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# Using RFID to Direct Employees

Anyone who has run a retail store, factory or warehouse knows that it's often very difficult to get workers to do exactly what they're supposed to do—and it's even harder to confirm that they've done it. Managers can train low-wage employees who often work part time all they want, but with no way to

monitor them, it's difficult to get them to comply. Radio frequency identification has the potential to change that in a powerful way.

Right now, most companies aren't thinking about using RFID in this way. They are stuck on the idea that it's simply a tool to track goods and assets. One firm that has deployed RFID to improve workers' productivity is the Australian tomato grower, d'Vineripe. The company is employing RFID technology to ensure workers perform a variety of tasks each day, including pruning, pollinating, de-leafing, pest and disease control, and picking (see [RFID Helps Improve Agricultural Worker Productivity](#)).



As each worker is given his or her daily assignment, the greenhouse's station manager reads an RFID tag specifically identified for the task using a handheld interrogator. The manager then reads another tag designated for the row or rows in which the laborer will work, linking that individual to that task and row. At the conclusion of the employee's task or shift, his or her tag is scanned to indicate that individual is finished working. The data is downloaded into the company's back-end system, where it can be compared against best practices for each task. This enables the managers to address particular problems, such as training or other issues related to a specific employee not working efficiently.

Retailers could adopt a similar system for replenishment. Today, many retailers rely on workers to take the initiative and scan bar codes on shelves that require replenishment. Some

retailers create pick lists based on point-of-sale (POS) data. Either way, it's up to the worker to pick the items and report that they've been picked. If the worker says an item was picked and it really wasn't, there's no way store managers can detect the problem until the item fails to sell for a few days, or until someone spots the empty shelf.

RFID can change the equation by alerting people when tasks need to be performed. When an item is out of stock or about to become so, an RFID-enabled inventory system can send a message to a handheld computer used by store associates (POS data is less effective because when an item is stolen or misplaced, the system thinks it's still in stock). The worker can then be timed to see how long it takes him to replenish. As he takes the item from the back of the store to the sales floor, the tag is read confirming the item has been replenished. If the tag isn't read after a certain period, an alert can be sent to the store manager. Workers can be rewarded for replenishing quickly, retrained to be more efficient or fired if they consistently fail to replenish in a timely manner.

In a factory, systems can be set up to alert workers when a sequence of tasks needs to be performed. Let's say parts need to go to one workshop for an acid bath, and then another for final milling. Software can be set up to alert a worker to bring an item to the first shop when the unit arrives at the facility. Once the process is done, the shop laborer might place the part on a shelf to dry. There, the tag is read. This confirms the process was completed, and an alert is sent for someone to pick up the part and take it to the next shop.

Software systems could also be set up to send an alert to a manager that a part has not completed a process within a specified period of time. The manager can investigate and, if necessary, intervene. It's this ability to confirm tasks have been completed and alert a manager when they aren't that is crucial. Think about it: One of the big problems with inventory accuracy in stores is that store associates say they

replenished an item when they didn't. Now managers can confirm whether they did or did not do what they were supposed to, because a tag is read when the item is replenished or not read if it isn't.

Some people will say this is Big Brother watching workers' every move (the Big Brother label is getting so overused), but the fact is, the technology ensures only that tasks are completed in a timely manner. And folks I've talked to say workers actually like having clear guidance on what to do, and feedback on when it's done. "Kids working part-time to pay for college don't necessarily want to think a lot," says one manager of a facility at which RFID monitors employee tasks. "They like that our system is dead-simple—they can listen to their iPods while they work—and it lets them know when they've made a mistake so they can correct it and not have me come down on them for screwing up."

If you're having trouble getting unskilled workers to follow instructions, consider whether RFID can make life easier for you—and for them.

*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 or click here.*

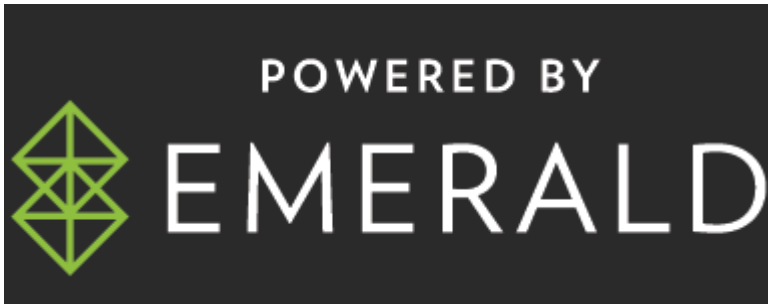


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