Anytime anywhere **policing**

Mobile data can greatly increase police productivity in the field but, to do that successfully, apps and software systems need to link up easily with other systems for seamless two-way data exchange, says **Jimmy Cockerton**, business development manager, SmartWorks at Capita Secure Mobile Solutions

We can all relate to the levels of frustration experienced when technology doesn't do what we want it to do. If our mobile network drops, we find ourselves at a loss. We can't make or receive calls and we lose the ability to keep up to date via social media with news from our networks.

We even get physically lost because we can't look up maps and addresses. As soon as the mobile network is restored, however, all of these problems go away and we carry on about our business as usual.

What's remarkable is that police officers have to deal with some of these technological challenges every day while out on the beat – specifically, the ability to work efficiently away from the desk at the police station. Despite the fact that frontline officers carry, on average, three mobile devices during a shift – a radio, a work mobile phone and a personal mobile phone – the ability to source or share vital information is still limited because the devices don't always connect to central systems.

It is hard not to focus on the financial implications of these limitations given the current climate. Research from O2 and the Centre for Economic and Business Research (Cebr)* calculated that a lack of technology costs UK policing a staggering £221m due to its impact on productivity levels.

This is difficult to reconcile when you consider recent headlines suggesting forces may be grappling with further cuts of around 5% in 2015/2016 and more over the next five years.

Yet it would be remiss to get sidetracked by the pound signs – it's worth taking a closer look at how the wrong tools impact, not only on the day job but also on officer and public safety.

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COMMUNICATION: Mobile devices also need to be fed information from command and control rooms

Right technology

Officers spend a significant chunk of their time making phone calls to and hanging on for the response from busy support staff who undertake queries for information on various databases, or back at a desk typing up the lengthy reports they have written by hand while out on a shift.

In addition, 11% of external meetings attended by police officers are follow-up visits that could have been avoided if the right technology and information had been readily available during the initial visit*.

So, the key to success is not to assume that providing a frontline officer with a smartphone or laptop enables mobile working. The problem is that software platforms on the devices need to integrate with the same systems accessed by officers back at base – witness statements, crime and intelligence systems and police national computer databases are prime examples.

Mobile devices also need to be fed information from command rooms when officers are attending an incident, so they are better informed and can more efficiently manage the incident.

Are there any limitations with existing technology that would prevent frontline police officers having access to their entire offices in their pockets? The answer is that there shouldn't be – any new software should be able to integrate with all existing systems if the officer needs to access them away from the office.

Bigger picture

However, this means looking at the bigger picture when it comes to deciding which IT to invest in and when looking at roll-out plans and business cases.

It may be tempting for forces to deploy quick wins by investing in mobile devices and providing tools to push out data to police officers in the field, but this one-way flow of data doesn't support today's more collaborative and dynamic style of policing.

Information on the ground (such as the recent trials of body-worn video) could prove vital in decision-making for call handlers if shared from the street with the control room (or other public agencies) and stored centrally.

Importantly, time can be freed up for employees (both frontline and back office) to focus on other activities by removing duplication of effort. Once mobile devices are linked to back-office systems, updates can be made in real time by the officer attending the scene, or immediately after a meeting with a witness at their home.

CONNECTION: New software platforms need to integrate with existing police systems accessed by officers back at base

Multi-platform

Given the rapid pace of developments in new technology, finding solutions that work on any type of device or platform will avoid forces being locked in to a product that may not work for them in the future. As mentioned before, the problem is less about frontline officers actually having mobile phones or laptops and more about what those devices allow frontline officers to do.

Given that around 75% of people own a smartphone, it makes sense to find types of software that frontline officers are familiar with. There's an app for anything from finding a bus stop to sharing photos and taking notes. Harnessing the potential offered by apps will help frontline officers to quickly access information, which could be stand-alone or obtained via another source.

For some apps, for example, the real win will be the ability to link them up with other systems. So, for example, an officer in a particular location may be pinged an alert to his or her mobile phone to advise them of anti-social behaviour outside a local takeaway. The officer could view CCTV footage of the incident provided by the local authority via an app. They could also pull up any historical information about similar instances of anti-social behaviour previously reported by the shop owner. In the event the officer spots the suspect, they would have access to a range of tools at their fingertips to search for additional information and securely file any resulting reports on the move.

Collaborative working

The benefit of this more dynamic way of working is that it opens the door to a more collaborative operation. Frontline officers will be able to work more closely with the control room and in ongoing investigations. It could, however, also go much further.

Police officers don't work in isolation – they may be working with fire and rescue services, highways agencies, ambulance services and even health workers from local authorities, depending on the nature and scale of the incident or accident. Police officers could be alerted to a missing person, for example, suffering from Alzheimer's Disease, by an adult social care team at a local authority – providing images of the individual and information about their last-known location.

If apps were available to all neighbouring public safety agencies and local authorities, offering varying degrees of levels of access depending on the type of user, then this could result in increased collaboration when dealing with emergency situations. This would be of benefit not only to the frontline staff, but also to public safety.

Technology has long been described as the enabler for certain ways of working. We need to take care that mobile phones aren't expected to solve the problem of mobile working.

It's what those devices allow frontline officers to do that needs to be more closely considered.

**Source: O2 and the Centre for Economic and Business Research (Cebr)*
Smarter Working Britain: The economic benefits of connectivity – A study for O2 February 2014