

**THE REGIONALIZATION OF
POLICE RECORDS MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS
IN THE FUTURE**

Article

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Introduction

The article will seek to identify how regionalization of police records management systems will impact law enforcement agencies.

“A police records management system (RMS) is an agency -wide system that considers the reasons, the processes, and the means necessary for a document to exist and be used. RMS must cover the entire life span of the document, from its generation to its destruction. It provides for the effective storage, retrieval, retention, manipulation, archiving, and viewing of information, records, documents, or files that are related to a single subject.”¹ The specific and primary purpose of regionalizing a RMS is to share regional criminal justice information contained in individual systems.

A RMS allows an agency to maintain effective operations by analyzing response trends, crime information, and other data useful in maximizing efficient resources. An effective automation solution is essential to the efficient operation of modern law enforcement agencies. “RMS provide immediate access to accurate, up -to-date information, reducing paperwork, improving officer safety, and enhancing both administrative and investigative operation.”²

Prior to records automation, agencies typically maintained hard copy data consisting of index files that had to be manually searched. Research and statistical analysis required the manual search and tedious deciphering of data. Manual operations made regionalization extremely difficult and labor intensive. Although computers have existed since the early 1950’s, applicability, expense and sheer bulk made them impractical for local law enforcement to obtain. Meanwhile, changes in technology and legislation,

increased demands for information and expanded civil liability began to contribute to the complexity of records management.

The information revolution of the past two decades has resulted in more people having faster access to more accurate information than ever before. Both the public and law enforcement expect agency information systems to respond quickly with an enhanced ability to recognize crime patterns and problem areas. Law enforcement agencies needed to improve their information systems in order to be able to better analyze and use the data they collected. By the early to mid 1980's, the personal computer (PC) was the technical advancement that began this shift. The PC moved law enforcement from a manual to automated system. PCs were affordable and compact tools that were easily adaptable for records data collection and provided valuable word processing capabilities that soon made typewriters obsolete.

The influx of computer technology created a demand for software that was unique to law enforcement records management. The initial software packages were modifications adapted from the private sector and federal government. Unique requirements make implementation of even a single system in an agency a very difficult task. When you bring multiple agencies into the picture, the complexity of developing a functional efficient system further compounds the degree of difficulty.³ It is clear that accomplishing effective sharing of information among agencies is a complicated process that requires future and strategic planning.

Strategic Planning

Police organizations are constantly changing and will be different in the future than they are today. Technological advancements will stress the limits of organizations and

require them to challenge the technical curve in order to be effective in providing protection and service to the communities they serve. In order to prepare organizations to meet future needs, administrators must make sound decisions today that will shape and develop their organization in the future. Progressive organizations use strategic planning as a future roadmap that will anticipate potential changes in the organization and focus on future versus present issues.

Strategic planning is a tool that we can use to describe and sell the perceived output of the planning process to stakeholders. It can be used to guide the organization in setting priorities, allocating resources and making decisions. It's a blend of qualitative and quantitative analysis that is both subjective and objective.

Vision Statement

In order to properly prepare for the future we must first have a vision. A vision statement is a snapshot of what we desire the future to be and what we want to achieve. The objective is to develop a regional RMS that establishes a seamless integrated system, which, maximizes standardization of data and communications technology among the users and enhances law enforcement's ability to provide protection and service to the communities served by the system.

Situational Analysis

Before agencies can successfully implement change, the organizational environment needs to be examined. In the case of regionalization, this requires the examination of the each individual agency, as well as the group as a whole. One method of analysis is the use of the "WOTSUP" (Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats, Strengths Underlying

Planning) model to examine issues affecting the organization or organizations. This analysis is a general overview, which allows for insight into the regionalization process.

Weaknesses (potential areas which may require attention)

- Resistance to change of individual agency procedures to meet regional needs
- Recession may affect amount of available grant funding and shift greater expense to local agencies
- Continued technical advancement in the field will increase the cost of maintaining and acquiring equipment
- High cost of technology may limit availability to meet needs
- Security of the system may be jeopardized by technical advancements. Protection mechanisms should be constantly evaluated
- Changing from a localized mentality to a regional mentality
- Data entry issues need to be standardized.
- Training requirements are constant and ever changing. The training curve must be maintained
- Accuracy of data entry is essential.

