

Wireless World: Libraries embrace wireless

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A library patron ambles out the door, book in hand, without stopping by the librarian. Is this theft? No, it's the new checkout procedure, made possible by Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology, experts tell United Press International's Wireless World.

"Currently, approximately 120 million media and books in about 500 libraries worldwide are already attached with RFID labels," Birgit Lindl, a spokeswoman for Bibliotheca RFID Library Systems AG, based in Munich, Germany, told Wireless World. "This is a remarkable number which is continually increasing."

The RFID labels enable the customers to pass by card readers that automatically update the computer system, indicating that the book has been checked out. The ID information on the patron's library card is synchronized with the book, enabling accurate recordkeeping.

RFID standards are being developed for an array of industries today here and abroad and are setting the stage for increased usage of the technology in the coming years. "We have initiated a task force on this matter with leading European librarians," said Lindl.

Major technology companies are involved in the standards-setting efforts too. Last month IBM announced an array of new partnerships in the RFID realm to help customers build what it called "on-demand" business processes. "Standardization has historically been the key driver in accelerating the mass adoption of emerging technologies," said IBM Vice President Robert Mayberry.

Right now, Mayberry said, RFID is being deployed in what he termed "first adopter" industries and companies. These companies are trying to cut costs and create new business processes -- increasing their overall efficiency.

Even though the market is still very early in its development research consultancy The Yankee Group is projecting that the market will be worth over \$4 billion by 2008 from \$1 billion today.

Other leading companies such as like Avery Dennison are also pushing standards to help the industry reach those sales projection levels. The company recently released a white paper on its own RFID tag testing technology, essentially releasing, for free, some of its trade secrets. "By sharing its testing methodology, Avery Dennison is in a practical sense, helping the entire industry move forward with RFID adoption for the benefit of end users," said Todd Appleman, a company spokesman.

A related standards development is in the field of electronic product codes -- EPC in industry argot. This is the information, simply put, that resides on the RFID tags and tells the readers what the product is, who made it, where it was made, who bought it, and other relevant information. There is a trade group especially for this effort, called EPCglobal, which has developed protocol specifications and has certified technologies said to be in compliance with the specifications, a spokeswoman for Symbol Technologies, a major player in the RFID space, told Wireless World.

"RFID standards are extremely important, especially for the libraries," said Lindl. "The use of established standards creates a downward compatibility, which allows existing systems to be easily extended with the latest developments. An ongoing inter-library loan will be no problem at all. There will be no barriers to easily and swiftly implementing an RFID system and to connect it to a library management

system."

Librarians from German-speaking countries -- in cities like Hamburg, Munich, Stuttgart, Tübingen, Ulm, Vienna and Winterthur -- have founded a task force on RFID technologies and are working with leading European companies to move it along. They, in turn, are working with standards developed first in another country. "The task force is supporting the data model which was developed in Denmark," said Lindl.

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