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Product Feature: Helping Data Work for You

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It was no ordinary burglary. Thieves had broken into a home in Oceanside, California, and it was not a random home. It belonged to Tristan Geisler, a world-class athlete who won a gold medal in the skeleton event at the 2002 Winter Olympic games. Her medal for that victory was among the items stolen.

Note: Police Chief magazine, from time-to-time, offers feature-length articles on products and services that are useful to law enforcement administrators. This article features data gathering.

There were questions about whether police would be able to recover such a thing before it disappeared on the black market. In just a few days' time, however, the Oceanside Police Department had answered those questions by recovering the medal and apprehending the criminals.¹

Their secret weapon? Data.

"We may not have been able to recover that medal if we didn't have the tools that we had," said Steve Walter, the department's crime analysis and intelligence supervisor.

Specifically, the tool in question was part of a system that helped guide and target police activities based on real-time criminal data. It is just one example of the ways in which departments can harness data more comprehensively and more thoroughly in order to do their jobs better. In a time of frozen resources and human assets, managing data can be a key way of getting more mileage out of existing department staff. Better data management can empower law enforcement professionals to focus on the work at hand—and the areas where that work is most needed.

In the case of Walter and the Oceanside Police Department, the gold-medal burglary arrest and many other lower-profile arrests like it were made possible in part by FirstWatch Solutions, a California-based company whose software solution helps law enforcement companies capture, analyze, and disseminate crime information far faster than a traditional ink-and-pen system. In turn, these capabilities can help police predict where crime is most likely to occur and focus in more quickly on those who are committing it.

"It not only helped us decrease crime, but it helped us move our entire crime analysis unit forward," Walter said. "Before, we had to wait for the report to be processed. Then, we would read handwritten reports and analyze each case along with all the other cases. By that time, a couple of days had gone by, and we were looking at stale information."²

FirstWatch significantly expedites the process. Departments using FirstWatch can look at and act on data, essentially in real time, and can map trends and set up alerts based on crime category or location.

"We have a default view that allows us to see our calls for service on a map," Walter said. "For example, we can isolate auto thefts and look at those. We can drill down into the incidents and see what's going on. With just a few clicks, we have a lot of information."

On The Road

Managing data goes beyond the four walls of a department's headquarters. The patrol car has evolved into its own law enforcement hub, a kind of rolling satellite office for those in the field. Data has saturated that environment as well, with laptop computers, text messages, and other communications vehicles joining the traditional radio as an officer's constant field companions. Although it can be helpful and convenient, it can also be a hindrance.

"There's been such a push to ban texting and driving, but the dirty little secret is that police are sometimes pretty bad themselves," said Mark Grice, co-founder and chief technical officer of SAINT Police Systems. "If they have an accident, it's a PR issue, a legal issue, a liability issue, and a safety issue. Every agency has a policy in place to prevent it, but that policy gets violated all the time. The reality is these guys are regularly using laptops while driving. Radios are so crowded that [agencies] are pushing text messages more to get chatter off the radio. But a distraction is a distraction."

With SAINT Police Systems, police officers can control messages and other data while behind the wheel, without sacrificing their focus on the road. Launched in June, the voice-recognition technology helps officers command virtually every communication in their car (including laptops and mobile devices) with simple vocal commands.

"You can intelligently read information, peruse through it and figure out what's interesting," Grice said. "We wanted to let officers do more than give a command like 'lights on.' You can command the full laptop, and it connects to almost any mobile software... Anything a user can do with their hands, fingers, or eyes, we can do."³

Police can manage the flow of data in the patrol car environment using services from various vendors. 3M Motor Vehicle Services and Systems—a division of Minnesota company 3M—offers vehicle classification and license plate recognition software. Motorola Solutions is a brand typically associated with radio communications, but the Illinois firm also offers mobile computing solutions that work in patrol vehicles.

Big Data, Bigger Capacities

The concept at the center of the SAINT and FirstWatch models—using technology to harness technology—is at the heart of several other resources designed to help law enforcement agencies better manage their data. The model also lies at the center of Presynct Technologies, a California company that offers digital workflow solutions to a variety of sectors, including law enforcement and public safety.

Police officers spend substantial time on paperwork. According to Tim Pakes, vice president of sales for Presynct, the company's technology literally makes paperwork digital, and in doing so, reduces the time it takes to complete a form by as much as 12 minutes.

"This lessens the lag time between the time you fill out the form and the entry into a database," Pakes said. "Officers get faster info, and it's extremely configurable."⁴

User-friendliness is a key piece of the puzzle. According to Pakes, if an officer can fill out a form, he or she can learn to use the Presynct technology in about 30 minutes, as it simply converts forms to a digital format.

