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Look Beyond an ROI

I'm always leery of using an existing or potential tragedy to highlight the benefits that radio frequency identification can offer. It's unseemly, and it can be a stretch to suggest that RFID could have prevented an incident. For this reason, I've been debating for the past few weeks whether to discuss the news that emerged in June that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) mishandled samples of the deadly anthrax

virus and other pathogens. I've finally decided to write about it, because I think two important lessons can be gleaned from the problems at the CDC.

The first is that a return on investment is not the only reason to deploy an RFID system. Every deployment must deliver value to an organization, but value is not always measured in dollars. Companies sometimes need to invest in a system that will have a negative ROI because the positive benefits of saving workers' lives is greater than the system's cost.



Some companies get this. BP Cherry Point, BP's oil refinery in Cherry Point, Washington, deployed an RFID personnel-tracking system in 2006. The site's "Location Aware Safety System" monitors the whereabouts of 2,000 staff members, contractors and visitors, who are required to wear RFID-enabled badges in the refinery's processing area, tank farm and docks. The system enables BP's operators to determine where they are located in the event of an emergency, such as a fire or explosion. Other refineries have since deployed similar solutions (see [BP Refinery Uses RFID for Evacuation System](#)).

In the case of the CDC, an RFID system perhaps could have ensured the safe handling of deadly pathogens by alerting managers when items were not properly checked in or out of secure refrigerators or cabinets. An investment in an RFID system might cost \$100,000 or even \$200,000, but that would be a small price to pay to ensure the public is not exposed to deadly toxins or pathogens.

The second lesson from the CDC incident is that workers do not always follow procedure. This is hardly unique to the CDC. In

many organizations, rules are bent ever so slightly. Nothing bad happens, so over time, they are bent a little more. After years without negative incidents, an organization can develop a culture of complacency, which will not be exposed until tragedy strikes (which thankfully did not happen at the CDC).

RFID systems can act as a reminder, or they can be set up to require certain behaviors. Last year, I spoke to a hotel general manager who had deployed a system to remind kitchen workers to wash their hands at regular intervals. The kitchen staff wore badges with tiny green, yellow or red lights on them. If a worker's light was red, it meant that person had not yet washed his or her hands and needed to do so immediately.

The CDC could use RFID to ensure the proper handling of pathogens. Employees could be required to check out pathogens they are testing with an RFID-enabled badge that identifies them personally. Samples could be tagged so that software records which specific item has been removed from a refrigerator. And the system could be set up to alert managers if a pathogen is not returned to the proper location after a certain period of time.

The thing about software, tags and readers is that they don't get tired, they don't lose focus and they never become complacent. They just do what you set them up to do. They can be a great check on us humans—who, as we all know, are prone to error.

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, the Editor's Note archive or RFID Connect.



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