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ONE STOP CENTRE, 08/05/2009

How a UK utility is protecting its remote sites without giving its CCTV operators square eyes is shown to Mark Rowe.

The kitchen inside E.ON's UK security response centre has a view of lawns, a path and young trees. It reminded me of a visit to Boots' UK headquarters, at Nottingham. Both sites are on the edge of Midlands cities, and both sought to secure people and property, without feeling like a fortress. The other side of the door was the control room, where operators monitor alarms and CCTV at more than 100 sites.

George Moss, security response centre manager, said: "We've become a one-stop security centre for the whole of E.ON in the UK, and would like to expand this service to all our UK customers. The Immix system we're using enables us to monitor sites very effectively; we use the internet and broadband connections to link to our sites. We opened in October 2008 with 35 sites, and have quickly expanded to 100-plus.

Before that we carried out a project where we looked at various CCTV and alarm receiving platforms, Immix being included, and Sureview [the software manufacturers] were invited to demonstrate, to see if it fitted into the task that we wanted to carry out here. The problem we had at the time was that we had a lot of legacy equipment and we needed to link that in, rather than replace it all. Immix was able to offer us that. They offered us a platform that's easily connected to all types of systems out there in the market, DVRs, cameras, and alarm panels. And we were able to connect pretty quickly; they worked very well with our IS [information services] department, and quite smoothly; there were very few hiccups. It's very user-friendly; the operators find it very easy to use; basically it does what it says on the tin. What we asked for was a system that will enable us to receive an alarm; respond to an alarm immediately by clicking on a button that will connect us to a site; and the operator can then see what is going on and from that we can determine whether we can stand down, or we need to escalate the incident any further. It's working tremendously well."

Already other possible users have visited the room, at E.ON's offices on a business park on the outskirts of Coventry. What's striking inside the control room is how it's chosen not to view image after image of sites where not much if anything is happening, which would only give an operator square eyes. There are three large plasma screens; the centre one showing Sky News; the one on the right, footage from eight cameras, mostly showing perimeters. Operators sit on dark ergonomic chairs with what looks like lattice work on the backs; that's so the sitter doesn't get sweaty on what can after all be an eight or nine hour shift. It's calm and the only noise is the hum of the air-conditioning. Three large round clocks in a corner tell the time in New York, London and Berlin. The servers that store the digital footage aren't in the building, 'and that's a good thing,' George says, 'because you can see the speed of the system, where we are moving cameras in live time, even though some of these cameras are as far away as Cumbria. But we can still move them around as if we were looking out of the window.'

The CCTV comes in when there is an alarm; the control room operator reacts, has visual verification, as required for a police response. I asked about the reasons for the response centre (there's separate monitors and staff covering E.ON's domes and pan and tilt cameras at the business park site itself). As George said, in a gatehouse or CCTV monitoring centre, 'you're relying on operators to see something, basically; and nine times out of ten past experience has proved - and I have worked in the industry for 31 years - you can miss things very easily. You can be distracted; you can see something, but not really apply any urgency to what you are seeing.' As he added, such a response depends on the operator; some may see something and be suspicious, another operator will not. To repeat, as so many of the utility's sites are remote and unmanned, such as sub-stations; there's no point in looking on CCTV. Hence, E.ON decided an alarm receiving platform was a better option. The operator can pick up the detector activation, and see on CCTV if an engineer needs calling out, or what needs verifying. The response centre can also link with live sites, such as power stations. Besides security, safety is paramount for any utility. The response centre can monitor lone workers in the field, who for example might be checking a high-voltage site.

I asked about George's background. He was 20 years with British Telecom, in their security and investigations team. Even as a 21-year-old, he recalls, in the days before BT when it was the Post Office, colleagues told him that security was an old man's job; but George liked the versatility of it, for instance, investigating thefts of coins from telephone boxes if the collections did not tally. In 1994 he came out of security for about four years; then started working for a contract security provider at what was then Powergen in 1998 at the Coventry site. Starting as supervisor, he became security manager and became employed by E.ON on a permanent basis in June 2008.

As his business card says, he's part of Business Resilience Office (BRO), headed by Barrie Millett, previously at GE; who besides his day job, is also ASIS UK chairman.

