

TECHNOLOGY: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Looking back over the past years, we have seen a significant change in the acceptance and use of technology in corrections. Think back for a few moments to 1988. Can you recall where you were and how technology has changed since then? Ten years ago, I was working as state director of probation and parole in New Mexico. We had no electronic monitoring capability, no on-site drug use detection kits, no computers, no beepers, no portable phones. Our offender reporting system, budget and planning system, caseload reports and pre-sentence reports all were done by hand without the aid of automation. Yet at the same time, the number of offenders under our supervision was increasing; offenders were becoming more dangerous; staff morale was suffering; training was scarce; and the need to enhance public safety was becoming a greater issue in the political arena.

I quickly realized that technology can be used as a significant tool to enhance the way in which we do business. Most staff and administrators were resistant to change and skeptical at best when it came to evaluating and implementing new technologies. We broke through that resistance and, in one year, implemented the use of electronic monitoring and established test sites for developing products such as drive-by technology for electronic monitoring and on-site drug testing.

We also introduced to our offices the personal computer (PC), which enhanced the way we did business in everything from offender tracking and record-keeping to budgeting and accounting. Additionally, we enhanced staff training with the establishment of specified training for probation and parole supervisors and staff. Perhaps one of the most significant benefits during that year was the willingness of many staff to focus their vision "further down the tracks."

Each of us experienced this technological progress a little differently. Can you remember the first time you sat in front of the computer terminal? How comfortable were you with learning DOS? Do you remember the first time you were presented with a vendor presentation on a technology that you knew nothing about? What was your comfort level then? Do you remember the first time your agency purchased some technology for a specific purpose, only to have it not fulfill that function after sinking many dollars into it?

I recall a perimeter security system we purchased from a vendor. We became so frustrated, we simply turned off the system and used more razor ribbon in its place. That instance was a painful and costly mistake for us, but it motivated us to better evaluate and test technologies and share both good and bad experiences with others. At the time, we had no formalized way to evaluate technology or compare similar products, and had little, if any, standards or testing criteria.

I can recall that a part of our decision-making process when purchasing a particular electronic monitoring system consisted of personally putting the device (and my own body) through a rigorous weekend at the YMCA, playing basketball, swimming and running, just to see how rugged it was.

When I compare how we in corrections used to evaluate technology 10 years ago with the manner in which we do it today, I see that we have made significant progress. A decade ago, the ACA convention hall was filled with products and services that had few technical components. I used to be able to spend one afternoon in the exhibit hall and get completely filled in on all the new technological advances.

Now, however, I have to spend every available moment in the exhibit hall throughout the week and I still cannot see all the technology.

ACA now dedicates not just a workshop, but an entire track on technology and has done so for the past several years. In addition, ACA sponsors additional technology workshops on topics such as the Internet and security systems.

Recently, I had the opportunity to be part of a weekend-long technology training exercise that only a few years ago would have been impossible. In April, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and its Office of Law Enforcement Technology Commercialization hosted a multistate Mock Prison Riot event in Moundsville,

W.Va. More than 35 correctional agencies from across the nation participated and/or observed a simulated weekend mock riot that highlighted the use of numerous technologies, which either are newly available or being developed and tested. More than 60 different technologies were available to be used or demonstrated by corrections practitioners. The event also enabled several states -- including Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia, as well as the Federal Bureau of Prisons -- to conduct realistic training for their hostage negotiation and response teams. The overwhelming participation in an event such as this demonstrates how far the corrections field has come in embracing new technologies.

In corrections, we cannot afford to trust technology that critically fails, especially in light of public or personal safety issues. Yet, with the value that technology can and does provide, we cannot afford to resist it. No, technology is not the cure-all for all our woes. But it can be a valuable tool in improving efficiency and security, and in providing cost and time savings. Technology also will continue to play an important part in how we do business. The key is to maximize its use by making sound decisions and applying the right technology to the proper situation.

~~~~~

By Kevin M. Jackson

Kevin M. Jackson is a senior technology program manager for the U.S. Department of Justice, and head of ACA's Technology Committee.

Copyright of Corrections Today is the property of American Correctional Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.