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What's stopping us? An early adopter considers how to get more out of the technology.

Background Slide

I'm not an expert on RFID. I don't want to be one. I just want to be able to take advantage of RFID without massive amounts of technological knowledge.

I'm a subject librarian, not anything to do with the people who look after RFID at our place, but interested in Technology Enhanced Learning and making the best out of the technology we have.

Our library has been self service for quite a while, first using self-issue machines that read barcodes, then for the last few years RFID – including self-return with a book sorter. We've also half heartedly played with RFID wands, but not really done much beyond basic issues / returns.

Slide change: What are we really using RFID for?

STOCK CONTROL. We might as well be moving pallets of soap powder around the place. We're identifying items via RFID to move them from one location to another, whether that is between libraries, library to a person, a person to library). Which is all very nice.

It saves us a bit of time as we're not having to do so much of the routine stuff, but very boring. Some of it also saves us more time than others, the book sorter for instance sometimes feels like looking after an elderly pet. We regularly have to call in the Vet (i.e. engineer) to it and we have to dedicate teams of people to clean up it's mess (empty the book boxes). Which I'm sure is more to do with our library than book sorter per se...

RFID costs a lot of money. If we get decent efficiency savings from it, then it can pay for itself or give small savings, but is that enough to justify it? What about those efficiency savings, PLUS providing genuinely new, innovative and exciting services to our users at the same time?

I think we, that is all of us library services, are generally quite conservative in our use of RFID. We get excited about the possibility of libraries doing MORE STOCK CONTROL with it (innovation award winner), like scanning shelves with a mobile reader / wand or checking in boxes full of books at a time. These things are nice, but still really basic stock control applications.

Why aren't we looking at uses to do with INFORMATION? We are libraries after all... Instead of connecting to a system to change the location of an item, to check it into our out of a library, why aren't we using RFID to make it easy for our users to connect to information about a tagged object?

I want to be able to use RFID to connect users with information. That's what libraries are about.

Slide change: Suggestions for stock.

I want to know why I couldn't buy a cheap card reader tomorrow that works with the tags in my stock and my users' cards to do these sorts of things:

I'd like to pop a book or DVD on readers scattered throughout my library, connected to cheap computers to

Display book reviews, author interview videos and podcasts

Suggest other items based on usage history, subject headings, or genre.

Add items to a reference list, correctly formatted

Give opportunity to leave reviews

Or swipe a library card on a pad to:

Slide change: Suggestions for cards:

Display suggestions based on the usage of other people like us

Give opportunity for social interactions

Display reading lists with detail of what is in stock for colleges & universities

Suggest other services and user education materials based on personal history

Slide change: Why?

Why should we do these things? To bring a little bit of magic into our libraries.

Slide change: What are libraries for?

Should be able discovering and exploring new knowledge – not sitting behind computers on facebook. As physical stock reduces in importance I want us to explore ways of making sure the physical library is still a place to explore information and create knowledge.

Slide change: Real life example

These aren't too weird and wonderful suggestions I hope – we can look around and see some interesting things people are doing with RFID. In libraries, a Dutch University (image) experimented with tagging of books using smart, RFID enabled tagging. To return books users them on a shelf which automatically returned the book, however, the shelves were also set up to enable user generated tagging (Shelves were tagged 'bold', 'boring', 'funny' etc.).

I'll show a clip of Julian Cheal's talk at a mashed libraries event here in the talk (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkavurKj_po) shows a workable system that he has knocked together in his spare time with a cheap card reader.

There are more museums than libraries that seem to be doing interesting things, especially bringing their exhibits to life, or around the idea of interactive tours. Just a handful of almost random examples: Museum of Siena University give people a rfid reader that they wave at interesting exhibits on the way around – at the end they pop their email address onto a screen and get emailed more details about the objects they were interested in. Cleveland Museum of art used them on visitors to track how people used the library (How useful would this be to see how people used your library?) as they moved through the building. Museum of Natural History in Aarhus Denmark (v. Popular way of using it this!) tagged objects / exhibits, allowing more information to be displayed on a small handheld computer as users moved close to a tagged object - really bringing the objects to life.

RFID seems to be really popular in museums at the moment, which I'm sure some of the suppliers here could confirm, but people like Julian Cheal, experimenting with cheap and easy ways of making our libraries more interactive and a better user experience seem to be somewhat lone

voices. Museum of Siena University wave rfid readers at interesting exhibits – they can then email themselves details of those exhibits on the way out. Cleveland museum of art have tried tagging their users (how good would it be to see where your users go? How they use your library?).

Slide change: The hard bit?

Surely we've already done the hard bit? We've tagged all our stock and often all our users too.

Lots of us already keep all the information we need for these sorts of services, though it's not always easy to liberate the data.

BUT, I couldn't even tell you what sort of reader I'd need to buy to start this process, especially to read the tags both in our stock and in our users' cards.

There doesn't seem to be any consistent standard worked to (that's what it seems to me as an outsider anyway), so I can't confidently and easily buy an affordable reader and thin client to experiment with. I'd need to first become an expert on our RFID systems, and as I said at the start, I don't want to do that – I have better, more exciting things to do with my time.

I'm not happy about this, I suspect this is why we're all using RFID for stock control, purely as a warehouse might, rather than taking full advantage of the opportunities they represent.

Slide change: Sum up & contact details

I really think that those of us who already have RFID throughout our libraries, along with those of you just considering it, need to think about how we can get more than just stock control out of the technology. It may give enough efficiency savings to pay for itself, though it can be hard to justify the up-front costs at the moment. How much easier to justify RFID if we can also use it to provide genuinely new, innovative services at the same time? I think suppliers also need to do their bit – make it much easier for us to innovate around the standard products, without necessarily having to go back to yourselves to get things to work. Some consistent standards would be a nice start!