MS, SAP Tout New RFID Platform Capabilities

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Microsoft releases the first public beta of BizTalk Server 2006 R2 and SAP showcases its RFID Product Tracking and Authentication application at the RFID Journal Live conference.

Microsoft and SAP previewed new technology at the RFID Journal Live conference in Orlando from April 30 to May 2. While Microsoft took another baby step toward releasing its RFID platform with the first public beta of BizTalk Server 2006 R2, SAP showcased its RFID Product Tracking and Authentication application, the company's first process-based application to build on its Object Event Repository launched in March.

Both companies said they hope that by developing what amounts to an integration and development platform for radio-frequency identification, they can advance the discussion among users from such mundane questions as how to connect disparate tags and readers to the broader issue of how to use RFID-generated data in a meaningful way.

Microsoft and SAP are not the first vendors to have this desire. They compete heavily in the RFID platform race with the likes of IBM, BEA Systems and Oracle. Microsoft's approach is to partner to build out vertical solutions; more than 100 software and hardware vendors are on board with BizTalk Server 2006.

"We think RFID capabilities and what we're doing with partners can really change the adoption of RFID," said Steve Sloan, senior product

manager for BizTalk Server, in Redmond, Wash. "We made a decision about a year ago. We could release BizTalk RFID - put it out there, iterate with customers and put something out relatively shortly thereafter. Or we could bring partners in a bit closer than we normally do and take more time with them, with the result more of a Version 2 or 3 product, rather than a Version 1."

Microsoft focused on two areas with the Beta 2 version of BizTalk Server 2006: simplifying device interaction and moving data from the edge, where it's collected, back into the organization. To that end, Microsoft has developed three pieces of BizTalk Server: an abstraction or plug-and-play layer to enable integration with other systems; a set of services that let users filter, aggregate and transform data into relevant events; and a set of tools that enable users and partners to manage their RFID environments.

BizTalk Server 2006 R2, available in the third quarter, also adds native support for EDI (electronic data interchange), and is integrated with Vista and Office 2007, with adapters for Windows Communication Foundation and Workflow Foundation in Vista and for Office SharePoint Server.

SAP likewise is taking the platform approach. Its Object Event Repository really capitalizes on the bulk of user data it owns in ERP (enterprise resource planning) by serving as the record of RFID events, as well as the integration platform for connecting RFID data and business applications, according to SAP's Krish Mantripragada, director of solution strategy at SAP, headquartered in Walldorf, Germany.

"We have a lot of our internal applications that stand to benefit from consuming RFID data - some that are enabled by ERP processes," Mantripragada said. "We will continue to build out the - OER - platform so customers don't have to enable different repositories and platform

elements to support different applications. That will be our first area of focus. In addition we are building different applications and will continue to do that, and we will leverage the ecosystem."

The PTA application is the first business process that taps into the SAP Object Event Repository. It enables companies to track and authenticate the serialized products that they manufacture and distribute, both within their own enterprise and when products are in the hands of trading partners.

SAP currently has about 250 RFID customers and 25 partners that are certified on SAP's Auto ID Infrastructure, the predecessor to the repository. The company is also building out its portfolio of partners that will build composite apps on OER, according to Mantripragada.

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