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Digital document management helps San Francisco Police put an end to time-stealing paperwork

Police work can sure look glamorous when TV and movie stars chase bad guys on the streets of San Francisco. But for veteran SFPD Lieutenant Jack Ballentine, the reality was a massive paper chase with stacks and stacks of police reports waiting to be indexed, photocopied and distributed. Police reports by the thousands were clogging the wheels of justice and creating delays in readying criminal cases for court.

Ballentine's staff was dwindling due to retirements, and it was clearly time for the 150-year-old law enforcement agency to get smarter with technology. He spearheaded an initiative to bring in document management software from Laserfiche®, with help from local Laserfiche reseller Technical Consultants International (TCi).

Ballentine says, "We greatly appreciate the outstanding service and swift way Laserfiche has handled our operational concerns." That review comes after Laserfiche has only been on the job for a few weeks and only in the records room at headquarters. The SFPD is starting off slowly as it attempts to groom decades of data in electronic and paper forms into something more manageable. There's lots of room for improvement for their record-keeping. It's almost as paper-based now as it was 30 years ago. Each day, the SFPD's 2,300 officers add 1,500 new pages of reports, which quickly accumulate into a massive paper problem. Every month the records room alone goes through an entire pallet of paper.

So far, Laserfiche is used as an electronic data bank. In the past eight years, the department has indexed and imaged nine million pages of police reports. Untold millions more pages of paper reports are in filing cabinets throughout the department.

An incident report is the initial item in what can be a very long chain of documents—supplemental reports, evidence, statements and more. Most of it starts out as paper but must be digitized right away for distribution to officers, attorneys and judges.

In San Francisco, most police reports are written on PCs installed in the 10 district police stations around the city. Sounds good so far, but then they're printed out and hand-delivered to the records room, where they are photocopied and distributed on paper to the investigations bureau and the district attorney.

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Organization Profile

The City of San Francisco is the fourteenth-largest city in America, with over 740,000 residents.
Serving the city are the more than 2,300 officers of the San Francisco Police Department.

Situation

Proliferating police reports were impeding everyday police work and creating delays in getting criminal cases ready for court. The SFPD needed to streamline its records-keeping model and improve information access without hiring additional staff.

Solution

With help from their reseller, the SFPD implemented a Laserfiche solution and immediately began digitizing its millions of pages of police reports. A new records management model is in the build stage, and soon, documents will be made available via the secure public safety intranet.

Benefits

- Laserfiche search capabilities nearly eliminate time spent searching through police reports, records and supporting documentation.
- Information is more readily accessible to officers, judges and attorneys.
- The SFPD has reclaimed physical storage space and lowered the cost of reproducing documents.

Laserfiche Components

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One set of paper reports is scanned and automatically indexed into Laserfiche. With a previous system, all the indexing was done manually by typing in a few pieces of information from the report. This resulted in lots of errors and wasted resources, so Laserfiche is already streamlining the process.

Another set of paper goes to clerical staff that key a bit more of the information into the 70's era mainframe system, which is shared with the court and district attorney. A new records management system being adopted by the department is still many months away. Until that system gets going, the most comprehensive information is found in the images and searchable text in Laserfiche.

The next step will be giving access to reports in Laserfiche over the secure public safety intranet, so inspectors and district attorneys can locate the reports without leaving their desks. But the big leap will occur once the reports that officers create on the police station computers can be automatically picked up, imaged and indexed into Laserfiche without human intervention. It's an easy technical fix but a difficult bureaucratic challenge to get it done.

San Francisco has many agencies that need to tap into this system, including the district attorney's office, the courts and the police department's own legal division. Eventually, all San Francisco criminal justice agencies could be given secure access to these records through the Web.

Lofty notions when you're talking about big-city bureaucracies that have to sign off and then collaborate on such projects. But smaller departments and agencies across the country are doing exactly that.

In San Luis Obispo County, CA, Laserfiche serves several hundred staff and officers with the sheriff's office, probation court, superior court and the police departments from all over the county. All send records to the county district attorney via Laserfiche.

The Kern County, CA, Sheriff's Office is getting wired to the county courts system via a password-protected, internet-accessible Laserfiche system that has cut delivery time for court-issued restraining orders from days to minutes. "They can have it literally in minutes," says Marc St. Laurent, who is supervising document imaging for the Kern County Superior Court. "It helps to protect the public and it helps protect potential victims from harm."

These are the sorts of services and testimonials San Francisco Law Enforcement Agencies could be receiving as well, according to the Director of Professional Services at TCi, Bill Bigley. "The key thing," he says, "is that Laserfiche enables more accurate information and makes that information available to more agencies."

Ballentine is all too aware of the possibilities, but sometimes revolutions come in baby steps. Regardless of how bright the future is, he's happy for now to enjoy this new version of the present—so happy, in fact, that he'll deliver a presentation at the upcoming Laserfiche Institute Conference.

Says Bigley, "Seven or eight months ago there were 25,000 reports sitting on a table because of inefficient processes—a huge backlog that affected their staff, the public and the courts. Laserfiche has been a dramatic help in reducing that, and it's going to keep them from getting backlogged in the future."

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About Laserfiche

A resource for over 23,000 publicand private-sector organizations around the world since 1987, Laserfiche creates simple, elegant document management solutions that help organizations run smarter. From streamlining digital records management to automating the agenda process, Laserfiche helps improve efficiency while integrating seamlessly within any environment.

Your Next Step

Visit laserfiche.com/gov to get a free white paper on implementing an electronic document management system. Or call (800) 985-8533 to get answers now.

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