Opportunities (potential benefits)

- Enhancing officer safety
- Improving service to customers
- Creative thinking that looks for opportunity
- Expands information capabilities of all agencies
- Grant money to support continued development of the project
- Development of technically knowledgeable personnel
- Centralization of records data
- Technology is readily available
- Creates a common objective for agencies to unite
- World Trade Center disaster of September 11, 2001 has raised public awareness about the need for integrating data⁴

Threats (things that may have a negative impact)

- Budget constraints which may not allow for the flexibility needed for change
- Organizational resistance to change
- Political agendas of agencies may adversely affect the overall objectives
- Emerging technology may make system obsolete
- Competing values among the agencies in the region

Strengths (areas which will support the plan)

- Clear vision, direction and support on a regional level
- Regional recognition and support of the need for change
- Increased and continual training
- Public support for integration
- Technological advancements in integration
- Willingness and desire to share information
- Officer safety is increased
- Community and regional safety is increased

Stakeholders

Plans to affect organizational change must consider the stakeholders. Stakeholders are individuals or groups who are impacted, or who want to impact, what an organization does. Identifying all the stakeholders, both internal and external, allows an organization the ability to understand who may support, interrupt, or stop a plan. Identifying those who may significantly impact the success or failure of a plan is critical to achieving the ultimate goal. Some of the most destructive stakeholders are “snaildarters” who have no interest in the organizational plans, but arise at the most unexpected time to interfere with organizational plans.

Some of the stakeholders associated with this issue are: Participating Agencies, Community Members, Elected Officials, City Manager or County Manager, Sheriff and Police Chiefs, Police Executives and Mid-Managers, Police Supervisory Staff, Police Officers, Clerical and Non-Sworn Staff, Prosecutors, Police Associations or Unions, Product Vendors and Technical Personnel, and Law Violators.

Strategy Development

When developing a strategic plan, it is important to be aware of the purpose for the regionalization of a RMS, which is to provide an effective integrated system that

enhances law enforcement's ability to protect and serve the community they serve. This provides the direction necessary to start to devise the strategy needed to succeed.

Strategies to consider are:

Statement of Goals and Objectives

Every planning phase should have broad statements of system goals and objectives that place boundaries on the system and give the direction for design. They take the generalized statements of the user's goals, such as:

The objective is to design a database that will be accessible by any participating agency to acquire information related to individual persons, vehicles, cases and other sources of data. The preferred approach will be a centralized database that will be replicated from each agency's RMS system over a wide-area network (WAN). This database will be available for access by local CAD, RMS and mobile data users.

Design and Planning Process

It is essential that the users of the system be involved in the process as early as possible in the design and planning process so that they have a stake in the system. This will assist in developing and implementing a viable and acceptable system.

Most successful projects use committees as part of the strategic planning phase. At a minimum, these committees should include a technical committee and a management committee. Having the technical committee chaired by a user group supervisor and having essential technical personnel as advisors is suggested. The management committee should avoid getting inundated with the technical jargon, but should have final decision making powers. Some other approaches have included the overlapping of

subcommittees to assist in the process. Keep in mind that committees should be kept small so that decisions can be made in reasonable time periods.

The committees will deal with research and planning related to:

- Developing detailed network design
- Developing Central Records Data Bases
- Developing records search functions
- Installation and configuration of hardware and network equipment
- Installation of software
- Testing of database updates and queries
- Conducting systems administrator training and operator training

Scope of System

The scope of the system deals with the capabilities that should result from the consolidated RMS and how that system fits in the scheme of the regionalized effort. Strategic planning should ensure the smooth integration of the regionalized RMS within the context of the existing and planned systems. This requires a clear definition of systems that will interface to the RMS, including what other systems will be procured or currently exist, such as crime analysis, crime reporting, CAD, Cal-ID, and Booking Photograph.

Standards are also part of this process. The regional group needs to consider if the system will meet the uniform data reporting requirements, state reporting requirements, personnel records standards, record retention schedules and data security standards.

Schedule of Implementation

The strategic planning process should evaluate time constraints for implementation and installation, as well as issues of conversion. Technical and administrative constraints, such as funding and personnel, are examples of issues to consider. Some of the other issues for consideration include site planning, test planning, software and

hardware design, installation planning, training planning, document conversion planning, maintenance planning and support planning.

Research

The strategic plan should include a mechanism that continually measures and assesses processes, services and systems against those of successful organizations. Reinventing the wheel is not necessary. Conduct research and find which agencies have a regionalized RMS that measures up to your size, standards, and scope. This will help in developing the best design for the application.

Strategic planning should also consider the vendor community. It is essential to investigate credentials and product history.

