

21st Century Courts

By: Clint Matthews

In this era of technology and convenience, important institutions are not always elevated to the priority they should be. When it comes to technology upgrades, one can travel to many countries and be stunned by how outdated court systems are, from paper files and stenography to compact tape systems of the 70's. Justice, being one of the core pillars of society, should always be granted the best tools to provide efficient, fair and encompassing justice for all. Today I want to outline what is possible in a court of the 21st century, given the tools it so richly deserves.

Case inception

The pen, as antiquated as it is, is the beginning of all cases to move through the system, but it does not have to be so. Officers can use audio or audio video recording devices to prepare initial reports and interview the parties involved. Photos and recordings, on and of the scene, are taken as required; once at the police station, they are then uploaded to the Case Management System, integrated into the newly registered case file. All subsequent interviews, notes and evidence, whether audio, audio video or written reports and photos, will be scanned and uploaded and attached to the case, building on the case file, both chronologically and in substance. This lowers the chance for lost bits of evidence, or re-written accounts of events based on failing memories or personal prioritization according to opinion of importance. Does this require hugely specialized equipment? Not really. Just about every police officer on the planet has a cell phone; yes, a cell phone can do this task easily with the clarity and resolution of the most specialized equipment in the market today.

Defense and Prosecution

Now that we have our case in the system, through portal access the accused may have access to the entire case substance for his defense council to scrutinize and work on his defense, should the case move to the courts. This service, streamlined by the fact that the accused is automatically issued a unique case key when the case is registered, allowing his council to access this case through a web portal without tedious requests for copies or transcripts and other access to evidence or statements clogging up the system and taking many man hours to provide, is all available as it is added to the case, unedited and providing fast and fair access to justice.

This same access and more on the administration side of the case is provided to the prosecution and staff as needed

and defined. The prosecutor's office then has the ability to make the most informed and accurate decision in as short time as possible to decide the required course for the case. Should the case be put forward for trial, a court date would be assigned and the case moves to the next step in the system, while providing uninterrupted access to both defense and prosecution teams at all times.

The Courts

Once the case is put forward for court proceedings, the system will schedule the case to the relevant court clerk and then populate the assigned court room's fully integrated Digital Court Recording System schedule with the case details and scheduled court date. These details include names of all participants in the case such as, the judge, prosecutor, defendant and any of the defense council and witnesses who might be identified at this time.

Once the court date arrives, the clerk or operator of the Digital Court Recording system would call up the scheduled cases for the date and then select the case to be heard and start the systems recording. These systems are customized according to the type of court and the language of the country, as well as the court system it is in. After all, there are many variances in court systems around the world. The system allows the clerk or operator, through a pre-programmed drop down list, follow and annotate the proceedings, thereby creating an index for later efficient use of the recordings as required. Any other authorized party like the judge can make notes, either public or private, for their own deliberations later during the trial.

Evidence presented in the court will be scanned or captured into the case file by the integrated Digital Court Recording system through evidence collection components of the system; all being available to the defense and prosecution through the portal access. The Digital Court Recording System also provides for functions like interpreters, protected or sensitive anonymous witnesses and external viewing facilities like media rooms providing live

feeds of the proceedings, should the court not want or be able to accommodate crowds in it during the case.

When a sitting of the court ends, the Case Media Manager system, an integrated part of both the Case Management System and Digital Court Recording system automatically uploads the case recording and any related evidence captured for the sitting and adds it to the case file. These recordings and evidence are also synchronized to central archives and redundant sites, as is the whole system for integrity and availability. Should a case be moved to another court room within the same court house or even across the country, the scheduled court date for that case will trigger the synchronization of that case's recording files through the Case Media Manager system to the new court room. Thus, the continuance is uninterrupted and the existing recording and evidence would be available, should it be needed for playback or presentation during cross examination for reference.

Post Court

Once a case is completed, the Digital Court Recording system along with the Case Media Manager provide all the gathered evidence, court sittings, notes and add them to the case file on the Case Management System for the next step in the life of that case, whether it be just as an archive of the closed case or the reference used by an appellate court in subsequent appeal attempts, or even for parole board hearings later on, for a case that has resulted in sentencing. Suffice is to say that the case and all its content will be stored safely and be accessible at any time for unprecedented transparency in justice.

Advantages of Technology

The obvious advantages of these technologies are efficiency, expediency and transparency; however, there are advantages further reaching the administration and management of the courts.

These technologies employed in the manner set out above provide for extensive reporting and evaluation in the courts for the management function. Some examples of such reports are:

Court sitting hours reports - per court or per participant

Case duration reports – by case type or case location

Case reports – first appearance to case plea or case plea to finalization.

These and many other reporting options give the modern court administrator the ability to know the operation, bottlenecks and improve functions. Never before have our courts been so overutilized and needed every advantage to deliver on their mission than today.

Conclusion

While many courts have the advantages of utilizing more modern systems to provide the functions they are tasked with, let us not forget still many court systems have not had the opportunity to embrace the technologies available to us today. These technologies are robust and have the capability to be deployed in diverse conditions, for instance, mobile stand-alone systems are utilized in remote parts of Southern Africa, then transported to connected sites and synchronized with the national system. It would surprise many that one of, if not the largest interconnected court systems globally, is in Southern Africa boasting 2300 fixed connected courts and over 140 mobile court systems. Systems like these are capable and being used in villages without power or internet connectivity. Tenacity and ingenuity is the staple of progress, but progress depends on awareness of options.

Efficiency in Justice, Equality for all

Bio: Clint Matthews started out in law enforcement as a police officer with a five year tour of duty, then moved into information technology and high tech security solutions for the next thirteen years. Following an introduction to digital court recording in 2009, he has focused on courtroom technologies for the last 9 years specializing in court administration technologies and solutions, having provided solutions for over 2500 court rooms across several countries to date.