Technology as a Vital Component to Criminal Investigations

An interview with Melanie Talia, CEO, New Orleans Police and Justice Foundation, Dr. Michael Geerken, and Lt. Paul Noel, New Orleans Police Department

Poor, inadequate case filing systems create high rates of errors, room for lost data, and make it challenging or impossible to cross-reference similar cases or suspects. Law enforcement agencies need to embrace technology and software to manage and conduct criminal investigations in a more effective and efficient manner.

Column:

What is and what are the goals of The New Orleans Police and Justice Foundation (NOPJF)?

Melanie Talia:

The New Orleans Police and Justice Foundation is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting the people and processes of the criminal justice system in New Orleans, Louisiana. Since Hurricane Katrina, three goals have defined the NOPJF’s strategic vision of restoring faith in the Orleans Parish Justice System: retain and restore essential human capital, rebuild and restore critical infrastructure, and improve operational effectiveness and efficiency.

Column:

What operational challenges were you trying to solve when looking for a criminal case management system?

Lt. Noel:

One of the most pressing operational challenges was inconsistent, standalone databases and non-standardization. I served as a detective lieutenant in two separate police districts. Nobody could look at the data that I had in my system. We wanted one system that could be linked to other districts with security measures and audit capabilities.
Melanie Talia:

Without a central location for an officer in one district to know what an officer in another district is doing, an officer might come in for a report on an armed robbery in District 1 not knowing that District 8 was also working an armed robbery involving the same perpetrator. And when we would ultimately make these connections, you’d see that evidence from the robbery in District 1 happened to be on the person who got arrested in District 8.

Dr. Geerken:

Another challenge was getting police reports from various departments to the District Attorney’s (DA’s) office. We wanted an electronic system that would be able to shake hands with the DA’s screening case management system. So not only the submission of the reports, but the response to the DA’s request for further information, the report to be resubmitted, asking for a missing photo or a crime lab report. This is what we call a further information request form. You can actually develop statistics for individual officers saying what percentage of these officer’s reports did the DA have to ask for more information and what percentage did the DA have to refuse all charges for lack of information. In cases when we see an officer who has a high percentage of fully processed cases versus another officer whose cases get dropped half the time, we know that something is wrong there and can fix the problem.

Column:

How does your goal to improve operational effectiveness and efficiency align with the new case management system for the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD)?

Dr. Geerken:

Prior to Katrina, the NOPD didn’t have a single case management system. Every district and division had its own kind of homegrown case management system – in some cases a spreadsheet, in other cases a database, some departments even had their own systems. This is really when the NOPD recognized that we needed one case management system that everybody would use.

Lt. Noel:

I was looking at things from the supervision standpoint, from the individual detective, and from the historical value. To give you an example, the district investigative unit will have a lieutenant supervise two to three sergeants, each with six detectives that are working on four cases at a time and others working on twelve. The system really gives the supervisor the ability to go in and see what each detective is doing on each case. He’s going to have the ability to track, assign and reassign cases if someone’s case load has changed. Identifying links between cases is very important because if you have four to five cases that are all linked or might have the same perpetrators, you ideally want those cases to be under the same detectives.

From a detective’s standpoint, it's really going to help him pull up all sorts of information on his victim, on his perpetrator, and on his witnesses. He will also have the ability to link cases and add information that may be linked to another district's cases. All that information will be found in the system.

The final thing that is going to help us is the historical value of having this data over time. It can benefit us by tracking stolen property and verbiage the perpetrator uses. Say we have a guy that uses a unique verb or particular phrase when he commits a crime. In five years when he gets out and repeats the act, the case information is still going to be in the system. That is going to save us a lot of time.

Column:

Could you provide an example of the police report process to the DA’s office?

Melanie Talia:

Every day you might have 12 officers, each with 30 reports, or you might have four officers with only two reports. The assistant DA’s would read every report. If a report was complete, they would hand the officer a receipt; and if it was not, they would hand the officer a temporary receipt documenting what’s wrong, give them back the original report and send them away. It was called lap time for us. Moving reports back and forth to get all the complementary information would take up to 30 – 60 days or more.
Column:

What do you anticipate will be the biggest short-term and long-term benefits of the new system? What improvements have you already noticed?

Lt. Noel:

The biggest short-term problem we wanted to solve was moving everybody to one system. We recognized the benefits as soon as the system was up and running. Before everyone was using an in-house system and using their own forms and documents. We were all over the map. Now, everyone is on the same system and forms are standardized.

For the long term, the data we’re collecting right now is going to help us clear cases a year from now. A major improvement we’ve noticed already is that the system links to our FIC database and to other outside databases that we pull information from. We’ve never had that before. We’ve also seen the benefits of our arrest case module that helps track arrest cases.

Column: What were you looking for in a vendor?

Dr. Geerken:

One of our criteria was that the system had to be an existent off-the-shelf system and that vendor would be willing to make any improvements or configurations. We also wanted a system that had been in use someplace else, had gotten good reviews, and had all the features that aligned with what we needed. We also needed a web-based system, which used graphic interfaces to make it as easy as possible to learn to use. We were also looking for a vendor that would be able to manage the project with all the different elements that were involved and all the personnel involved.

Melanie Talia:

One of the advantages to the approach that we’ve taken was that we have multiple stakeholders in the decision making process, so we needed to find a vendor that every aspect could agree upon. And we think that we found that this approach is much more effective than the previous, where agencies would go out on their own and would buy what they wanted for themselves without seeing if that system would really be useful to other agencies involved in our criminal justice system.

Column:

What advice would you have for other agencies looking for a case management system?

Dr. Geerken:

First look carefully at what is available and what others are using. In my experience, people don’t know what they really want until they know what they can have. In this project, we found that we had left things out of the RFP because we weren’t interested in specific features. When we started working with Column on the project, we saw new possibilities, which led us to ask for additional enhancements later on. So don’t just restrict yourself to what you want, go out and see what’s out there because you will find a lot of things that can be really useful.

Lt. Noel:

If I can give any advice to anyone working on a project like this, it would be to definitely do your homework. Talk to other agencies. If you have a few vendors in mind, bring them in once or twice for a presentation and ask some questions. Checking references is big. The other thing that worked great with Column, that I was concerned about with some other vendors, was that Column really had a large support staff to help out with the development of the project. If a company doesn’t have enough support or people behind the scenes to get the job done, you could have some big problems.

If I could add this: the customization aspect that Column did was absolutely phenomenal. The product that we started out with, the product we have now, and the product we hopefully have a few months from now when the development is done is drastically different from the product we started with. Column really customized this to fit the needs of the NOPD, which are different than a lot of other departments. Column completely tailored this product towards us.
Column:

Anything to add?

Dr. Geerken: I think that people often underestimate the importance of project management in implementations, especially in large police departments there are a lot of people with different agendas and ideas and so forth. I’ve been very impressed with Column’s ability to move things along, identify people’s roles and identify time lines — it’s the best I’ve seen frankly. And it’s hard to sell that because people don’t think about that. They look at the product, the thing there, and often they get caught and want to load up and go away, they don’t understand the importance of the project management and implementation.

It’s not just a matter of having a good project methodology; you’ve got to have the right people doing it. I have to say that the Column team picks up things very quickly. They have a grasp of the different names and terminology. It takes very bright people to pick that up quickly.