"The larger the agency, the better the savings," Pakes said. "It's a force multiplier because it's less time writing reports and more time in the field doing police work."

Presynct is currently expanding into the mobile space with Note M8, which helps officers manage data on phones and tablets. Development plans in that area are ongoing.

"We're pushing farther into the mobile space, and we'll need to be more productivity based," Pakes said. "There are plenty of ways to view existing data but no way to do [data] entry."

It seems everything is changing from analog to digital, and that obviously goes well beyond paperwork. Video footage and other readily available tools are bringing big data to law enforcement. In general, electronic files are getting larger and more prevalent. That presents law enforcement agencies with a growing challenge when it comes to storing that information. While many data storage options exist, there are fewer that cater specifically to the unique needs and heightened security demands of law enforcement. One such option is available from Datamaxx Group, a Florida firm that facilitates sufficient and secure data storage, and does so specifically for law enforcement agencies.

"A lot of places are doing video surveillance," said Stephanie Miller, vice president of marketing for Datamaxx. "There are often cameras in the car now. Those files are large in size, and departments are hitting storage problems as a result. Storage is expensive, especially if you have to worry about encrypting."⁵

Datamaxx not only follows strict encryption protocols, but also ensures every employee goes through a background check. For the end user, Datamaxx handles security and regulatory steps so individual agencies don't have to.

"Each agency is audited by the state," said Miller. "If they're using our cloud, we are audited, which means they don't have to go through that, and they wouldn't have to worry."

Datamaxx allows customers to purchase storage by secure “dropbox” or by terabyte (TB) or even petabyte (equivalent to approximately 1,000 TBs or 1 million GBs). Entrusting data storage to a cloud service like Datamaxx can mean significant savings for agencies, both in terms of dollars saved in hardware and software costs and in overall human resources.

“They don’t have to dip into their capital budgets,” Miller said. “They can get subscriptions instead of doing a big RFP process. The IT staff is often a one-man show that may or may not know the specifics of the necessary policies. Or the police department IT is run by the city, and they may know nothing about the needs of law enforcement.”

Data storage, management, and application are ever-evolving, and police departments are still learning how they can best leverage the big data available; these products and others like them can help them do just that. ♦

Notes:

¹Steve Walter (Oceanside, California, Police Department crime analysis and intelligence supervisor), phone interview with author, March 18, 2014.

²Ibid.

³Mark Grice (co-founder and CTO, SAINT Police Systems), phone interview with author, March 14, 2014.

⁴Tim Pakes (president, sales, Presynct Technologies), phone interview with author, March 17, 2014.

⁵Stephanie Miller (vice president, marketing, Datamaxx Group), phone interview with author, March 18, 2014.

Source List for Helping Data Work for You

3M Cogent Inc.

www.cogentsystems.com

AccessData Group

www.accessdata.com

Cadow Software

www.cadowsw.com

FirstWatch Solutions Inc.

www.firstwatch.net

Information Builders Inc.

www.ibi.com

Intrepid Networks

www.intrepid-networks.com

MorphoTrak Inc.

www.morphotrak.com

Netsoft Solutions Inc.

www.net-pd.com

Oaisys

www.oaisys.com

PublicEngines

www.crimereports.com

SmartPrepare/Rave Mobile Safety

www.ravemobilesafety.com/smartprepare

Sun Ridge Systems Inc.

www.sunridgesystems.com

Verisk Crime Analytics

www.verisk.com/crimeanalytics

3M Traffic Safety & Sercurity Division

www.pipstechnology.com

Agnovi Corp.

www.agnovi.com

Crime Soft Inc.

www.crimesoft.com

Foray Technologies

www.foray.com

InterAct

www.interact911.com

JusticeTrax Inc.

www.justicetrax.com

Motorola Solutions Inc.

www.motorolasolutions.com

New World Systems

www.newworldsystems.com

POLICEintel by QiSOFT

www.policeintel.com

SAINT Police Systems LLC

www.saintpolice.com

Spillman Technologies Inc.

www.spillman.com

SunGard Public Sector Inc.

www.sungardps.com

Vigilant Solutions

www.vigilantvideo.com

ABM America Inc.

www.abmsoftware.com

BrightPlanet

www.brightplanet.com

Datamaxx Group

www.datamaxx.com

IAPro by CI Technologies Inc.

www.intermec.com

MediaSolv Solutions Corp.

www.mediasolvcorp.com

Mutualink Inc.

Numerica

<http://trylumen.com>

Presynct Technologies Inc.

www.presynct.com

SGO

www.sureteglobale.org

Stratus Technologies

www.stratus.com

SyferLock Technology Corp.

www.syferlock.com

Zuercher Technologies LLC

www.zuerchertech.com

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