

Selling Wireless Tagging To The Healthcare Sector

Even though the Internet has had a radical impact on organisations in both the private and public sectors, state owned health providers have been slow to take on board Internet and Web based technology. Now they are desperately trying to catch up – in fact, in the UK, a large part of the NHS's National Programme for IT (NPFIT) is based on Web technology. However, just as health providers are coming to grips with this technology a new generation of Internet solutions is emerging. Today, the World Wide Web is primarily a network of content – in the future it will increasingly become a network of 'things'.

The traditional image of the Internet is of a person using a browser to locate linked pages of information that a publisher, or another individual, has uploaded onto a server. The 'Internet of things' does away with the person at each end of the network connection. Instead, devices publish information that is read by other devices. These devices are typically small radio tags, tag readers and computers. The only time a person needs to interact with this network is when the proximity of a tag to a tag reader, or the actual location of a tagged item, indicates that a pre-defined procedure is not being adhered to.

Given the cost savings and increases in operational efficiency it could yield, selling the Internet of things to the healthcare sector should be relatively straightforward. However, while the healthcare sector found it difficult to resist the advance of the Internet of content, it is better positioned to fend off the invasion of an army of devices that communicate with each other.

In the case of the Internet of content, patients forced the pace of change. They used the Internet to research their illnesses and afflictions and to form 'user groups' for a range of previously undiagnosed or untreatable diseases. This alone radically altered the relationship between doctor and patient. Failure on the part of the healthcare sector to embrace this new technology would have seen a gradual erosion of the status and influence of medical practitioners.

The Internet of things is not a technology the patient can take with them onto a hospital ward. While it would, in many cases, make hospitals safer and more efficient, it would represent, for the clinician and other hospital staff, an unacceptable change in working practices. The challenge for the wireless technology vendor is to overcome resistance to these changes. In this report we describe scenarios where the Internet of things can increase the safety and efficiency of healthcare providers and reduce the cost of treating the patient. We suggest strategies that vendors can adopt to reduce resistance to tagging technology and we profile vendors who have found potential routes into the healthcare market.

At A Glance

Whereas the Internet of content is widely used throughout the healthcare sector, hospitals are being slow to adopt an 'Internet of things' made up of wireless tags and scanners.

There is a widely held belief that healthcare is difficult to automate and that wireless tagging is an unacceptable intrusion into the privacy of both the patient and the clinician.

Vendors must prove to the healthcare sector that, just like workers in the manufacturing and financial services sectors, clinicians carry out a large number of routine tasks that are relatively simple to automate. Also that rather than intrude on their privacy, wireless tagging can alert clinicians to potential errors before they come to the attention of line managers.

In this report we describe scenarios where an Internet of things would increase efficiency, increase safety and reduce costs. We suggest strategies that can be adopted to reduce resistance to tagging technology. We also profile: Zebra, Intel, Ubisense, Ekahau, Plastic Logic and J-Squared.