



Interview: for the record

Jose Maria Sanchez de Muniain interviews Police Sergeant Mark Woodward, Gloucestershire Constabulary, about the benefits of a resilient digital recording solution and a quality management solution, as supplied by CyberTech.

Why did you decide to move to a resilient digital recording solution?

We went out to tender in 2005 because we were finding storage was a nightmare to control. Our system only allowed us to keep a rolling 100 days' worth of recordings. And if an officer asked for a particular piece of data, it would take a trained member of staff 45 minutes to get a two minute call.

What kind of solution were you looking for?

We wanted a digital system with digital authentication and with lots of back up, as well as a search and replay interface with large storage. In our tender we said we wanted to get something off the system in less than five minutes. When we first started with CyberTech five years ago we had one terabyte of storage and two removable disks. That was giving us 12 months of immediately available online material. It involved over-writing a removable disk with five or six months' of backup. Today we have nine terabytes which gives us six years of immediately available material. As back up we have a removable 500 gigabyte disk.

Has it had an effect on day-to-day policing?

A good example of this is a malicious caller who over three months made 500 nuisance calls, including 300 malicious calls and 250 calls to the ambulance service. The existing recorder made it an impossibility to retrieve so much material, so we could never entertain a prosecution. I typed in the telephone number into the new system and within minutes I had hits on all those calls. I passed it on to the CPS, who then successfully prosecuted the individual.

It has also helped officers to be proactive. In domestic abuse cases, when a victim is brought to the station they often have second thoughts because the situation has calmed down. At the stage of giving a statement the only evidence we might have is a recording of the 999 call. We can play that quickly in the custody unit and ask the alleged offender to explain the call (background noise/allegation), and that can make all the difference.

And back-office management?

There are lots of criteria in the victims's charter to help victims get through the trauma of a court case. Our constabulary quickly realised the benefits of utilising a suite of quality assurance software called Veritel XQ to develop our operator skills. It's not just about 999 calls and each month a supervisor looks through a number of non-emergency calls and assesses them according to our scale and matrix. Our assessment forms are compliant with national standards and they both give us the basis to look at individuals call takers but also assess the assessors to ensure they are given the appropriate skills.

What has been the reaction from partner agencies?

The CPS and Public Defence Solicitors' Office in Gloucestershire have been very supportive, as long as we can provide copies of 999 calls on standard formats. We have also found trial review lawyers now asking to listen to a 999 call before deciding to arrest or release someone (and this includes ability to email a copy of the call). The project aimed to achieve maximum "buy-in" and, therefore, ensured representatives from the Criminal Justice system, CPS and HM Courts were fully consulted. Changing legislation presents us with the challenge of keeping up-to-date, eg Freedom of Information Act and litigation.

Are there any plans to develop the system further?

At the moment we have special replay software and the problem is we need bespoke bits of kit to take to court and replay. We have been invited to assist in the development of a system called Scenario Replay, which could help in major investigations. Forces find it difficult to present in a time line not just the voice recording, but all the bits of information such as docs, jpegs etc. It would be great to have it all in a single DVD that's easily playable in court.

Woodward highlights that Gloucestershire decided to go for an off-the-shelf solution that was also scalable, which has proved to be a great benefit.