

Leveling the Technology Playing Field for Law Enforcement





Today's technology allows citizens to communicate on the move at an amazing speed. While this speed is positive for those with good intentions, that same benefit makes finding those with malicious intent increasingly challenging. Moving at the pace of paper or dealing with systems that don't talk to each other in the age of mobile computing power puts law enforcement at an extreme time and technology disadvantage when investigating, apprehending, and prosecuting perpetrators.

You might expect that the gap between the sophistication of the criminal element's use of technology and the lack of law enforcement's access to the newest tools at a local level would cause a significant leap in crime rates. The surprising good news is that according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program, both violent crime and property crime on a national basis has been trending down over the last 5 years with a 13.2 percent decline and 12.1 percent drop-off, respectively, when comparing 2010 rates with those reported in 2006. This decrease is a testament to the effectiveness of the law enforcement profession, even when they are operating on an uneven technology playing field.

However, as the economy continues to struggle, departmental budgets are under siege with perilous cutbacks in both personnel and resources that put this positive trend at risk. City, state and federal government financial pressures have put organizations under the gun to find ways to stretch their law enforcement professional's ability to cover more cases and tighten control over evidence handling. Increasing the use of technology to gain control and increase efficiencies is not only possible but imperative in order to prevent the technology gap between the crime fighters and criminals from becoming a disabling factor.

There are six areas where technology can quickly deliver visible efficiencies in evidence handling and case management:

1. Eliminating the duplication of information
2. Securing the chain of evidence
3. Forwarding data to and retrieving from external sources
4. Using automated visual tools to help identify relationships
5. Aggregating searchable and accessible case information
6. Accessing reporting that supports different organizational techniques

Let's explore the opportunity to gain stealth-like efficiency from each of these areas more in-depth.



Eliminating the duplication of information

Whether automated or still shuffling paper, law enforcement departments and agencies are universally frustrated with the time wasted in duplicating the same information in multiple formats.

For the paper environment, it can mean repeating the same information on various forms and unnecessary legwork traveling from point to point. For the automated environment, it can mean repeating data entry into various systems, as well as logging in and out multiple times before specific recording tasks are complete.

Besides the obvious inefficiency, the risk exists that data will be inconsistently captured, which could cause relationships to go unidentified, or key information might be lost inside a system and therefore unavailable to those who need to make decisions during the investigation. The amount of time wasted on duplicating the same information relative to a case or on failing to identify relationships between information early in the investigation varies depending on the law enforcement environment, but the amount of time could be as high as 50 percent of an officer's day.

To make strides in this area, organizations must move to a single-entry system that integrates with all the necessary internal and external information points for a case, handles all formats of information, and also provides a means to perform automatic updates to external agencies. This system needs to validate data with spell check and text formatting, as well as edit checks to ensure that the information retains its full investigative value and is easily retrievable after it is entered into the system.

Securing the chain of evidence

When it comes to efficient use of time and resources, the next most frequently raised concern is determining where the evidence has been and where it is now.

Too often, current processes of evidence handling fall short and critical pieces might be disqualified from judicial proceedings.



Using barcodes, RFID, and other data capture methods, the evidentiary chain of custody can be protected and maintained. Even while out on assignment, the chain can remain uninterrupted with offline synchronization, which provides the ability to sync the data when an officer is in a secure wireless hot zone or when the officer returns to the precinct or office.

This type of process captures the timely story of the evidence journey from person-to-person or person-to-place starting with the crime scene and moving through the various steps to prosecution, ensuring that evidence movement is defensible. In addition, because evidence movement has been captured every step of the way, the evidence can also be precisely located in detail when needed, such as evidence room 1, bookcase 1, second shelf, left side.

Forwarding data to and retrieving from external sources

Today's law enforcement successes might depend on the sharing of acquired information with outside departments or agencies. This integrated approach provides the ability to more tightly monitor and track criminal activity, but this approach also requires constant attention, which can result in a large consumption of valuable time. The exchange of information can encounter delays due to workforce shortages, information sensitivities, or the approval cycles that waste critical time in solving a case.

Further complicating the sharing of information is that information is made available through various channels and in various formats. Mobile devices, such as the Blackberry and other PDAs, are now often used to write police reports, take photos at the scene, or retrieve mug shots. Information must be able to flow to and from sources regardless of its format: text, forms, photos, video, or audio.

Having a secure system that can automatically forward and retrieve all types of data with evidence of signatures to and from external sources (for example, warrants, bonds, jail data, mug shots, and so on), as well as upon user request, ensures real-time information sharing, elevates the likelihood that criminals will be apprehended more quickly, and frees up time to focus on gathering new information and analyzing what is already known.



