

Straight Talking – RFID: What can it do for the Business?

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All too often, when a novel technology concept comes along, everyone focuses on how to promote and sell the technology - rather than looking at it from the 'what can it do for the business' angle.

In other words, what are the challenges and issues that organisations and employees face, and are there any ways we can alleviate them with technology, rather than how can we better package new technology into a so-called solution?

RFID is a case in point. Identifying all small or moving objects with a unique electronic tag is all well and good - but in isolation an identity does not become overwhelmingly interesting just because it is shared over a radio frequency rather than printed as serial numbers, barcodes or some other form of tag.

Proponents of RFID will say the technology makes it simple to tag and identify individual objects with a unique identity, rather than just identifying the group to which an object belongs, and that RFID readers can detect multiple tags at a distance or without clear line of sight.

But really it is more important to identify the sound business reasons why an organisation might care more about one particular tin of beans than the rest of its friends on the same pallet. Even when there is a reasonable business case, it is too often swamped by suppliers placing too much emphasis on cost of tags, speed of readers and how cool the technology is.

You'd think vendors would have learned a lesson from the smartcard industry. I have lost track of how many times a year has been hailed 'the year of the smartcard' in January, to be followed by press comments in the spring bemoaning overblown industry hype.

Yet smartcard concepts are now embedded into daily life, from mobile phone SIMs to car remotes, without compelling the user to think 'I'm using a smartcard'. Even Big Brother-like loyalty cards can be deployed without a ripple, providing a retailer promises sufficient reward points, tokens or money off. Perhaps there's a marketing message here for some governments as well as vendors.

The key for successful deployment is to focus on the whole activity or process, and not the technology used at the end point. What makes the identity of items more valuable is the overall Idea - IDentity plus

Environment plus Action - using the context or environment the object is in and an understanding of how this will generate activities or affect business processes.

The starting point should be the business need. For many uses of tagging items this will mean that additional information must be gathered, and at times this information may be much more significant than the identity. At a simple level it might be the location for tracking, for example on the large scale the shipments of goods around the planet or on a small scale the precise location of valuable artefacts in a museum.

More sophisticated solutions may require environmental or component monitoring with sensors for heat, sound, stress etc, and others may require awareness or detection of periodic events, such as opening or closing of doors or gates.

Knowing which items are involved in which processes, and what is happening to them, allows informed decisions to be made or other activities to automatically kick in within the business process. It is in making the decisions or triggering actions based on live and accurate data that these processes can be transformed or made more efficient. This is the point at which the attributes of specific individual business assets becomes interesting.

As well as a number of start-ups and young, nimble companies exploring this field, many traditional suppliers have been touting their fledgling RFID activities. One company has now adopted a notably different approach, however. IBM started out by appearing to jump on the RFID bandwagon like any other company but its experience - including both successes and failures over the last few years - has resulted in a much more mature attitude.

Instead of treating RFID as a primary technology in its own right, IBM places identity along with other sensor-derived information on the periphery of the solution where it belongs, and ascribes a more important role to the integration of this information into business systems and processes.

In IBM's sensor and actuator cross-functional group, which incorporates RFID, solutions are defined on problem areas that a customer organisation will identify with - the tracking, auditing and monitoring of valuable business or individual assets.

Applications may make use of RFID tagging but what is presented in IBM's solution centre in La Garde near Nice is a framework that is clearly recognisable as showcasing business processes, rather than technology. This business-led approach to the issue has to be backed up with real deployments, requiring IBM to orchestrate the involvement of partners for network service provision, tags and sensors as well as specialised application software.

Rather than going directly into RFID and sensor technology production itself, IBM has used its research and development muscle to spawn ideas that can be further developed and taken to market by others. These often use embedded IBM software technology, making the overall solution more straightforward to integrate.

After all, the idea is to deliver a business solution that includes relevant sensor and identity technology, rather than build solutions around a technology-de-jour such as RFID.

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