

Centralised security pays dividends at Britannia

Many companies have large numbers of retail branches across a region or even countrywide. The usual way to meet the security challenge is to install cameras and a recorder at each branch, and give responsibility for monitoring security and reacting to threats to the branch manager.

With 180 branches across the country and the above average level of security threat that building societies attract, the security problem faced by the Britannia Building Society (Britannia) is not unusual. But their security solution certainly is.



John Taylor, Fraud Risk and Security Manager at Britannia, takes up the story: “The standard approach of having each outlet together with an external alarm monitoring station largely responsible for managing security incidents has a number of problems. First, no one on the site is a security professional. Second, it is too expensive to have real-time monitoring and control of the system at each site, so the benefits are reduced to a degree of deterrence, and relying on the recordings after an incident. Third, when an event does happen, off-site staff are far better at managing the event than anyone on site who is understandably stressed. Fourth, alarm receiving stations do not have enough information to empower their staff to take decisions other than call the police or key holder.

“Finally, from the cost point of view, like many sites we had a problem of false alarms and call-outs. With a monitored system it is simple to identify that there is no threat, to reset the system, and save on a call-out from the local security and engineering support companies, and in some cases the police. This is not just a cost issue – the new alarm verification standards place requirements on companies to monitor more actively.”

This line of thinking led Britannia to consider a solution based on a centralised security operation run from their headquarters in Leek, Staffordshire. The hub is a control room that is linked to the CCTV system, cameras and digital video recorder



(DVR) installed in every branch in the country. The control room is manned 24 hours a day by security professionals, with at least two staff on duty at any time. In the event of an incident the staff on duty are responsible for the management of the incident remotely.

The system works on an exception basis. Most of the time there is no display of the video feed of a specific branch in the control room. However, the control room becomes directly connected to a specific branch under three circumstances. First, it can be triggered automatically by an event identified by the branch alarm system – door contacts, motion sensors, safe limpets, or perimeter alarms, for example. Second, staff at the branch can initiate the connection, for example through a panic button. Third, staff at the central control room can open it. Under the first two conditions an alarm rings in the control room to identify that an incident is being displayed on the control room monitors.

Once the link is established, the control room staff have full control over all the cameras within the branch. If required they can also access the DVR. Being security professionals they know what to do in the event of an incident, in terms of the capture of evidential images, and what actions they can take to ensure that the incident is managed with the least possible risk to staff and the public. At the same time, the control room staff can contact the police, keep them informed of exactly what is happening on the site, and call them out as required.

The equipment that runs the system in each branch is a mixture of legacy cameras and new digital devices and software. The pre-existing branch systems comprising cameras plus a multiplexer and VCR were upgraded in a six-month roll-out in 2003 with a Dallmeier DLS-6S1 12 channel DVR as the recording medium, supplied by Norbain. The Dallmeier DVR was chosen because of its communications capabilities, and its quality of playback image.

The control room and its equipment is all new, although the communications between the branches and the control room use the existing corporate WAN for the transmission of images. The software – Dallmeier’s PView remote viewing package, PGuard alarm management, and the Smart GUI interface - runs on a PC with another PC in hot standby, with images displayed through four monitors. The GUI allows the central staff to control each DVR and camera as if they were in the branch, as well as being able to download images from the branch DVR and burn a CD for police and other use as required.

James Walker, MD of Dallmeier UK, explained the aspects of the Dallmeier system that were key to the solution. "The success of a configuration such as this depends heavily on the speed at which images transmit from branches to the centre, and of course their quality. Britannia’s corporate WAN is a mix of 128kbps ISDN and 256kbps ADSL connection. We were able to demonstrate to the client’s complete satisfaction that we

could use the full bandwidth of both types of connection, thereby meeting the speed and quality requirement that was central to the system. The installation is an excellent showcase for the communications capabilities of our hardware and software products".



John Taylor is very happy with the way it is working. "We could see the upside of centralisation, but we were warned at the time of a downside too, which centred around the issue of calling in local resource, such as the police, from hundreds of miles away. We have not found this to be the case, and every police force we have worked with has been very responsive, in part because they recognise our professionalism in managing security incidents."

John is equally content that centralisation brings tangible benefits. "The benefits come in two areas. First, we now handle incidents better, improving safety and security for staff and public. Second, there are cost savings, mostly related to false calls. 400 call outs under the old system has been reduced to 12 under the new system for a comparable time period. Over a 6 month period we had no false alarms whatsoever. We now have far better control of our security costs."

The installation of the system was handled by Renard Systems of Widnes. Joint Managing Director Dave Butterfield commented; "With a tight roll-out like this, it is vital that the right equipment arrives on the right site on the right day, and that is not always easy for the distributor. However, Norbain achieved exactly that, and were highly supportive throughout the planning and implementation of the project, including advice as to which equipment to select. Together we put together a system that I believe is a model for branch security for many organisations in the future."