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Digitising records to prevent future tradgedies

Background

- Police records management in the UK was under the microscope after a judicial inquiry identified information weaknesses that lead to a tragic circumstance.

- By not having access to critical information enquiry found this lead to the murder of two 10 year old girls.

- They needed a solution that would enable them input and have access to documents and data quickly and efficiently.

Challenges

- Police rely on information and with traditional paper methods the volume of records is too high and information cannot be easily accessed.

- The systems that were in place provided more confusion in police records management and there was not clear understanding of how to use it.

- Records had been deleted casting serious doubts of the usefulness and reliability of police records.

- They needed to become MoPI compliment and report monthly to the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) regarding policy and practice around data records.

- Reduce quantity of paper held and produced, make content more widely available to those

When the UK Police Force needed a data capture solution to help with their investigations, EzeScan software was configured to apply metadata to digitized records that were then uploaded to the EDRMS, enabling ease of searching of hand written content.

Police records management in the UK has been under the microscope since a judicial inquiry in 2004 identified information weaknesses that led to the tragic circumstances of the Soham murders. The Soham murders was an English murder case in 2002 of two 10-year-old girls in the village of Soham, Cambridgeshire.

Police rely on information to do their job well. Traditionally information has been recorded on paper, completed by an officer at a scene of a crime or an accident, or by a member of the public coming to the police station and records being completed, or gathered form other places and other witnesses. Before the advent of computer records, ledgers were maintained at police stations to keep a log of events, registration of property, log crimes/accidents reported and provide reference numbers. Whilst recording information is a good thing, if the volume of records is too high and information cannot be easily accessed, it becomes worthless in terms of supporting operational policing. There has to be an effective method of recovering and understanding the information held within records.

In 1986, HOLMES an early Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRMS) was introduced as a policing tool in the UK. It supported the investigation of incidents where masses of information needed to be processed and provided a system that allowed key words searching in records that had been committed to an electronic format. However, this system was only used for the most serious crimes and access beyond that criteria was almost non-existent. Another key computer system in the UK is the Police National Computer (PNC); it was initially established in 1974, to store and rapidly provide officers with information about stolen vehicles. It now holds a much wider range of information about people, vehicles, crime and other property.

The PND is an Electronic Document and Records Management System that holds information about convicted criminals and intelligence about those the police have an interest in. It also includes some victim details. Police forces can now check each others information very rapidly. If good use is to be made of this information then data accuracy and completeness of records is essential. If records are destroyed too soon, then any potential intelligence value is lost, and there will be insufficient information to assist in case reviews at a later date.

A PND was one of the key recommendations from the Bichard Inquiry into police failings into the Soham murders in 2002. It found that police failed to disclose details of allegations against Ian Huntley a year before he murdered Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, both aged 10. Those allegations, had they been known about, would probably have resulted in him failing the vetting process, and would have subsequently prevented him from getting a job that allowed him access to his victims.

who need and have authority to access, ensure paper records are maintained in a secure environment. Change the culture from storing paper to scanning and making better use of content.

- Previous external scanning service had left the Police force with scanned records that had been linked to wrong file and physical papers were returned misfield or missing causing additional work.

Solution

- EzeScan Data Capture solution was implemented. The software was configured to apply metadata to digitized records and enable ease of searching of hand written content.

- Large scanned files were separated into smaller component parts making the end product more user friendly e.g. statements were separated from interview notes.

- Files would then be uploaded into an EDRMS preventing the need to send large email files across networks.

Results

- Scanning records reduced the demand on storage spaces, enabled rapid viewing of records and reduced the costs associated with storage and retrieval.

- The Force retained complete control over the records it created.

- The Force was able to make use of the content of records at any time they needed.

- It allowed for more efficient searching of the record content and records linked to an inquiry can be found quickly and relevant intelligence extracted.

- Improved security was achieved by transferring documents electronically across the organisation rather than manually.

When Huntley applied for a job as a school care taker he was required to fill out a police record check form. He did this but used an alias name of Nixon, as he had done when arrested for rape in 1999. This name when checked did not give a full history of Huntley's contacts with the police because vital intelligence had not been available. Individuals in the force knew that Huntley and Nixon were one and the same, but this was not reflected in the information held on records systems. Police failings in records management at the time of the inquiry were described in as "systemic and corporate".

