



A division of the Smart Card Society of SA

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4th RFID Conference Held on 17 August 2005

The 4th AFRITAG meeting and conference took place at the Carnival City conference centre on 17 August. There were over 150 attendees roughly half of which were users and the others suppliers of RFID solutions.

The conference was opened by Derick Rule, chairman of the Smart Card Society of Southern Africa, which is AFRITAG's founding company.

The first speaker of the day was Ronnie Herzfeld, Pick 'n Pay's Systems and Technology group executive. Ronnie is also a director of the CGCSA and chairman of GS1 South Africa.

Retail requirements

Ronnie provided a practical perspective of the retail industry's requirement for RFID. He emphasised that retailers are committed to using RFID or any other technology that will help them to improve efficiency and profitability, but that they would not deploy technology just for technology's sake.

He pointed out that it had taken many years for barcodes to be accepted by retailers and FMCG manufacturers and even today there are some companies who have still not implemented barcodes. He believes that there is a real need for RFID technology, but that it should be focussed where it provides real return on investment, such as in the supply chain.

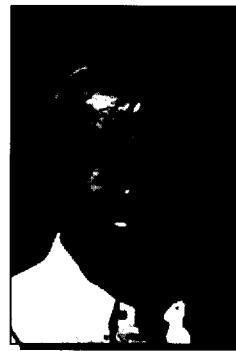
Pharmaceutical perspective

Pat Smith, who is a consultant to the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association of South Africa provided a very useful overview of the challenges facing the pharmaceutical industry, particularly in the area of counterfeit drugs that come from overseas. Many of these do not have the same efficacy as the "real thing" and so pose a serious health risk to patients. He also talked of the problem of subsidised products, such as anti-viral drugs that are being provided in Africa at cost, finding their way back into the supply chain in Europe and America.

The next speaker was Dirk Verbeek who is on the management team of Industrial Fingerprinting Solutions and is also a qualified pharmacist. He was one of the developers of the first comprehensive retail pharmacy computer systems and provided dispensing software to the Transnet, De Beers Mining and Iscor dispensaries. Dirk's presentation dealt with a solution to the difficult problem of identifying and securing the identity of items, particularly organic and pharmaceutical items.

Frequency allocation

Max Stone, country manager of Symbol Technologies very eruditely provided some answers to the question of what the EPCglobal RFID standard can deliver in the next 12 months. He said because the UHF frequency band in South Africa that the



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EPCglobal Gen 2 standard was designed to work in, hasn't yet been ratified, the international company he represents couldn't legally sell their RFID technology in South Africa. He later clarified this statement during questions by saying that the current Symbol Gen 1 product will not work in the South African frequency allocation but that their Gen 2 product will when it becomes available in a matter of weeks.

Max outlined some examples of successful rollouts of RFID systems by the US Department of Defence and of automated baggage handling at the Hong Kong and McCarran airports.

Regulations

After lunch, Chris Turner provided an update on the South African radio frequency regulations that affect RFID usage. This very informative session provided a platform for the panel to enter into a lively discussion on the RFID frequency challenge.

The panel included Bertus Pretorius, member of the Standards South Africa RFID workgroup, Wojtek Skowronski, general manager of Engineering at the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), Kobus Roux of the CSIR, Andrea Sada of Symbol Technologies and was chaired by Chris Turner.

Summarising, Chris highlighted three main conclusions:

Firstly, RFID is here now, through the initiatives of EPCGlobal and the companies that are producing RFID solutions.

Secondly, international standards for RFID are basically agreed subject to some fine-tuning. We will have both ISO and harmonised (with Europe) EPCGlobal G2 standards for RFID published within the next 12 months. Meanwhile manufacturers and deployers of RFID technology can start using RFID systems that conform to the EPCGlobal standard.

Thirdly, the non-availability of a radio regulatory framework specifying where we can deploy RFID systems has caused a great deal of controversy. This regulatory framework is now stable. It has been published, gazetted and signed off by the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications. There is no longer any doubt that we have the power and frequency allocations that we need to deploy RFID systems. In fact South Africa is twice as well off as Europe in terms of available spectrum having 21 X 200 kHz channels compared with Europe's 10 X 200 kHz channels.

The day ended with delegates networking with each other at the after-conference drinks function. Once again AFRITAG provided a stimulating environment for members of industry and their suppliers to learn about the challenges facing industry and how RFID can help meet those challenges.

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