George went through his responsibilities: management of the system (as if on cue, his mobile buzzed at this point); setting up sites and bringing them on-line; training operators; putting in processes and procedures; data protection; 'everything that goes on with the operation'. As George led me back to reception where I came in - passing the desks, and sofas in open meeting areas, and balconies of the upper floors - and went through the glass turnstiles, it struck me that here is, as George called it, the evolving use of electronic security. This is how nationwide organisations like utilities are getting the most out of their alarms and CCTV. Other likely devices are lone worker and vehicle tracking, and who knows what else? All it takes is software.

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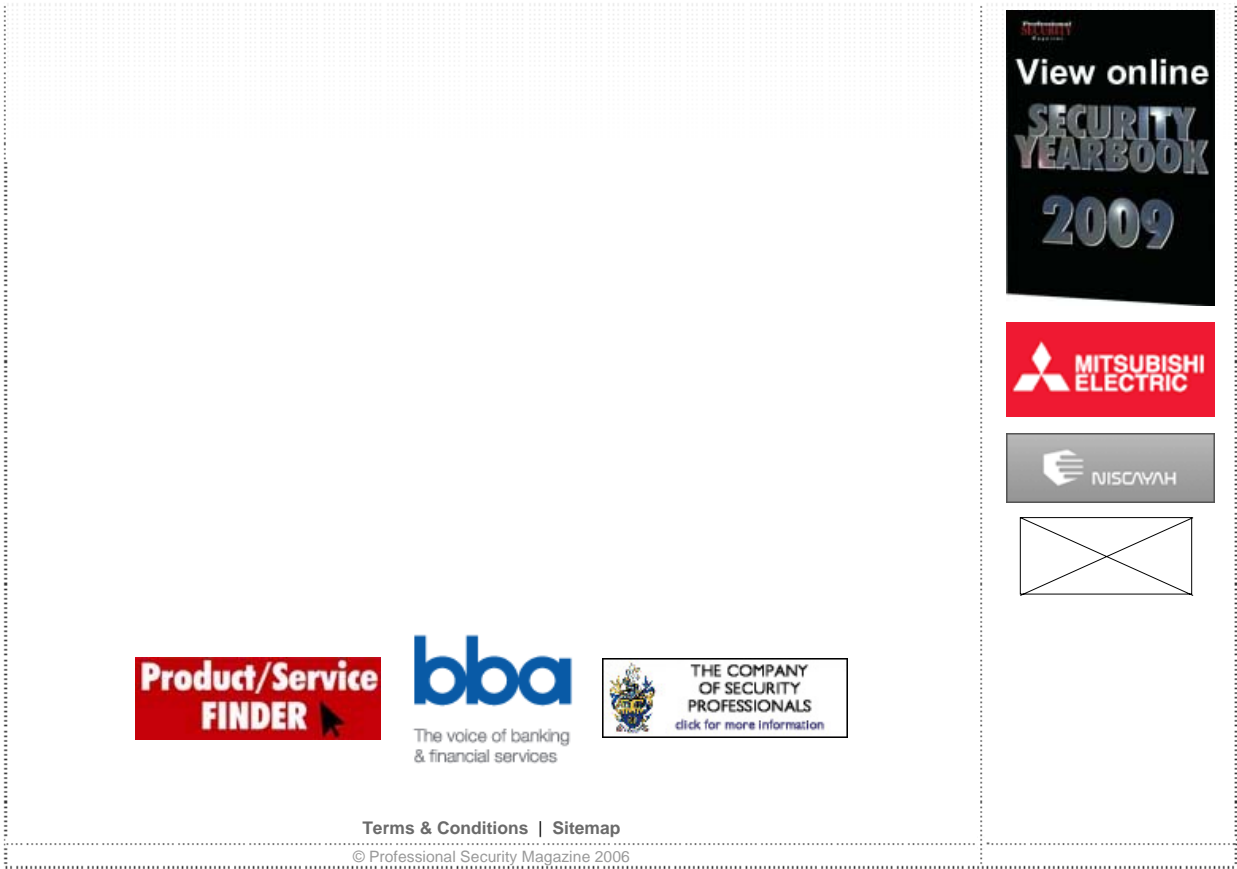
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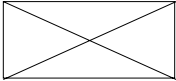
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