

CSI London part 1: How the City Police's CSI System helps SOCOs Manage Forensics

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Police forces across the country can now have a bespoke CSI system at a fraction of the cost of standard solutions, thanks to a consultancy initiative with the City of London Police: the system, eFex, was not only developed in tandem with the police (rather than an existing technology later adapted for CSI use) but has proven itself over several years to be invaluable in three major areas: Helping the CSI officer or SOCO on the ground, generating useful management statistics and securing convictions in court. In a series of three articles we look at each of these benefits in turn, beginning with the SOCOs' experience of eFex.

The Story and People Behind eFex

It's interesting to take a quick look at how the system began because this is crucial in its success. As mentioned above, this system was a bespoke system designed in close conjunction with the police but now generally available. Back in 2001, the City of London police decided they needed an electronic CSI system to replace the paper trail. Ian Gray, then Detective Sergeant in the Scientific Support Unit, started to investigate off-the-shelf market offerings.

"What I saw at the time were effectively exhibit tracking systems. But we wanted a cradle-to-courtroom system for both officers and management," says Gray. "Instead of just exhibit tracking, we wanted a system that could do everything: fingerprint tracking, DNA evidence, high-tech forensics such as computer and satellite tracking, recording crime scene notes, crime scene videos, visibility of crime scene examination. So, for example if someone is going to be charged, the officer would be able to tell the court that fingerprints had been found." Not only did he find other systems limited in function, but they were very expensive plus tied the force into other possible payments in the future.

These two issues prompted Gray to investigate the possibility of working with an IT consultancy consortium who had done some training with the force and shown an understanding of police working culture as well as the pressures of policing. They knew that officers don't have the time or inclination to deal with difficult computer systems and demonstrated this understanding beautifully by producing an interface so simple that it didn't need an instruction manual! Officer feedback in trials was incorporated. Amazingly, the system cost around a third of an off-the-shelf solution.

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eFEX as a CSI system for the SOCO

Because eFex was developed hand-in-hand with the City Police, the system was intuitive to use and accepted easily by officers. “I was very quickly able to challenge any SOCOs with embedded practices because I could show them the benefits so easily,” says Gray. “It simply worked so well. Officers can find what they are looking for and the fields are easy to fill in. We made certain fields mandatory so crucial stages have to be recorded.”

With eFex, when a piece of evidence is brought in for submission, the SOCO can create an entry record including information such as what it is, event details and what needs to be done or, for example, include video evidence of forensics being taken at the crime scene. “It’s a two stage process of auditing and then maintaining integrity of the exhibit so, at court, we can show the entire exhibit history without a break,” says Gray.

Flexible and Accessible

“The benefits we’ve found are that eFex speeds the process for the officers involved, at all stages. Once the SOCO has created an entry, like a credit card from a burglary, they take the exhibit with its reference to the next stage, say for fingerprinting. The system allows them to add a narrative. Later the SOCO can pick up and cross-check all the labelled exhibits, with a description that that is written and its own ID code.”

Another great feature says Gray is that the system is web-based. “This speeds the process for everyone as an officer can look up the exhibit on any computer or time, say on night duty. Or keep checking during the day to see if the exhibit is back from forensics.” (This is explained in detail in the third article which outlines how eFex was used in the high-profile Operation Magnesium.)

The Bigger Picture

Improved efficiencies in the forensics process then include: less mistakes or problems caused by bad handwriting or missed information, watertight continuity up to the courtroom, ease of tracking for SOCOs and other officers wherever they are and when they need the information, co-ordination in real time of fast-paced inquiries.

Gray concludes: “In comparison to our old paper trail, an officer could now view the progress of, say, 200 exhibits in real-time updates, rather than dealing with numerous pieces of paper. eFex also gives us a more complete picture. With the old system, paper used to sometimes go to the wrong officer. Now we have visibility across the whole force.” This visibility includes the easy generation of management statistics, including Home Office data, the subject of next week’s article.

For more information or a free consultation, please contact us today.

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