RFID: What is Your Strategy?

» The equipment doesn't make the change happen!
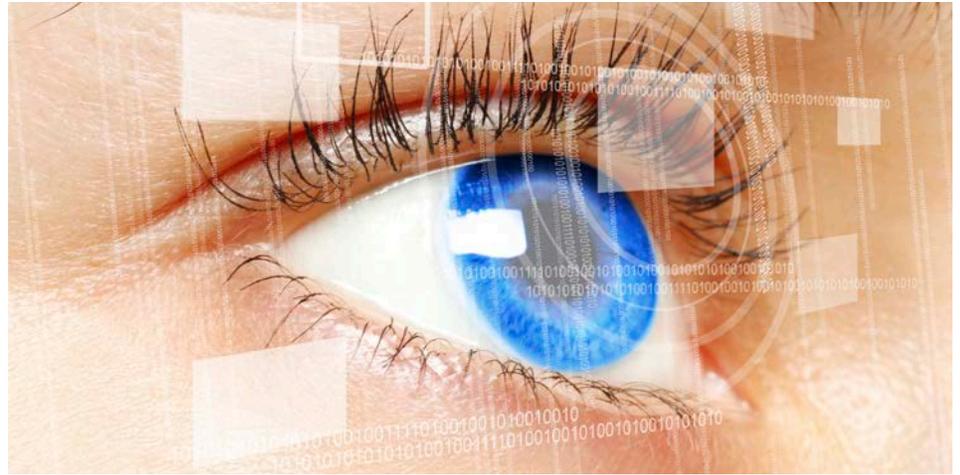
BY LORI BOWEN AYRE

Lately, I've heard about a lot of materials handling projects that have lost their way. Very often these projects involve big investments in equipment. But they also require a strategic vision to be implemented successfully. And that strategic vision needs to come from a range of stakeholders, including patrons, trustees, and of course, staff.

Without bringing people together behind a shared purpose for implementing a big automated materials handling project, the decisions and changes that need to be made to ensure success won't come. The technology may be in place out on the floor, but that isn't enough to make the initiative successful.

Let's use RFID as an example. To successfully roll out RFID, it is critical to establish a clear set of priorities for doing so and to continually make choices based on those priorities. Decisions must be made about how the system will be configured to suit the workflow you want to use. Remodeling may be required to locate equipment where it will be most effective. Signage and patron assistance will be required. Oftentimes, circulation policies need to be modified or materials security strategies need to change.

What data needs to live on the RFID tag versus the ILS? How many staff workstations need to be RFID-enabled? Will self-check machines be upgraded or replaced? Where should the machines be placed and how many will accept cash? And, most importantly, what exactly will staff be doing after all this equipment is in place? Where will the new staff-patron interface points be and what training will be required?

Just purchasing an RFID system doesn't guarantee that anything will change. In fact, many libraries have proven themselves to be quite adept at purchasing a very costly RFID system without changing anything. I've heard more times that I like to admit that libraries are still checking in items one at a time or patrons were instructed to check-out items individually. If improving workflow for staff was the objective, continuing to use the RFID reader like a barcode scanner isn't going to do the trick!

I've heard libraries complain about false alarms at their security gates following implementation of RFID. If an improved material security environment was the objective, false alarms at the security gates are the last thing anyone needs!

To be effective, RFID implementations must be based on a strategic vision that carries through all aspects of the rollout, including procurement, implementation with the vendor, quality control and testing throughout deployment, and ongoing evaluation once the system is operational. Prior to procurement, administrators must work with staff to establish the need for the change and get their support for making the investment. If they have taken part in creating the strategic vision, they will support the changes that need to be made.

Once a library has a vision for what it wants to do, the strategic planners can move to the next steps. Establish a clear set of priorities and develop a plan for how the technology helps bring that vision to life. Use the vision and the library's priorities throughout implementation as signposts to guide every choice. Set up metrics that can be used to measure progress toward the goals.

Metrics will reveal whether adjustments need to be made. Without metrics, you can't even be sure you've made a change! Are you increasing the number of self-service transactions? Have you freed up staff to do more patron-facing work? Have you reduced the number of touches and streamlined the materials handling workflow? Have you reduced the time it takes to get returns back up on the shelf? Are you making the staffing adjustments you need to make?

Too many libraries think that RFID, sorters, self-check-out machines, and self-check-in machines are magic. They are not magic. They do certain things well and can be used to support changes the library wishes to make in how to deliver services. They can free up staff to do new things. They can create opportunities for patrons to interact with the library differently. But they only play supporting roles.

The equipment doesn't make the change happen. The changes have to be made by the people with the vision for how to transform the library, provide new services, change staffing levels, introduce new service models, and streamline workflows. ∎

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Lori Bowen Ayre is the principal consultant at The Galecia Group. She is a nationally recognized expert in library RFID and automated materials handling and is committed to the strategic use of library technology. The Galecia Group has worked with a variety of public libraries and consortia on many projects including RFID, automated materials handling, self-service technology, delivery, workflow optimization, library system and resource sharing software selection, and Drupal website development. Lori can be reached at lori.ayre@galecia.com.