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The Problem With People (and How RFID Can Help Fix It)

All eyes in the United States—metaphorically speaking—are on the Gulf of Mexico, and the battle currently underway there to plug BP's broken oil well to stop it from leaking. There will be a government investigation to determine what caused the disaster, but as I watch the news each night and read the

papers every morning, the thing that sticks in my mind the most is the report that a battery in the blowout preventer's control pod might have been dead. That's probably not the only issue that contributed to the failure of the \$2 billion rig, but surely it was someone's job to test the battery—and, if necessary, to replace it—before the unit was installed.

And that's the problem with people: They don't always do what they are supposed to. We all know that inspectors often fail to check equipment, and simply sign off on the paperwork. That was the case when a 15-story crane near *RFID Journal's* old Manhattan office collapsed, killing seven people. The inspector had reportedly never been to the site (see RFID in Maintenance and Field Services).



RFID isn't Big Brother—it can't watch everything workers do. But it can be used to confirm that employees have done what they are supposed to, such as inspecting equipment. Frankfurt Airport is utilizing RFID to confirm that inspections of fire-safety equipment are conducted properly (see RFID Lands at Frankfurt Airport). And a growing number of construction product-management companies are employing the technology to enable their inspectors to create documents automatically in the field (see Equipment Inspectors Find Safety in RFID).

Safety is obviously a big issue in health care. RFID systems are being used today to ensure that employees wash their hands (see RFID Debuts as Hand-Washing Compliance Officer). RFID systems could also be designed to ensure that patients are not inadvertently administered the incorrect medicine, or that the

wrong tube isn't connected to an IV pump.

Mine safety is also a big issue, especially in the United States and China, after recent collapses resulted in miners' deaths. A growing number of mines are turning to RFID to ensure safety equipment is properly installed and inspected, as well as to monitor the locations of workers and vehicles so they can be evacuated quickly in the event of a problem (see Australian Coal Mine to Enhance Safety Using RFID).

While safety is most critical, people also cause business problems. A few years ago, I was touring the back of a Wal-Mart store with Simon Langford, who was then leading the retailer's RFID efforts. He made the point that workers sometimes reach the end of their shift before replenishing all items on their pick list. As a result, some simply tick off the remaining items on their handheld computer, indicating they were picked when they really weren't, but the system then thinks the products are on the shelf, thereby leading to lost sales.

RFID can be used to ensure that items actually have been replenished. In RFID-enabled stores, Wal-Mart didn't remove items from pick lists until the EPC RFID tag on an empty case was read, right before it was moved to the box crusher. In an apparel store, taking inventory every three or four days with an RFID handheld enables retailers to confirm that items intended to be brought out from the back room were, in fact, brought out.

RFID can't solve every problem, or guarantee that people always do what they are supposed to. But the ability to collect information automatically—without workers having to do anything differently—is a powerful tool that can improve safety and compliance with established procedures. In short, it can be utilized as a tool to ensure operational excellence.

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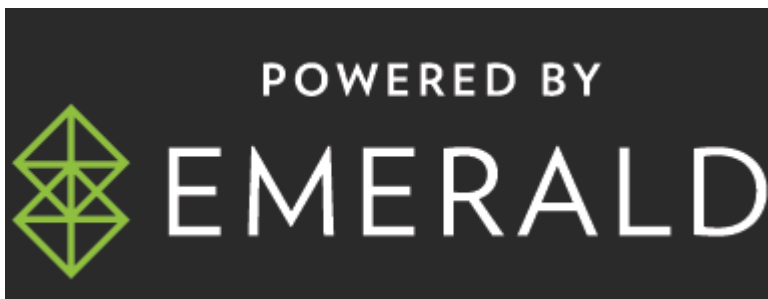
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