RFID Offers Benefits, Challenges

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The Internet Caucus yesterday hosted a round table discussion on Radio Frequency Identification technology (RFID). An RFID tag or transponder comprises a chip that contains a unique number that identifies an object (and perhaps other information) and is connected to an antenna. Each antenna enables the chip to communicate via radio waves to a reader, which captures the unique number or other data on the tag. That data can then be transmitted to computers that store information about the object to which the tags are attached. Government and business see tremendous promise in the benefits that this technology may hold to streamline business processes, enhance security, deliver services, reduce error rates in health care facilities, and improve the safety of the drug supply. That promise may prove true, but the discussion on Tuesday reflected the growing awareness on the part of business, government, and (not surprisingly) privacy advocates, that unless the privacy questions raised by the technology are addressed early, acceptance by the public will be hard to come by. Media accounts over the past year or so illustrate that when RFID is linked to personally identifiable information, this nearly invisible technology raises concerns about tracking the location of individuals and about collection of information about them without their knowledge. These issues are even more critical when RFID use is mandated by government, and individual choice about its use is limited, if it exists at all. How to address those concerns and still reap the benefits of this emerging technology? CDT believes that fair information practices - among them providing notice about the use of RFID to collect information and about how that information is used, offering choice about information sharing and use, providing access, securing the information - are key to deploying RFID technology responsibly. While CDT believes that privacy legislation specifically targeted to RFID technology would unduly hinder the development of the technology, industry and government must step up to the plate to implement fair information practices as they deploy RFID. And government must be open and candid with the public about its plans for RFID use. I had the privilege to lead a working group [1] made up of some of the nations largest companies, public interest leaders, consumer advocates and RFID experts seeking to address the issues raised by RFID. In May, the working group suggested best practices [2] for companies seeking to implement RFID in consumer applications.

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