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The Pull of the Culture

Sept. 23, 2002 – When I was in college, I had a sociology teacher who used to say: “Never underestimate the pull of the culture.” His point was that the way we think, feel and act is determined to a great extent by the society around us. My well-educated professor was from Brooklyn, New York, and his admonition came out like this: “Neva unda-estimate da pull a da culcha.” Thus, he demonstrated his own point every time he

said it.

The importance of culture in business is often underestimated. Any group of employees – whether longshoremen or vice presidents – has certain codes of behavior, standards of conduct and issues of pride. Over the past five years, people in all areas of business have been asked to do things in new ways because of the Internet.

Communication is now done primarily by e-mail, orders are placed online and many meetings are done via the Web. Some people are happy to do things differently, especially if, after struggling through the initial learning period, they are rewarded by a reduction in work. Others have a difficult time with change regardless of the potential benefits.

The changes involved in implementing RFID are every bit as dramatic as the changes wrought by the Internet. In Part 3 of our Special Report *Low-Cost RFID: The Way Forward*, Change Management, we look at some of the initial changes that will confront frontline workers, the medium-term impact on IT departments and on middle managers, and finally, the long-term impact on senior managers and CEOs.

When companies reach the point where individual items are being tracked using RFID, everyone's job will change, from the marketing person to stockroom staff. But ultimately, it will be up to CEOs and senior managers to create a culture where people embrace change. It's up to senior managers to convince the rank and file that even though they have to learn something new or do things differently, the benefits for the company – in savings, increased efficiency, better customer service and ultimately competitive advantage – make it more than worthwhile.

Just as Dell Computer and Cisco System embraced the Internet and made it an integral part of the way they do business, we think there will be a handful of leaders who will embrace

RFID. They will encourage employees to rethink the way they do everything to see if there is a better way to do it using RFID. Those companies will enjoy a huge competitive advantage.

As I survey the landscape, the one company that stands out right now is Wal-Mart. That shouldn't surprise anyone because Wal-Mart has a culture of doing whatever it takes, including adopting new technology, to increase efficiency and reduce costs. While employees at many other companies resist change, the people at Wal-Mart – from top management to checkout staff – are eager to seize new opportunities created by new technology. That's the pull of the culture.

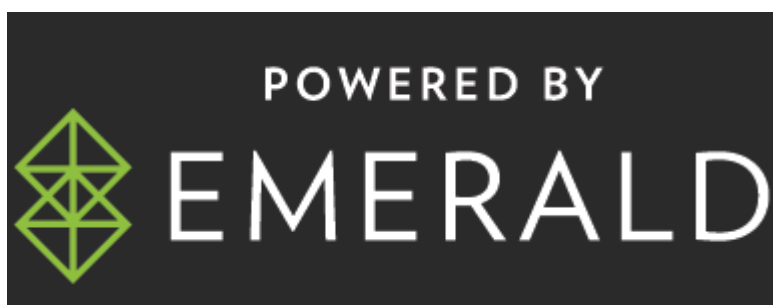
Mark Roberti is the Editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article or submit your own, send e-mail to mroberti@rfidjournal.com.



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