

Education Is Key

There's a dangerous knowledge gap between early adopters, such as Wal-Mart and the U.S. Department of Defense, and just about everyone else.

By Mark Roberti

Oct. 13, 2003 - Must be nice to be Wal-Mart or the U.S. Department of Defense. These massive organizations buy more goods than most midsize countries. They have a deep understanding of RFID technology and its benefits. And they have the clout to require suppliers to tag shipments. Unfortunately, most are hopelessly behind and will find RFID an added expense, instead of a huge opportunity.

The problem hit home last week at the first seminar in our RFID Journal University series. More than 75 people attended the one-day course in San Francisco. There were executives from Levi Strauss, Microsoft, PepsiCo, Safeway and other large and midsize enterprises. These are not technology laggards. Yet, the thirst for knowledge was evident in every corner of the room.

"This is exactly what I was looking for," said Jay Watts, Microsoft's senior manager for package engineering. "The Wal-Mart mandate is driving us at Microsoft to get into RFID. My group creates packaging worldwide, so I have different concerns with respect to materials, suppliers and disposal—recycling and landfilling. A bit of this is over my head, because I'm just beginning to learn about this, but it's presented in a way that I can go back with my notes, noodle it a bit, and bring the info back to work and share it with my co-workers."

Because the number of people who have hands-on experience deploying RFID technology is very limited, we tapped the expertise of some of the leading vendor companies in the field. The topics—from the building blocks of an RFID system to data management and project planning—were presented by a panel of experts, including Joseph Tobolski, a senior manager at Accenture Technology Labs, and Mike Nichols, senior project consultant at Intermec Technologies. They didn't sugar coat how hard it is to deploy this technology.

"I'm very impressed, because this is not your standard marketing pitch for RFID," said Jon Anderson, president of Technology Solutions, a systems integrator based in Oakland, Calif. "[The lecturers] were very realistic in explaining what works and what doesn't work. I told my wife that I might be home early today, because I half-expected to hear a bunch of marketing B.S., but that wasn't the case."

RFID Journal's mission from the start has been to provide the information companies need to take advantage of RFID technology to lower costs and improve productivity. Providing information means warning companies about the pitfalls, explaining the weaknesses of RFID systems and never underestimating the cost and complexity involved.

We're planning to do another educational series next year, to help companies get up to speed quickly. The agenda hasn't been determined yet, because RFID technology is evolving and our objective is to keep pace with the latest issues, problems and solutions. And, of course, we want to provide the information you need. For instance, do you want to learn how to deploy Electronic Product Code technologies or how to develop a business case? If you have thoughts about the type of educational series you would find most helpful, please

e-mail me at mroberti@rfidjournal.com.

We are also planning next year's RFID Journal Live! executive conference, which will be held in Chicago from March 29 to 31. Rather than focus on the nuts and bolts of RFID systems, it will cover more strategic issues. We've invited some of the most prominent early adopters, and we're working on some innovations that will make this year's conference unique. If there are topics you would like to see covered, please let me know.

Mark Roberti is the Editor of RFID Journal.

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