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The Bar Code Is Back!

I received an e-mail the other day from a gentleman who sells bar-code systems, pointing out that back in March 2003, I wrote that the use of radio frequency identification systems “leads to ‘zero human involvement operations,’ which may actually boost productivity” (see Getting to 0HI0). He also referenced my Jan. 25 news story about Wal-Mart rolling out handheld and forklift-mounted RFID interrogators, exploring

the use of wearable RFID interrogators. He then wrote: "RFID is marching backwards, and it's about to meet—the BAR CODE!"

This man's point was that end users are finding RFID too expensive to deploy at every dock door and on every shelf to get to 0HIO (zero human intervention operations). The way end users are deploying RFID system looks a lot like the way bar-code systems have been deployed for years. My e-mail correspondent believes end users will soon discover that even putting RFID interrogators on forklift trucks and in people's hands will be too expensive, and they will revert to using tried-and-true bar-code solutions.



While people may be rethinking RFID deployment strategies, that doesn't mean RFID is marching backwards. It's cheaper to put an interrogator on a forklift than on every dock door, and using an RFID-enabled forklift reduces human involvement because the driver doesn't have to scan the bar code manually. Plus, it's hardly a surprise Wal-Mart sees benefits in adding RFID capabilities to its current handheld devices—companies will always try to leverage existing infrastructure rather than rip out systems they have in favor of new ones.

From what I see and hear, RFID is marching forward at an incredible pace, far beyond what I had ever expected. A few years ago, virtually all commentators, including me, thought RFID would be used for several years at the case and pallet level before companies started deploying it at the item level. And yet, item-level tracking is moving ahead rapidly. Pfizer

recently announced its use of RFID in tagging Viagra (see Pfizer Using RFID to Fight Fake Viagra), for instance, while Alien Technology CEO Stav Prodromou told me recently that more and more apparel companies are looking at tagging individual items (see Tipping Point Is Closer, Says Alien CEO).

That said, I think companies are rethinking the way they deploy RFID and the future role of the humble bar code. Not too long ago, many end users thought the bar code would be relegated to a backup role for cases and pallets, and continue to be the main method of identifying individual items (no serious thinker I know thought the bar code would become obsolete any time soon). Today, companies are examining where different auto-identification technologies make sense. There's some talk, for instance, that serialized bar codes might be a better solution for tracking individual units of pharmaceutical drugs and creating electronic pedigrees.

Airbus and Boeing have launched a joint effort to create RFID standards in the aerospace sector, but they are also reexamining the use of bar codes. Alan Thorne, manager of the manufacturing automation laboratory at the University of Cambridge in England and a member of the Cambridge Auto-ID Lab, is working with the Aerospace ID Technologies Programme at Cambridge. He told me, not two days before I received the e-mail from my bar-coding friend, that the research group is creating a matrix to determine when it makes sense to use different types of auto-ID technologies in the aerospace sector.

As the founder of an RFID media company, I could feel threatened by the fact that some end users are reexamining the role of bar codes, RFID and other technologies, but frankly I don't. It's healthy for companies to reexamine their approach to deploying a new technology. We're now beyond the phase where companies are infatuated with the idea of deploying RFID and into the stage of looking at the hard, cold realities and determining where it makes sense to deploy RFID and how to do

it cost-effectively. Some potential applications won't work out. New ones will be discovered. But ultimately, companies will develop applications and back-end IT systems leveraging a variety of auto-ID and sensor technologies—including bar codes—to help them do business more effectively. And that, in the end, is what it's all about.

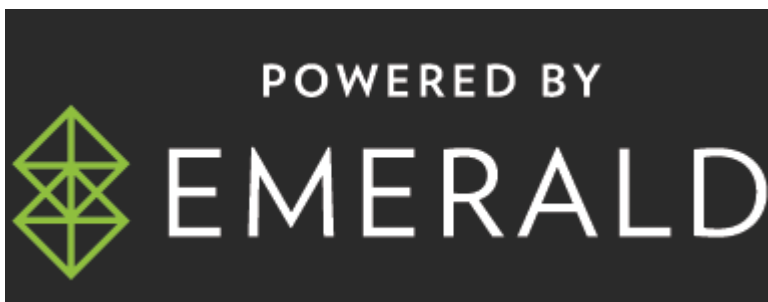
Mark Roberti is the founder and editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article, click on the link below.



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