

UnderstandIT

From **MAY DAY CONSULTING LIMITED** in association with **FACILITATORS UK**

A publication designed to inform and enable businesses to understand the implications, costs and advantages of using Information and Communications Technology. Distributed through Chambers of Commerce.

WHAT'S RFID?

RFID is an acronym that you may have recently heard or seen somewhere. It stands for **R**adio **F**requency **I**dentification, and you are likely to hear much, much more about it in the future.

You will be aware that most items that we purchase these days are marked with a bar-code. This code is typically read by a laser scanner device and is used most often in supermarkets at the check-out. Just think how long your wait in the supermarket queue would be without bar-codes!

RFID is a significant development on this idea by marking items (or even people) with an identification tag that emits a radio signal that can be picked up by transponders or receivers – i.e. a radio bar-code.

Unlike conventional bar-codes, which have to be read individually by a laser scanner, hundreds or even thousands of RFID tags can be read simultaneously by radio scanner devices.

At the moment, the cost of an individual RFID tag is relatively high. Simple, “passive” tags with a range of only a few metres are just a few pence each. More sophisticated “active” tags that require a small battery are more expensive – around £5-6 each and are at the moment much larger. However, these costs and physical size will reduce significantly soon.

The potential for applying this technology is endless. Here are just one or two examples:

- Individual items on a production line, or even supply chain extending from the manufacturer to customer, no matter where in the world that customer may be, can be tracked with pinpoint accuracy.
- Machinery that can only be operated by qualified staff wearing appropriate tagged safety clothes or other protection.
- The ability to link the tags to sensors, which for example could monitor that frozen goods in large refrigerated containers are at the correct temperature or that potentially hazardous goods are not stored in close proximity.
- Monitoring the movement of an unusual number of a particular item out of a department store that could indicate shoplifting activity. This is of course already done with in-store sensors at exits. However RFID tags can be more intelligent and flexible.

Organisations like Tesco have been testing the technology extensively – the advantages to them are obvious.

On another level, it was recently reported that the park owners at Alton Towers in Northamptonshire are also looking at the possibilities that RFID can open up.

The application they are looking at will allow them to electronically tag visitors to their park by providing willing visitors with an RFID wrist strap. Receivers around the park, linked to CCTV cameras will enable them to track where visitors go and even to take video footage of them when they are within range of any of a network of cameras. This video will then be available to the visitor on DVD when they leave the park as a record of their day's enjoyment!

This new technology does have its detractors however. It is the application of the technology to clothing or people that is perhaps where human rights and privacy advocates are concerned. In the USA, these organisations are already warning about the potential for infringement of these rights.

If you are interested in the potential for applying RFID technology within your organisation, then call Alan Finch on 01224 695457 for assistance.

WINDOWS VISTA LAUNCH DELAYED

For those of you who were sitting on the edge of your seats waiting for the new version of Microsoft's Windows operating system, then there is bad news!

Microsoft recently announced that it is to delay the launch of the new operating system until January 2007. The new system, called Vista (originally code-named “Longhorn”) will come in 6 different versions – 3 for home users, 2 aimed at business users, and one for so-called “emerging markets”.

The cause of the delay? Microsoft have said that security issues have been the main reason. Does this sound familiar?

A survey recently quoted in the Computer Weekly publication claims that as few as one in eight organisations will opt to upgrade to the new operating system in the first year. Organisations that are potential pioneers with the new system are concerned about:

- Hardware compatibility – initial releases of previous versions of Windows have been plagued with incompatibilities with existing hardware

- Security issues – what old vulnerabilities have been “fixed” and what new ones introduced? The many delays in the launch of Vista results from Microsoft appear to be security related.
- Cost – many companies cited the cost of evaluating, testing and rolling out the new system which would eclipse its benefits.

However, this last comment is a familiar one that has accompanied every previous release of Windows. Many compatibility problems will not be directly because of Vista itself, but with the customised applications developed by users that are in many ways loosely designed and too “tolerant”. With the significant tightening up of security in Vista, many such applications will just not work, requiring the developers to tighten up on potential loopholes and make their applications “Vista tolerant”.

Most users will eventually migrate to Vista, but maybe not for some considerable time, when all the initial compatibility issues, bugs and vulnerabilities have been resolved and the product is completely stable.

If you wish to find out more about Vista, then visit the dedicated Microsoft site at:

<http://www.microsoft.com/windowsvista/default.aspx>

WINDOWS XP ON AN APPLE MAC??

Following the decision to begin producing Apple Mac computers using the Intel processor, Apple has made yet another move to try to gain market share.

Apple has recently released a beta version of some software that will allow their Apple Mac computer run the Windows XP operating system.

The software is known as Boot Camp and it enables the hard disk on the Apple Mac to be partitioned, allowing Windows XP to be installed on it.

NB: Partitioning simply means the division of the computer’s single hard disk into two or more separate “virtual” disks that appear as separate physical disks to the operating system.

The principal advantage for users is that in this way, they can gain access to the vast range of software that is available for the Windows user, but which are denied to the Apple user (until now).

Many Apple and OS X purists will probably not like this trend, but in reality Apple is trying to gain a larger foothold in the general PC market. It currently has less than 5% of a rapidly expanding market, particularly in under-developed countries.

NOKIA PC SUITE

This article is specifically for those who use Nokia mobile phones, and discusses the facilities that Nokia provides for integrating some of the functionality of their mobile phones, with the personal computer.

Nokia has, for some time, provided software for installation on your personal computer, with most of its ever-changing range of mobile phones. The latest version of Nokia’s PC Suite (which is now version 6.70) is considerably more reliable and flexible than previous versions.

The software, once installed on your computer in the usual way and launched, produces the following program interface:



It provides a number of small applications, including:

- Synchronisation of the phone’s address book with an address book (contact listing) within Microsoft Outlook
- Backing-up critical information – settings etc onto the PC. This is useful if you are changing mobile phones, or if the phone needs servicing, which often results in the system software being re-set and the loss of all settings.
- File management – allows for files, including photos and music files, where the phone has these features, to be copied between the phone and the PC or vice versa.
- Management of your text messaging – it will display your inbox and sent items folders on the computer in Windows Explorer. Management facilities include the ability to view and delete individual text messages on the phone, but more usefully, create and send text messages using your computer, rather than the keypad of the mobile phone itself.
- The ability to connect to the internet (via the mobile phone) – probably not used often as most PCs will already have a connection.

If you have a Nokia mobile phone - install or upgrade the PC Suite onto your PC – you will find it extremely useful and now reliable at last!

We wish to acknowledge with thanks that some of the material contained within this publication has been sourced from Computer Weekly, PC Pro, BBC and other reputable sources..

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