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# Don't Forget the People Factor

A few years ago, most presentations at our events focused on the performance of radio frequency identification systems. Speakers would discuss problems they had to overcome, such as tagging small vials of drugs or goods with high-water content, and attendees would spend most question-and-answer periods on

performance issues.

At RFID Journal LIVE! Europe 2009, held last week in Germany, many presenters talked more about people issues than physics problems. And while some attendees asked about read rates, a few also inquired about how employees reacted to new systems.

To me, that's a sign that RFID technology has matured. Businesses are now dealing with the same types of deployment issues that typically arise with other technologies, such as a new customer relationship management system.



Gerd Wolfram, head of Metro Group's CIO office, delivered the opening keynote address at this year's LIVE! Europe event. Wolfram described an RFID system that shows when certain cuts of meat need to be replenished, so that a butcher can prepare them without having to perform a physical check of the display to see what's been purchased. The meat is tagged, and interrogators placed within a refrigerated display area have a read accuracy of 95 percent—despite the fact that Metro uses ultrahigh-frequency (UHF) tags and meat is mostly composed of water (UHF energy is absorbed by water, which caused problems with early deployments).

Butchering is a fairly low-tech job, in which skills are passed on from one person to the next, so I asked how the industry responded to having to utilize an electronic system. Wolfram said there was resistance to using the technology at first. Metro had to not only train the butchers, but also actively encourage them to use the system. "But once they get

used to it," he said, "they like it, because it makes their job easier. They don't have to keep checking the shelf to see what's out of stock."

Pankaj Sood, founder and manager of McMaster University's RFID Applications Lab, provided a presentation on managing risk in an RFID deployment. One risk is that people won't use the system. Between sessions, Sood told me the lab has worked with several hospitals to deploy a real-time location system (RTLS), and that it generally took about three months to get the nurses to fully embrace the system, and to utilize it to find assets. "You can't have an ROI in five months," he stated, "if the nurses don't use the system for three months."

Another gentleman from a large retail company told me a similar story, at a dinner hosted by Checkpoint Systems, the event's retail sponsor. This individual discussed the resistance his team encounters whenever it tries to employ RFID to solve an existing business problem. If his group discovers an issue and raises it with a CIO in order to obtain funding, he said, local managers often push back and oppose the project. But if they quietly approach the local managers and suggest RFID might be able to help, they receive support.

These issues are important to understand, because although RFID automates some tasks, it is human beings who will use the data provided by an RFID system, in order to become more efficient or better serve their customers. All of us are, on some level, resistant to changing the way we do things, and threatened by ideas that are new—especially when a new idea is designed to improve the job we're doing.

I've asked our editors to develop a Best Practices article on how to manage change effectively when deploying an RFID system. We'll talk to those who have already done so, and distill down what worked, so you can ensure that when you implement your brilliantly designed RFID system, people will actually use it to deliver value to their company.

*Mark Roberti is the founder and editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article, click on the link below. To read more of Mark's opinions, visit the RFID Journal Blog or click here.*



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