

A Year of Great Progress

This year, RFID has made major strides towards becoming a technology that can be used in open supply chains. But there is still important work to be done.

By Mark Roberti

Dec. 15, 2003—Around this time last year, I cautioned that even though there was a lot of buzz about RFID, it was a mistake to think it was a given that it would take off in open supply chains. There was still a lot of work to be done by the Auto-ID Center and the International Organization for Standardization to finalize standards (see [Looking Ahead To 2003](#)). Well, the buzz has gotten even more intense, and there is still a lot of work to be done.

Make no mistake, 2003 has been an important year in the evolution of RFID technology. The Electronic Product Code (EPC) has progressed to the point that Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, is committed to using it. The Auto-ID Center has handed its research work off to the [Auto-ID Labs](#), which are continuing to do important work. The Cambridge lab, for instance, is working on concepts that could change the way goods are manufactured (see, [Auto-ID Lab Redefines Manufacturing](#)). And the center handed the promotion of the EPC Network to [EPCglobal](#), a joint venture between the Uniform Code Council and EAN International.

The EAN and UCC have done a remarkable job of continuing to make progress on important issues even as they build EPCglobal. Last week, we saw some progress on the intellectual property issue. The policy developed by EPCglobal is far enough along that Alien Technology and Matrics were willing to take the lead and say they support the royalty-free approach EPCglobal wants for EPC-related intellectual property (see [Two EPC Vendors Go Royalty Free](#)).

But the IP issue is not fully resolved and probably won't be until more RFID vendors subscribe to the policy or vendors test their patent positions in the courts. Another important issue is the Class 1, Gen2 protocol. Exactly what form it will take will be determined during the first half of 2004. There is hope among some vendors and a few end users that EPC technology can be merged with the ISO 18000-6 UHF protocol, which is nearing final ratification. It's not clear that that can be achieved.

The RFID industry has made good progress. The issues that remain are thorny because how they are resolved will help or hurt some vendors. It's important now for end users to get involved with EPCglobal and make their views known about what they want to see the EPC Network become. This is an usual role for end users—typically technology is created and then used—but it's a huge advantage for companies to be involved in the creation process. It's also vital if RFID is ever to achieve the long-term expectations that its supporters have raised.

Clarification: A recent article in a well-regarded IT trade publication entitled "Defense Department Scales Down RFID Plan", states: "Defense originally wanted all of its 43,000 suppliers to implement RFID by January 2005. Now it's requiring only its top 100 vendors to meet that deadline. The top 500 suppliers must be using RFID by July 2005, while the rest need to be on board by January 2006." A Defense Department spokesperson says "the article is inaccurate, and we stand by previous statements." To read more about the

official policy, see [Military Edict: Use RFID by 2005](#).

Please note: *RFID Journal* will not publish its regular newsletter on Dec. 25 and Jan. 1. We will continue updating the Web site as news breaks, and we will resume publishing the newsletter after the New Year. We wish all our readers a happy, healthy and prosperous 2004. We are grateful for your continued support.

Mark Roberti is the founder and editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article, click on the link below.

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