



Police

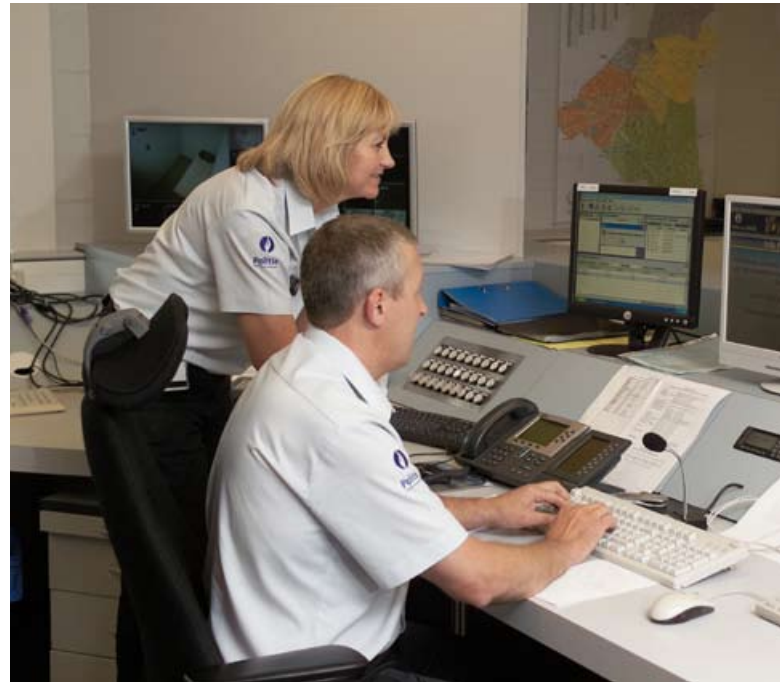
Dozens of “unsolved cases” solved through publication of APBs on PCs and plasma screens

The GAOZ Police Service is responsible for fighting crime, maintaining public safety and order over an area encompassing the Belgian city of Genk and the neighboring municipalities As, Opglabbeek and Zutendaal. The total population of the district is 80,000.

As one of the first police forces in Belgium, the GAOZ Police Service communicates with its 228 employees in a proactive and effective manner – via large plasma screens on the walls and pop up and screensaver messages on all PCs. A solution that encompassed an unexpected bonus: more than a dozen cases a year are solved thanks to the system. Especially when teams are stuck with a case, publishing an APB on all those screens often helps to generate new leads. “Information lead policing is a hot discussion topic amongst police services. This project clearly demonstrates the benefits of this new approach,” says Frank Mulleners, chief constable of the GAOZ Police Service.

“A system with a huge added value”

The police service initially purchased the technology, developed by software provider Netpresenter, to streamline its internal communication. “Police services are very information intensive organizations. Before the introduction of this system, officers were informed via e-mail and over 400 printed orders a year. Thanks to Netpresenter, we now have a far less bureaucratic information stream. The number of e-mails has been minimized and the number of printed orders has been reduced to less than 50 a year,” continues Mulleners. “The system most surely did what we originally implemented it for. The employees are much better informed. That it would also be a great tool in fighting crime, was something we had not really expected, but that of course adds tremendous value to the system. Over a dozen cases solved in the past year, is a fact that speaks for itself.”



Officers in control room

All workstation in the region connected

The software now runs on all 110 work stations of the police service that are connected to the nationwide local police information system in Belgium (ISLP). This does not only include the PCs at the Genk headquarters, but also the workstations at the police posts in As, Opglabbeek and Zutendaal, the Prevention Service and the Justitia Antenna in Genk. These offices are linked with the head offices through a direct glass fiber connection. Apart from this, there is a large plasma screen in the canteen in the headquarters on which the same information is broadcasted. Because sometimes also visitors pass through the canteen, only information that the public is allowed to see is broadcasted here. For example, no pictures of suspects, missing vehicles etc, are shown on this screen.



Officer with Plasma Screen

The GAOZ Police Service publishes all kinds of internal news on the PC and plasma screens – everything from new legislation to the contact details of the magistrate on guard and introductions to new employees. And now also APBs. “This way of using the system started when a team had a case in which there were no more leads to follow. The team decided to ask the colleagues for help, using Netpresenter. As this turned out to be a huge success, the solution was used for this purpose more and more.”

“The system must act as a signpost”

All messages on the system have a fixed layout, are brief, to the point and include a picture (when possible). There are various backgrounds, for example to distinguish messages from the traffic police from other messages. “We aim to publish only the headlines of the news on Netpresenter:

it should act as a signpost. Officers should know there is a new law and where they can find more information on it. The same goes for APBs really. Because a picture can be published with the message, communication via Netpresenter is very efficient,” explains Mulleners. “We are now looking at the possibility to add video images, for example from security cameras. Sometimes moving images can relay a message even better than pictures.”

Emergency alerts and information on mobile phones

The system also includes an emergency alert component. When there is a (pending) emergency, a highly visible emergency alert message can be published on all screens within seconds. Mullener: “This can be used with urgent APBs, but also when one of the buildings must be evacuated. Luckily, we have never had to use this option, but the fact that it is there, is reassuring.”

Furthermore, the police service is considering expanding the system to mobile phones next year. When going onto the streets, officers will be equipped with a police-owned mobile phone on which they can view pictures of suspects as well as internal news. Information on a robbery or kidnapping, will immediately be published on the screens of all phones, including details such as location. Currently, the police service is investigating the juridical consequences as well as benefits versus costs, in order to make a well-informed decision on the expansion of the system to mobile phones.

“A simple principle, but a highly effective one”

The Belgian success story is already widely imitated inside and outside the Belgian borders. Dutch Regional Police Service Groningen was able to make seven extra arrests within a few months of trialling a similar system. And the Canadian Toronto Police Service has been using the software successfully as a tool to help find missing children for several years now. “The more people you can reach with a message, the more people can help you solve the case. A simple principle, but a highly effective one,” concludes Mulleners.