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Success Story



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Sometimes the supplier lock-in is unavoidable. Certain regular "customers" of the police find themselves locked in with alarming regularity but most of them are in no position to complain about it.

Securicor Information Systems, the computer services arm of the security group is nearing the end of a national project to improve the systems used by the police and the courts in England and Wales. As the name suggests, the National Strategy for Police Information Systems is a scheme intended to automate several routine but vitally important aspects of police work.

NSPIS covers four areas:

- Case preparation: acquisition and delivery of forms, photographs, police reports, statements and other materials required in court for trying cases.
- Custody: booking in, tracking and monitoring of individuals held in police cells.
- Command and control: coordination and management of police operations.
- Crime: analysis of case histories and crime statistics.

Securicor is writing the software for each of these applications, which are expected to be used throughout the police service. While the forty-eight forces in England and Wales is free to make up their own minds whether or not to buy the system, the success of the scheme depends on its widespread adoption. A basic principle is to improve sharing of information at national level, which can only happen if all the forces are using the same systems.

Just as fundamental to the scheme's success is that the systems are continuously available to the officers using them once they have been deployed.

The custody application, for instance, handles the booking in and out of prisoners, schedules routine checks and, where appropriate, medical examinations and provides officers with supplementary information about the prisoners in their care - identifying dangerous individuals or those considered a high risk.

Alan Homersley, project manager for SIS, says: "In these days of intense public and media scrutiny, it goes without saying that the police need to follow custody procedure to the letter. Officers changing shift need to know who is being held, where they are and when they were last checked. Until now many forces have had to rely on nothing more sophisticated than a whiteboard for custody management."

The custody and command and control applications have to be kept running around the clock, but not all of the applications need to run 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The case preparation module, for instance, will be most used during the working hours kept by the courts.

"For all the applications, even those that might not be deemed mission-critical, we have taken the approach that anything less than 100% availability isn't good enough," Homersley says. "The ease with which officers can prepare case histories, which often involve huge volumes of supporting documentation, could be critical to securing a prosecution. You can't always choose when the system goes down - and if it's in the middle of the working day it could mean costly delays and even the rescheduling of cases."



“... anything less than 100% availability isn't good enough”

Alan Homersley



As the software developer, Securicor has to be responsible for the quality and reliability of the applications, but in order to guarantee that the system keeps running the company also had to take reasonable steps to protect the parts of the system outside its direct control - the underlying hardware.

The Securicor team took a belt and braces approach to the system design, duplicating processors, disk arrays, network connections and power supplies. It selected RSF-1 from High-Availability.Com Limited as the management software. RSF-1 continuously monitors all aspects of the systems performance. At the first sign of failure, the software redirects user requests to a back-up machine running an identical copy of the application, sends an alert to technical staff and generates a report detailing the nature of the problem.

“We looked at a few other products that could have done the job, but these tended to cost more to implement, had higher ongoing maintenance charges or both. High-Availability.Com's product was the most cost effective,” Homersley says. “People are often impressed by the sheer scale of public sector contracts, but the truth is that resources are tight and we have to keep a watchful eye on the budget.”

In designing the applications for NSPIS, Securicor simply followed the first principle of software development and listened to the customer. “We've treated all parts of the system as mission critical, even the back-office applications, because that's how the police view them,” Homersley says.

Police work may never be free of bureaucracy, but NSPIS should at least ensure that the long arm of the law isn't permanently weighed down with paperwork.