Budget

The budget should also be part of the strategic plan. It is important to consider as many budgetary options as possible to ensure growth, conversion, hardware, software, maintenance costs, operating costs, staffing requirements, site preparation, power and cabling concerns are met. In the case of regionalization, it requires contribution from all participants.

Long-term Support and Technology Updates

Strategic planning should evaluate the expected life span of hardware, software and technology and plan accordingly. Plans need to be developed for the continued maintenance and support of the regionalized system. Concern should be given to issues of compatibility, open systems and maintainability. Ensure the company has longevity and is reputable.⁵

Commitment Planning

Consensus among the stakeholders on the concept of a regionalized records management system is not a difficult task because it generally is a benefit to the participating agencies. Achieving consensus on implementation becomes more difficult because of differences that exist between the agencies. Not all organizations enter data in the same manner or use the same terms for data entry. Agencies have different software packages that cannot communicate to each other without developing interfacing software. An agency may have hardware, which may not be compatible with or capable of adapting to the integrated system. These are just a few of the implementation issues that need to be considered and addressed. Developing a commitment plan will assist in ensuring implementation.

The first step is to identify groups or individuals that are essential to affect change. This includes stakeholders, as well as groups and individuals who may not have a stake or interest in the project, but are influenced by the impact of the project. As an example, the new site of the regional RMS may be opposed by environmentalists on the basis that it will destroy the habitat of the Red Legged Frog. They are not opposed to the regionalized RMS effort, only the designated site and its affect on the environment. All of these individuals and groups together comprise a critical mass, whose active commitment is necessary to effect the change.

The commitment of the community members, the participating agencies and their personnel, public officials, software and hardware vendors, and consultants are essential components to success. They must be thoroughly briefed on the purpose and scope of the regionalized project. To properly focus on the vision, meetings, briefings, and training

sessions must occur to fully explain the benefits, impacts, cost factors, and downside of the project. It is important to emphasize that because this is an integration project of varying equipment and technology, there may be temporary technological setbacks that should not be viewed as failure. Assurance needs to be given that this is a cooperative regional effort that will benefit all and will increase law enforcement's ability to protect and serve the regional community.

Implementation

The senior management of all agencies must be consulted throughout the process in order to arrive at the solution that is best for all involved. This includes ensuring that all players are vested in achievement of the same result. "Organizations and individuals are always resistant to change. Conflicting personalities, egos, and distrust among users are some of the greatest obstacles to integration efforts."⁶ Remember that changing age-old practices is difficult, regardless of the benefits of the new system.

All participating agencies must have an equal voice in the integration process. "The most effective structure includes all constituent organizations and provides a neutral forum for consideration of issues."⁷

It is inevitable that unanticipated problems will arise. Regardless of the nature of the problems, there must be a mechanism in place to handle them. Many successful integration projects have addressed these issues by developing a small group that focus on the business practices within the region. Successful groups tend to meet frequently and address issues as soon as they arise. Agencies that appear to be experiencing the greatest difficulties either have no local committees or rarely bring committees together to resolve their problem.⁸

According to researchers who studied the Colorado Integrated Criminal Justice Information System, the greatest challenges of implementation of an integrated system have not involved technological issues; rather they have involved business rules. They describe business rules as “protocols agreed to by the agencies sharing information regarding what action needs to occur or what document needs to be issued as a result of a particular action being taken, or as a result of the arrival or dissemination of a particular date element or data set or form, etc”.⁹ Business procedures should be analyzed in order to determine the most efficient method to automate the integrated system. This is a tedious transitional process that usually requires constant modifications to the originally agreed upon rules. Participants need to study, define and evaluate business rules before implementing an integrated system. “The system should be developed with a clear understanding of business rules so major problems are not continuously arising after the system implementation.”¹⁰

Integration should set manageable goals to the initial efforts. When multiple agencies are attempting to integrate a RMS, the complexity of the tasks multiplies significantly. The typical goal of full integration and “pie in the sky” objectives that are commonly seen in regional systems are usually unrealistic and tend to signal project failures.¹¹ System implementers should develop integrated systems incrementally and build upon early successes.

As stated earlier, system buy in from the stakeholders is essential. Lack of support from any one participating agency in an integrated effort can be fatal to project success. As an example, staff from each agency must be trained and educated as to the benefits of the integration effort. Fears and skepticism must be eliminated. Frequent meetings and

open discussion about every aspect of system implementation can achieve this.

Stakeholders must be involved from the outset so that common vision and similar objectives are developed.

