

The former executive director of the Auto-ID Center has joined the startup reader designer as vice president of marketing and business development.

Feb. 23, 2004—Kevin Ashton, the cofounder and former executive director of MIT's Auto-ID Center, has joined [ThingMagic](#), a Cambridge, Mass., startup that designs multifrequency, multiprotocol readers. Ashton will be vice president in charge of marketing and business development.

"I had number of opportunities to get back into the RFID business, but as I got more into ThingMagic and the technology they are going to launch this year, I became more and more excited about the company and it's future," says Ashton. "The technology direction they are taking is the one I want to be going in as well. They are very focused on extensive partnerships and open technology. Their vision of a world where every item is part of one sensor network is the same as mine."

From 1999 to the fall of 2003, Ashton was the driving force behind the Auto-ID Center's vision of an open network for tracking goods with RFID tags carrying an Electronic Product Code (EPC). He raised millions of dollars and signed up 103 sponsors. In September 2003, the Auto-ID Center ceased to exist. EPCglobal was set up by the Uniform Code Council and EAN International to commercialize the technology, and Auto-ID Labs were established at MIT and other universities to continue the research work of the Auto-ID Center.



Kevin Ashton

Ashton spent the next four months finishing a book about RFID and sensor networks. With the book done, he chose to join ThingMagic, which had been hired by the Auto-ID Center to do the first EPC reader reference design, a specification any company could use to build a reader for EPC tags. ThingMagic has since enhanced that basic design, working with Intel to develop an intelligent reader (see [ThingMagic Teams Up with Intel](#)), the Mercury4, which will be launched later this year. An Intelligent reader is one that can be programmed to filter data before passing it on to host systems.

"My primarily role will be in helping ThingMagic go from being pioneers to being leaders," says Ashton. "They have a leading position in a small market. The challenge and fun will be in ensuring they maintain that leadership position and build on it as the market grows."

Tom Grant, ThingMagic's chairman and CEO, says the hiring of Ashton is "another piece in the management puzzle we've been working to complete." The company hired Margaret Wasserman as VP of development in January 2004. She was previously an engineering fellow at Nokia Research Center, and principal technologist at Wind River Systems.

"We're building the development and management team to complement the talent of the company's founders," Grant says. "In hiring Margaret and Kevin, we've addressed two key elements. Margaret will manage our [product] development efforts, and Kevin is uniquely positioned to handle our marketing

efforts."

Grant points out that Ashton promoted EPC as an open technology that all companies could create product for. "We view that as consistent with our business model," he says.

ThingMagic readers are based on open EPC specifications. The company does not plan to manufacture readers. Instead, it designs readers and then licenses the technology to other companies. [Tyco/Sensormatic](#) is currently manufacturing readers based on ThingMagic's existing Mercury design and marketing them under the SensorID brand. Tyco/Sensormatic is expected to have a new reader based on the Mercury4 design on the market by the middle of this year.

The new Mercury4 reader is essentially a Linux computer that reads RFID tags. It will feature an Intel IXP420 XScale network processor operating at 266 MHz and will come with 16MB of flash memory and up to 64MB of DRAM. The reader will be able to support several air-interface protocols simultaneously, including EPC Class 0, EPC Class 1, ISO 15693 and ISO 18000-6.

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