

LAW and ORDER

Handheld Communicators

by Kevin Gordon

The BlackBerry handheld devices are in use by more and more police administration personnel for a variety of reasons, including access to e-mails. The BlackBerry has quickly moved into the police realm and is being used in the United States and the United Kingdom. This type of handheld device can greatly benefit officers in the field. Law enforcement is often the last to use new technology, so it is good to see that, for once, we are getting involved early on.

One of the first departments anywhere to use BlackBerrys was the West Yorkshire Police Department in England. West Yorkshire is the fourth largest police force in the United Kingdom. West York has 5,200 officers and 2,300 support staff to cover 2.1 million people and 780 square miles.

In August 2001, the home office commissioned a study titled "Diary of a Police Officer." The aim of this study was to gain a fuller understanding of what is involved in a typical police officer shift. It was expected that the results of the study would be used to find ways to free up officers' time so they could spend more time increasing the visibility of officers and in areas such as "reassurance policing," which is in essence, community policing. The study showed that officers spent almost as much time in the station as out, with 43% of the shift spent in the station.

The main computerized intelligence system for the force is the West Yorkshire Search Engine, WYSE. WYSE basically has everything the department knows, plus information that is stored in the Police National Computer. A mobile version of WYSE created by West York is called StreetWYSE and is used with the BlackBerrys.

There are many pros with using the BlackBerrys, including training that only takes a few minutes, an easy-to-use interface, officers can use it discreetly and quietly, and it can tolerate some rough treatment. While the original purpose of using BlackBerrys in law enforcement was to wirelessly connect to departmental databases, the list of additional uses continues to grow. This includes immediate access to most wanted people's mug shots and as creative uses such as officers being provided daily briefing information on the by e-mail.

There currently are about 2,500 units in use by West York, with 90% of those being used by front line field officers. It has been estimated that the use of these units has saved, in time, an average of 145 hours per officer a year. They have been extremely beneficial to community policing because the neighborhood police teams are able to spend more time in the communities.

This isn't West York's first step into the use of technology. What American policing calls lineups, the UK refers to as video parades. Under the old system, it cost an average of \$1,500 to put together a traditional line up, and it could take up to 10 weeks to set up. The new system is referred as the Video Identity Parade Electronically Recorded, or VIPER. The VIPER system allows all of the police forces to have access to the same database, so pictures are the same all around.

In brief, a short piece of video footage is recorded of the suspect. The VIPER database has more than 10,000 video clips of volunteers, and reportedly now contains more than 14,000 IDs. Video imaging experts edit all video clips in the electronic video ID parade, which is then sent back to the officer so he can show it to the victim. Because of VIPER, the video parade can be set up within an hour and can be viewed while the suspect is still fresh in the victim's memory.

In addition to speeding up the process, it makes it consistent across the forces and saves money, the cost now about \$200. The West York police force performs about 240 line ups a day, and it now takes only 20 minutes to download the IDs to police stations where they can even be burned to DVDs allowing witnesses to view in their own home or locations such as hospitals.

A partner in the VIPER system, Glasshouse Technologies, an American company, is supplying the storage system to improve the programs backup capacities. Glasshouse will deliver a two-phased project. The first phase is to design and build a backup solution and storage for West York's disaster recovery site.

The first phase will ensure that the VIPER system, which is presently used by 31 regional forces with more than 100 remote sites, will be able to access the application 24 hour day, every day. The second phase is outsourced storage and backup to support the VIPER production and disaster recovery element.

With more than 18,000 police departments in America, we often look to other agencies to see how they are addressing the same problems and issues as our own agencies. Sometimes we forget to look beyond our borders to see what other countries are doing. West York's use of the BlackBerry is an excellent example of a patrol solution.

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