Information Technology (IT) should be seen as a continuing investment by the participants and adequate funding should be allocated. Agencies need to get past the stage of looking at technology as a five to ten year investment and must realize that intermittent change is a necessity. “Information systems need to be upgraded continuously throughout the system lifecycle to enable the system owners to adapt quickly to the changing needs of the criminal justice community.”¹² Funding for the needed change cannot be a one-time process. Budgets need to reflect the ongoing need for system maintenance and upgrades.

Developers should keep in mind that the best development and implementation will fail if users are not adequately trained in the technology and business impacts of the integrated system. Developing empathy among the users for each other’s business practices is an important aspect of the initial training. This will aid in breaking down any political and organizational barriers that may hamper or prevent success of the system.

It is important to remember that integration of a regionalized RMS system is not a one-time effort. It should be considered an on-going process that will require maintenance and continuous development of the system.

Stakeholders, implementation planning, project issues, training, monitoring and evaluation programs are all necessary functions of the implementation process. In order to implement change, organizations must carefully determine the level of stakeholder support or resistance. The level of commitment from the necessary players and

observers must be identified in order to move forward in the implementation process. Technology is available that offers us the ability to share data and resources that our predecessors in law enforcement dreamed about. It is essential that regionalized RMS efforts take place in order to create agencies that are better prepared to perform objectives that include protecting the communities they serve and promoting increased officer safety.

Recommendations

It is clear that organizations are changing and it is critical for leaders to maintain pace with these changes. The research suggests that because of IT changes, integration of information systems is ripe for agencies. Some agencies have grasped the opportunity and have moved or are moving toward proactive RMS integration. Unfortunately, many of the organizations are still in the process of fine tuning or modifying their individual ability to maximize data within the agency.

It is essential that law enforcement proactively pursue the ability to share regionalized information by integrating Record Management Systems. The key is to develop a seamless information sharing system that is available on request to all authorized user agencies. The development of a modern integrated system will allow information to be shared and moved electronically, reducing the time, effort and cost that now go into producing, tracking, forwarding, filing and retrieving documents.

Integration of a RMS will also increase safety for the public and police officers, because it provides a broader base of information that will be shared. The common inquiry will link information systems maintained by the regional agencies and allow

authorized personnel the ability to call up a full file on an offender by pulling together information from all the participating regions.

Conclusion

A regionalized RMS will significantly increase the ability of law enforcement agencies to immediately access information throughout the region. A broad information base allows an agency to be more productive and to be better prepared to proactively investigate criminal activity. Some of the benefits of implementing a regionalized RMS include:

- Crime related information would be available to all agencies as events happen.
- It will foster cooperation between agencies.
- It facilitates communication and information exchange between agencies.
- It will reduce the amount of time to access information from outside agencies.
- It improves the accessibility of information to all levels of the agency, from communications to patrol to investigations.
- Information can be accessed from a variety of interfaces, including RMS, CAD, mobile data and web browsers
- It provides a cost effective solution that maximizes the shared product.

In order to accomplish successful integration there needs to be a high degree of standardization and cooperation on how to share data, and the ability to deliver information quickly with a high degree of reliability. This requires the cultivation of support from everyone who shares a stake in the project. Additionally, agencies need to agree upon common data standards and operating procedures for the system. This is where the work gets difficult and requires the involved agencies to buy into the vision of integration. They need to understand that the only way they are going to be able to play together is to have a system that adheres to agreed upon standards. Agencies also need to be financial prepared to not only maintain the system, but to also financially support it's projected evolution.

Regionalization of a RMS can have a significantly positive impact on a midsize law enforcement agency if implemented as discussed. Efficient regionalized RMS integration will provide the shared data that will enhance participating law enforcement agencies abilities to protect the community they serve and the officers they employ.

End Notes

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² Bill Kumagai, New Trends in RMS, MIS (9-1-1 Magazine,9/97)

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⁴ Ephraim Scwhartz and Tom Sullivan, U.S. attack: Data integration needed to track terrorists, (Infoworld Media Group, September 13, 2001)

⁵ Charles Drescher, Law Enforcement Information Management Guidelines for: Records Management Systems ((International Association of Chief of Police, 1998)

⁶ Amir Holmes and David Usery, Case Study Series, A Report of the National Task Force on Court Automation and Integration, Colorado Integrated Criminal Justice Information System, Project Overview and Recommendations, (SEARCH National Consortium for Justice Information Statistics, Fall 200/Winter 2001)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

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