an individual has relevant RFID project experience, or that an individual has the commercial sense to make RFID technology work effectively in a given situation. Certifications based on passing written tests are valuable—but skills certifications are not a panacea for an organization's RFID woes, nor do they guarantee a successful RFID implementation."

The RFID Tribe's workforce study also found that industry domain expertise—in such vertical areas as health care, logistics or payments—can make vendors especially attractive to potential RFID end users interested in deploying or testing the technology in a vertical application. "A professional who has experience in a hospital facility, as well as RFID project experience," Johnson adds, "is more valued by a health-care end-user than a professional who has RFID experience but lacks experience with health-care facilities."

RELATED_ARTICLES RFID Tribe used an online survey tool to collect data for its report, then conducted follow-up interviews with some of the 100 respondents to clarify answers provided and collect qualitative information. Additionally, the association utilized data from the [RFID Talent and Career Center](#), an RFID technology job board hosted by RFID Tribe. The full report is available for download from the [RFID Tribe Web site](#) at a cost of \$99 for a single copy. A license for five downloads costs \$299.

CompTIA collected 64 responses for its survey, which was also Web-based. CompTIA members can download the full report free by logging into the organization's [members-only page](#), while non-members may purchase the report. Interested parties should send an e-mail to research@comptia.org.

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