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Making RFID Easy(er)

I'm often asked, what's the biggest thing holding companies back from deploying radio frequency identification? My answer: the resistance to change. And while that is clearly true, the fact that RFID is not simple to deploy has only given opponents ammunition to shoot down projects. It will never work. Tags can't be read consistently. The read range is too short. The tags cost too much. Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

RFID technology providers have also heard all these arguments, and over the past 10 years, companies that make passive and active systems have invested millions of dollars to improve their products and make them cheaper and easier to deploy. While the technology is still not “plug and play,” our cover story in this issue identifies better hardware and software as two advances simplifying deployment (see 7 Trends Driving RFID Adoption).



Another key trend is the movement toward vertical-industry applications. Hospitals, for example, no longer have to adapt generic hardware to track assets and medical devices. In the apparel retail sector, several companies have developed software solutions designed to provide near real-time inventory visibility and help retailers improve replenishment, so items are always on the shelves when customers want to buy them. They also let managers analyze data to gain insights into what is or isn't selling, and why (for a closer look at some of these solutions, see Product Developments).

A more recent trend is the development of specialized solutions, such as applications that ensure doctors wash their hands before entering and leaving patients' rooms. Specialized solutions also are making RFID adoption possible for companies in smaller sectors; pubs and restaurants, for instance, are tracking the amount of liquor bartenders pour for customers.

In many industries, standards development is propelling adoption, but interoperability remains a challenge for

logistics companies that transport goods through the global supply chain. While EPCglobal's Transportation and Logistics Services Industry Action Group is working hard to establish standards, third-party logistics providers are collaborating with manufacturers and retailers to track goods. Kuehne+Nagel, for instance, worked with Iveco, a maker of commercial vehicles, to develop PARTS-iD, an RFID system used in the receipt, picking and shipping of automotive parts that pass through a distribution center Kuehne+Nagel operates for Iveco. The system has reduced shipping errors by 70 percent and improved customer satisfaction (see Logistics Providers Move, Slowly, Toward RFID).

Deploying an RFID system might never be truly easy because it involves change, and people are reluctant to change. But the continued evolution of RFID hardware, software and standards is taking much of the complexity—and risk—out of deploying the technology. Companies can spend less time getting a system up and running and focus more on streamlining business processes, retraining workers and using the data to cut costs and improve efficiencies.

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