Using automated visual tools to help identify relationships

In the past, law enforcement professionals have been forced to page through stacks of information, in various formats, trying to find connections, such as relationships between suspects, incidents, leads, victims, and witness interviews, in order to piece together the case.

For simple cases, a manual review of information might work. But when you have complex cases, which might have hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of documents or other cases that might be linked to other crimes, then the investigation is better served through technology. What is needed is technology that can identify patterns and trends that ultimately provide insights that might be missed on a manual search or might be weeks or months away from discovery.

Even more compelling is when technology can visually illustrate relationships in a graphically engaging manner with flow charts, swim lanes, and colors that make the information stand out or “pop,” which helps the interpreter of the information analyze and draw conclusions more quickly.

Aggregating searchable and accessible case information

In a perfect world, case information would flow in an orderly, linear fashion. In the real world, however, case information can be a series of random activities. Any system that is going to deliver real value to the law enforcement process must be able to capture information as it occurs in a manner that is easy for the investigator to enter. The time required to toggle from system to system or to deal with complex data entry rituals greatly diminishes the desired gains.

To maximize technology efficiencies in case management, case information in its various formats (for example, text, forms, photos, video, or audio) must be captured in a manner that allows it to be searchable and accessible from a single system.



Reporting that supports your specific organization's techniques

The criminal landscape changes as you move from one area of the country to another. What is a primary area of focus in one place might be completely different in another. While best practices will be largely consistent, crime solving techniques also have local nuances that are effective for local patterns of activity.

As a result, a “one size fits all” reporting scheme, while helpful on some level, is likely to miss opportunities that fully benefit law enforcement agencies. Systems that deliver the best value offer users customized reporting that supports local crime-solving approaches.

What Comes First: Case Management or Evidence Handling?

Depending upon local circumstances and limited budget resources, there may be a greater push to automate evidence handling or case management. The challenge is that they actually go hand-in-hand and, if you address just one or the other, you are likely to find that your stopgap measure does not allow you to complete the automation process.

It's important for law enforcement management to consider what they plan to do in the next step of automation while they are developing their first step in improving capabilities to ensure that the solution will be able to grow capabilities as more funding becomes available.

During this analysis, law enforcement management needs to keep in mind that evidence tracking is really a subset of case management. In order to manage a case, you must be able to manage the evidence. Obviously, if you don't have the evidence, you don't have a case.

The solution that you choose ultimately needs to be able to securely track and provide ongoing visibility into leads, evidence, court activities, and forensic laboratory examinations.



As part of this process, the solution needs to be able to

- Assign both case responsibility and task responsibility
- Capture and store all investigation data such as interviews and photo lineups
- Be searchable by case, agent, property, or location
- Track search and arrest warrant requests and issuance
- Track the initiation of criminal charges
- Generate alerts to both the assigned investigator and the supervisor

Key outcomes of the process include producing information for the prosecutor, assisting in managing case materials and evidence, as well as preparing cases for prosecution.

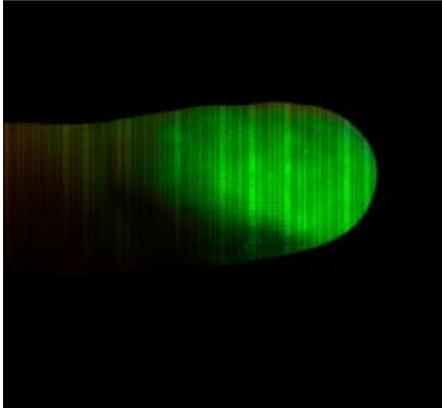
Comprehensive Case Management with Secured Evidence Handling

The EDAC CaseFLOW® Investigative Case Management Solution, built on the IBM Enterprise Content Management (ECM) suite of products, and is a Web-based solution designed for use by law enforcement, investigative agencies, and national security forces.

CaseFLOW features the ability to input and track information in various formats such as text, forms, photos, video, and audio that relate to leads, evidence, court activities, and forensic laboratory examinations.

It is designed to minimize time required for an investigator to send and receive the information necessary to analyze and manage a case and its evidence:

- Single point of entry
- Integration of information, both internally and externally
- Integration between systems and mobile devices
- Simple and customizable input screens
- Input and search within a couple clicks
- Customizable reports
- Automated processing that also accommodates ad hoc routing
- Electronic evidence and data capture using barcodes and RFID
- Offline synchronization to maintain the chain of custody
- Crime scene sketches with 2-D and 3-D diagrams
- Google Maps integration



To learn how the EDAC CaseFLOW can help level the technology playing field for your law enforcement team, contact:

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