CLOUD

RETHINKING THE CONTROL ROOM

IDEAS ABOUT THE PHYSICAL CONTROL ROOM ARE EVOLVING FAST

The coronavirus pandemic has seen virtually every organisation embed remote and distributed working into their operations. With the cloud enabling emergency services staff to access systems and resources from any location, is it time to rethink decades-old ideas about the role of the centralised physical control room?

The last half century has seen steady trend toward centralisation and consolidation of control room operations by emergency services providers. In the wake of last year's events, however, the need for socially distanced operations has sparked agencies to re-think their current control room strategies.

Even five years ago, taking mission-critical communication workflows outside the confines of a physical control room would have been technically unfeasible for emergency services and public safety operators. Today, however, blue and amber light services are embracing the benefits of hosting their mission-critical control room applications in the cloud rather than on-premise, allowing personnel to access resources from another location — whether it's a backup site or an ad hoc incident room in proximity to the scene of a major incident.

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During 2020 the need for social distancing and consequent implementation of remote working due to Covid-19 severely limited access to on-premise control rooms. The need to maintain service continuity in a changed world has accelerated many emergency services' plans to embrace more agile cloud-based solutions. Over the last year, for example, some UK forces have successfully relocated control room staff and systems for taking non-emergency 101 calls to employees' homes.

We're some way off seeing front-line emergency call handling shifted from the control room to the kitchen table. But today's technology is allowing organisations to reinvent operational practices to benefit staff and service end-users alike. Shifting control room operations to cloud-hosted solutions offers several appealing benefits. With 999 calls increasing by 11%

nationally over the last two years, staff are under increasingly intense pressure to manage a rising tide of inbound information from a growing range of multimedia sources — phone, radio, emails, SMS, web chat, social media, in-vehicle and body-worn video, CCTV and even sensors connected to the Internet of Things (IoT). This information overload means staff face the challenges of acting as a 'bridge' between numerous siloed systems from a widened range of data sources and communication channels. To boost workflow efficiency police forces are increasingly adopting cloud-based control room solutions, helping streamline telephone call handling and dispatch tasks to officers via the radio network.

Cloud based solutions score strongly on flexibility and agility, with the ability to scale and reassign resources rapidly to meet changing

operational requirements. Eliminating reliance on physical hardware makes it possible to establish a virtual control room whenever and wherever it's needed - in forward command vehicles, inside a football stadium, school or town hall or at the site of a major incident. A fully managed service in the cloud also lightens the burden on in-house IT teams, giving further opportunities to keep operational costs in check.

Software and applications hosted in the cloud can be continually updated, keeping emergency services users ahead of the curve by ensuring they always benefit from latest features, fixes and refinements. It's a big leap forward from the cost and operational constraints of on-premise solutions, where systems have to be taken offline or switched over to seldom-used backup systems for time-consuming patches and upgrades.

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