

No Country for Old Memos

Interoperability between Laserfiche and its RMS goes a long way to making police work cost-efficient and safer for the Elk River, MN, Police Department

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In most industries, being unable to access the right information can be costly and inefficient. But in law enforcement, it can be inconvenient—even deadly.

“Officers respond to calls uninformed of safety precautions,” says Elk River, MN Police Chief Jeffrey Beahen bluntly. “They’re on the scene without knowing if the suspect has any violent history, if they own any guns – nothing.” Once back at the station, he says, the real work began – only it wasn’t exactly police work.

“Officers would have to go through multiple locations and cabinets to find anything, which could take up to three days if it was over a weekend,” Beahen says. If officers could find what they needed, he adds, they would often have to return to the office from the field, get the documents and then return to the field—or take someone into custody who could have been cited in the field and released. Either way, that was valuable police time officers in the city of 24,000 at the edge of suburban Minneapolis could more effectively spend patrolling the streets.

Beahen saw the impact of paper on his department was not just organizational, but procedural. “Lost paperwork could impede prosecution,” he says. “Sometimes we’d be unable to coordinate multiple pieces of information and evidence to solve crimes.”



Chief Beahen

The cost—well that was a whole other story. “Man hours used to manage documents and case files was the biggest drain on the department,” Beahen says. By his estimates, **the ERPD spent over \$17,000 a year and needed 3.5 full-time employees just to process and store the paperwork generated by the department’s 24,000 cases each year.** “Files might have three or 3,000 pages. But then we had to sort them all, and everyone would have to have them – defense attorneys, prosecutors, courts, the state, FBI and other government and county agencies. So they’d all have to be copied, mailed and delivered. That killed a lot of trees.”

Besides case files, there were the gun permits, alarm files and other forms the police department was required to maintain. **“We were going through 36 reams of paper a year, which, if you add up all the different copies we’d have to make for everybody, wound up at 251 reams of paper, which was 2.2 tons of paper or 54 adult**

trees,” Beahen says. He estimates the paper alone cost well over a \$1,000 a year, not to mention the storage costs of four shelves required to house all this paper.

Beahen saw that going paperless would transform the way his officers dealt with information, both organizationally and procedurally. Since arriving in Elk River as Assistant Chief in 1998, Beahen had been a proponent of technology, working after hours to install computers and build a network “just to get everyone on e-mail.”

In 2002, Elk River purchased Laserfiche, and soon the city’s reseller, Cities Digital, Inc., expanded Laserfiche to the Police Department. However, the Police Department’s records management system (RMS) worked on a proprietary SQL-based server. “While Laserfiche had an open architecture, there was just no way to bring the RMS together with it. Everybody’s desktop had two icons, so you’d pull up the case number and go into Laserfiche to find supporting documents. There was a lot of jumping back and forth, and no access in the squad cars,” Beahen says. “We wanted to get to the point where everything for a case file could be scanned in and filed by case number and the whole thing could be sent out as an attachment, or accessed from a laptop in a squad car.

“We just wanted to make it simple,” he adds.

In 2007, it became just that simple. Beahen was approached by the Law Enforcement Technology Group (LETG) with a Web-based police records management system. “It wasn’t proprietary, so anything we could scan into and store in Laserfiche we could attach right to the record from the RMS. It turned the process of accessing records and documentation into a one-stop shop.”

Interoperability with Laserfiche was key when Beahen worked with LETG to set up the RMS, which Beahen describes as “friendly with Laserfiche,” in a way that media attachments from Laserfiche and police records are simultaneously accessed from a combined repository. “What we were really impressed by is how easy it was to integrate Laserfiche into our Web-based RMS. This kind of interoperability was really important to us because it was simply a matter of knowing how things are stored in one system and how it’s stored in the other and being able to build that bridge between them in a matter of days,” he says. **“This is the kind of thing that you hear stories about seven engineers working on and two months and \$85,000 later, it still isn’t working right. Our integration was done in less than a week.”**



An Elk River PD officer accessing Laserfiche from his squad car

These days, Beahen says, “Everything that we scanned goes into our browser-based RMS system. Officers have a wireless card in their squad car so the computer automatically updates to the central repository. **Photos, maps, reports, names – everything is accessible from our squad cars.**”

With only the fuzziest of details to search the database, officers responding to a scene can instantly access a criminal’s history and an incident’s full details. “This keeps officers safe all the time, because we have specific and related information available to police in the field instantly,” Beahen says.

Besides resolving the organizational issues associated with the old paper-based filing system, Beahen says the department has seen significant procedural improvements as well. For starters, all content is scanned into Laserfiche using Quick Fields advanced capture. “The time required to fill out paper forms used to be enormous, now it’s just, boom, drop it in the scanner, predetermined templates and voilà!”

Tickets and case paperwork are filed immediately in Laserfiche, which prevents the risk of evidence tampering. “We can cross-reference with other resources prior to disturbing crime scenes,” he says. **“That means greater coordination and access to evidence, so we’re solving crimes faster.”**

There is also the freedom and necessity of being able to collaborate with other police departments and cities, state agencies, courts, FBI, the Department of Human Services and other county authorities. Beahen cites an example of how effective this information sharing can be. "A missing person's body washed up about 50 miles down the Mississippi River from us. Because of Laserfiche we were able to quickly provide identifying information to local authorities, identify the victim, and within hours, we were able to notify the family."

As the Elk River Police Department's use of Laserfiche shows, you don't have to be the biggest department to realize real and valuable benefits from using Laserfiche; you just have to have some vision. In fact, [the ERPD's use of technology was recognized with a 2008 award for Excellence in Information Technology from the International Association of Chiefs of Police](#)— alongside some of the biggest, most advanced police agencies in the world.

Beahen is encouraged by the fact that a lot of skepticism about digital information has been put to rest by the U.S. Supreme Court. "Hesitance on electronic records and processing is not really a big deal anymore, but some people realize this sooner than others," he says.

And his advice for other law enforcement agencies facing the challenges he was? **"Have patience, a plan and a budget. Get past your fear of courts not liking electronic documents, put the old ways in the file cabinet you'll be getting rid of, and make the quantum leap."**