The Bichard Inquiry Report referenced confusion in police records management: "… so serious that there was not even a common understanding of what was meant by 'weeding', 'reviewing' and 'deletion'. It cannot now be ascertained how many records were lost without proper review." Bichard also said that the confusion may have contributed to "the deletion of the information in the only intelligence report on Huntley and that, the 'haemorrhaging' of intelligence casts serious doubts on the usefulness of other Humberside Police records".

In addition to the establishment of a PND to enable wider sharing of police information, the Bichard Inquiry recommended a code of practice on how police forces should manage their records. He said it: "Must clearly set out the key principles of good information management (capture, review, retention, deletion and sharing), having regard to policing purposes, the rights of the individual and the law" and "Must set out the standards to be met in terms of systems (including IT), accountability, training, resources and audit. "

The code of practice detailing the Management of Police Information (MoPI) was issued in April 2006. Since then UK police forces have been working to ensure compliance with the standards it sets out. A revised version of the code was published in 2010. In essence MoPI provided police with a set of standards that equate to good records management. The guidance includes a requirement for standardization of policy and practice concerning information sharing, for records to be reviewed and linked, and for a standard retention policy to be applied to records. To aid its implementation each force was required to have had an action plan, and progress against the plan was reported on monthly to the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA).

Records management, done well, can be challenging for any organisation. MoPI sets out those challenges very clearly to police forces. The first challenge is the quantity of records that need to be assessed, evaluated and linked (where appropriate) to others, if necessary on a daily basis. Secondly there is the challenge of not knowing what you don't know. If you don't know the detail of what is contained in a hand written statement that has been consigned to an archive store, how can you know if the detail of that statement is relevant? Can you be sure that the headline information provided in an electronic crime report will provide the level of detail required to decide if a suspect should be arrested or not?

Accessing information contained within paper records was part of the challenge faced by one Police Force as it came to terms with the requirements of MoPI. That Force moved from discussion and hypothesis around digitizing some of its paper records, to delivering a viable pilot scheme and subsequent operational deployment, in a short space of time and with minimal resources. Its methodology and application is equally applicable to any organisation that has a requirement to manage unstructured data as part of its overall records management strategy.

With a project team of two and other project work packages to deliver on, there were the following challenges to meet:
- Challenge 1 – To reduce quantity of paper held and produced
- Challenge 2- To make content more widely available to those who need and have authority to access it
- Challenge 3 – To ensure that records (paper) are maintained in a secure environment
- Challenge 4 – To provide this as proof of concept with limited project support and budget
- Challenge 5 – Change the culture from storing paper to scanning and making better use of the paper content and, gain support for such an approach by senior management.

At the time there was nobody who could provide clarity about the electronic scanning process or where digital records would be stored. Chief Officers had delegated achieving MoPI compliance to a project board. The project board did not understand how the EDRMS worked or what its capabilities were. There was awareness that it was only being used in one support department in a limited capacity, to store documents collectively referred to as "corporate memory" (meeting minutes, agendas and Home Office Circulars).

There was also an aversion to electronic scanning. Previously scanning had been outsourced and local records managers did not receive the level of service they had been promised. Scanned records had been linked to the wrong files and physical papers that were returned to the organisation were misfiled or missing. This caused additional work for the officers using those files. There was an organisational resistance to any form of outsourced scanning.

The project board drew up a list of the principle areas of focus for a Pilot Scheme:
- Weeding: The initial plan was to focus on weeding to reduce the amount of paper being held and prevent retention of documents deemed to be of no further value to the organisation. For the pilot scheme, court and crime records were weeded. Duplicate records and records that could be reproduced from computer systems were disposed of.
- Scanning: There was a desire to use technology more efficiently, to be able to scan records and upload them into the EDRMS. The approach of scan on demand was taken; a record would only be scanned if somebody in the organisation needed access to it.
- Information sharing: The vision was to develop an effective method to locate files in the physical archive, reduce the size of the file by weeding and once scanned to share the record electronically.
- Increased awareness: To raise awareness of the benefits of information discovery and sharing, a competition to promote MoPI was run. Staff were asked to provide a simple statement describing what MoPI meant to them. The winning submission was "MoPI – It could save a life".

