

Technology Corner: Put the Web to Work for You in the PSAP: Surf the Wave of the Future

By Jacqueline Hike

In previous editions of the "Technology Corner," we have looked at emerging trends and how they affect the public safety industry. For example, we have looked at the benefits of introducing computers into the PSAP and explored the advantages of deploying computer telephony integration into public safety call centers. With that goal in mind, we are now going to look at a revolution in communication on everyone's mind. In fact, it's the subject matter for litigation and major news stories—the Internet phenomenon. It's a technology trend that is experiencing more rapid innovations and attraction more investment dollars than any other medium in the industry today. As a matter of fact, Bill Gates claims, "The Internet is the most important single development to come along since the IBM PC was introduced in 1981."

But, before we decide whether there's any value in Internet and Intranet technology for the PSAP, let's look briefly at exactly what this technology is. The Internet is actually a global network of computers running on all sorts of different platforms (PCs, Macs, UNIX) that communicate using a common language or protocol (TCP/IP which stands for "Internet Protocol"). It's a public network, which means that it is not centrally owned and nearly anyone can access it and exchange information. It is comprised of millions of web sites making it the world's largest library of information. And it's still growing. There are also private networks based on the same technology as the global Internet (HTML, or Hyper-text marked language). Only they are internal networks called Intranets. You own it. You manage it. And, it's your own internal library.

Now, you may ask yourself what all the hype is all about and does it really translate into any value for the public safety industry. Consider some of the following benefits: better and more consistent communication, collaboration, and the ability to publish and share more information. These technologies are being integrated into more and more of the CPE products available to you and offer a realm of possibilities. There are a number of ways in which PSAPs can implement these types of technology.

Consider posting shift schedules and managing overtime on an inter-agency Intranet where the information is managed centrally, but empowers departments to update the information appropriately. What about posting incident updates and/or event monitoring? Standard operating procedures (SOPs) and employee handbooks are an excellent application for an Intranet. An Intranet allows more current, comprehensive updates to large documents (on-line) and cuts paper, copying, and distribution costs by 90%. What about posting training aids, departmental notices? Or, how about posting medical aid instructions as an Intranet application?

Some ways in which the Internet could be utilized in the PSAP include staying abreast of weather tracking, broadcasting traffic/ incident updates and local, national, and worldwide news, not to mention the ability to stay current with industry and vendor communication, such as NENA. Imagine live, on-demand multimedia content focused on some of your key data sources.

Internet and Intranet solutions have a lot of advantages over other communications solutions. First, they allow you to merge private and public networks and to become an integrated access point for all PSAP information and processes. They provide enhanced workgroup sharing and collaboration and they provide enhanced workgroup sharing and collaboration and they provide better ways to solve communication issues. They allow you to better organize your information which, in turn, enables faster and easier information access and increased productivity.

Second, they reduce the complexity and cost of information technology (IT). They are easier to develop, deploy, and administer than conventional systems. It is also easier to create and publish content than on other paper mechanisms.

Of course, as is true with anything, these solutions don't come without some challenges and hurdles. Some of which are the fact that security and administration inhibit adoption, there are multiple (inconsistent) ways to browse, some web sites lack good presentation, and bandwidth can limit some productivity.

But these challenges can be overcome given the potential these technologies offer. And, there really isn't a whole lot needed to get started. In fact, you really only need a PC, modem, browser, telephone/network service, and an ISP and you're ready to start surfing the web.

So the bottom line is that the future looks to be bigger, faster, and more exciting than ever. Both the Internet and Intranet continue to grow at amazing rates and the development tools are becoming more integrated and easy to use. So, maybe we should look at how we can begin to embrace these technologies. A good place to start is considering these opportunities in front of you and integrating standard Web technologies into existing infrastructure. That way you can leverage your current and future investments in systems, tools, and training and not let the wave of the future pass you by.

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