When the weeding team began to receive requests for files to be scanned and shared, they scanned using a multifunctional device (MFD). The electronic file was then emailed to the requester. This was an improvement to the previous process where the requester would drive to the store, find the file, drive back and pass it to the investigating officer.

However, scanning from the MFD, without any way of managing the scanned image, proved problematic. The output was a large PDF format document and the requester would have to scroll through the entire file to get to the information they needed. There was something missing between scanning and then sharing the file to make this an efficient and effective process.

The Force needed data capture software and had viewed several potential solutions. They contacted EzeScan, a commercial company providing a suite of document scanning products, to discuss the requirements and challenges faced. EzeScan agreed to support the pilot scheme by providing software for evaluation.

The software was configured to apply metadata to digitized records, enabling ease of searching of hand written content. Large files were separated into smaller component parts, making the end product more user friendly, for example, statements were separated from interview notes. The files were then uploaded to the EDRMS, preventing the need to send large email files across networks.

Awareness of the pilot scheme spread quickly, and those who had previously been concerned about deploying a scanning solution had their confidence restored. EzeScan can be completely tailored to meet the requirements of the user but the operator is only required to learn a few basic steps. This is an option that can be deployed into an organisation very quickly, provided the groundwork has been done and the options and the required outcomes have been thought through.

Scanning records reduced the demand on storage space, enabled rapid viewing of scanned records and reduced the costs associated with storage and retrieval. The organisation retained complete control over the records it created, and more importantly, it was able to view and make use of the content of those records at any time it desired.

Digitized documents uploaded to the record management system provided the organisation with confidence that documents had providence and integrity. It also allowed more efficient searching of the record content, records linked to an inquiry can be found quickly and relevant intelligence can be extracted. There was improved security achieved by transferring documents electronically across the organisation, rather than manually.

Audit, version control, retention dates and tracking of documents were routinely taken care of by digitizing records, in many cases these were added benefits, not previously considered by the organisation.
This combined EzeScan/ EDRMS solution offers an 'invest to save' opportunity for organisations who need greater control over their records management, offering a process for creating digitized records from paper archives in a few simple steps. Immediately after the pilot, EzeScan was installed into the major crime archive. Work commenced on digitizing hundreds of serious case files. Its use was also expanded in terms of providing information to the corporate memory.

Additional records being scanned and uploaded to EDRMS now include:
- Complaints & Pensions
- Information sharing agreement requests and responses
- Subject access requests
- Crime files
- Road traffic collision files
- Human resources files

The force is now preparing to deploy the system to manage the CPS direct processes enabling officers to submit papers electronically to the CPS for charging decisions. The tragic loss of two young lives in Soham might have been prevented if Police organisations, whose primary role is to protect life and property, had managed their records and information in accordance with the guidance now available to them.

The guidance (MoPI) states clearly that forces should regularly review the information within records and link them where appropriate. If such information is contained in papers records, there must be an established process of getting it into electronic systems.

The establishment of PNC, HOLMES and PND have all been reactive steps to information management challenges. Those charged with the protection of life and property need information in a timely fashion to make decisions, and in terms of policing, reactive systems provide this. What is needed now is to go one step further with information and records management in making "hidden content" equally available by digitizing paper records to help prevent future tragedies.

This article has focused on information to support policing, but the responsibility for "care" sits with a much wider section of society. Health workers, social workers, social housing providers, education providers, probation officers, local authorities and security services all share the responsibility. There have been too many instances where failings in records management and information sharing have contributed to the loss of life. Now is the time to be proactive in prevention – MoPI, "Could save a life".

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About EzeScan

EzeScan provides fast, cost effective business process automation solutions including simplified document back scanning, accounts payable, data robotic process automation, forms data extraction, mailroom/correspondence automation and highly integrated EDRMS capture. With thousands of installations in Australasia, North America and the UK, EzeScan is your ideal digital transformation provider.