

From Log Books to Bar Codes: *The Technological Evolution of Evidence Management*

by
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We live in a world of unprecedented technology with capabilities such as PCR DNA testing, global positioning systems, and personal identification devices, to name a few. The list of scientific advances goes on and on. In the world of law enforcement, the unequaled forensic science we have today has proven to be our best investigative tool yet. It not only helps us solve current crimes, but is also a key element in solving cold cases that occurred decades ago.

Although technology is widely used to analyze evidence that plays a key role in criminal investigations, it is surprising to learn how many evidence rooms do not use advanced technology to efficiently manage their evidence inventory. A well-designed evidence management system that utilizes advanced bar code technology is the essential element in operating an efficient property and evidence unit.

The following case studies detail how agencies have utilized advanced technology in evidence management systems to increase the efficiency and integrity of their evidence unit.

San Francisco Crime Lab

One of the key functions surrounding the forensic service the crime lab provides to the City and County of San Francisco is the ability to manage and track the thousands of evidence submissions brought to them each year. Until January 2004, however, the San Francisco Crime Lab logged their evidence in by hand and used an old-fashioned hard bound log book to sign evidence in and out. The recent implementation of EvidenceOnQ™, an automated property and evidence management system from Seattle, WA-based FileOnQ, has changed the San Francisco Crime Lab from stone age to new age.

EvidenceOnQ, with accompanying Zebra bar code label printers, was first installed in the narcotics section of the crime lab. With over 14,000 cases submitted to that unit each year, the time spent physically entering, locating, and transferring cases by hand was staggering. The narcotics division is unique from other sections of the crime lab in that it is the only one that receives evidence directly from the investigating officer, therefore is responsible for creating the chain of custody of each narcotic submission.

“The chain of custody feature in the EvidenceOnQ system has been the most beneficial aspect of the system for me,” says Lois Woodworth, a criminalist assigned to test narcotics. “I used to enter all the information in by hand and the chain of custody was all tracked on paper. That procedure was very laborious when it came time to assemble the documentation for court.”

With EvidenceOnQ, the chain of custody is now electronically documented every time the evidence changes location. It’s done by a simple scan of a bar code in just a fraction of the time it took to log it by hand, and the possibility of human error is drastically reduced. Because the chain of custody report is recorded electronically and is unalterable, it becomes less likely to be challenged in court.

Lois praised the fast and easy installation of the system. “One of the things that impressed me the most about EvidenceOnQ was that it was immediately functional. It was up and running the same day it was installed and I could start using it instantly. The Zebra printers produced excellent, high quality bar code labels for easy scanning.”

Lois further explains her positive experience in implementing EvidenceOnQ. “The company’s technicians were great to work with and customized our system to meet our specific needs and requirements. Another bonus was their design of an additional database for us to maintain our chemical inventory. We have thousands of chemicals to track as well, and the technicians at FileOnQ customized a database for us to efficiently manage those chemicals. We can easily switch over from our evidence database to our chemical database.”

Sheila Jackson, one of two Property Control Officers at the San Francisco Crime Lab, has also seen the benefits of having an efficient evidence management system. “I enter about 300 new cases a week. I love having a system that was customized to our needs and is set up to follow our workflow. The cloning feature allows me to enter multiple items of evidence from the same case very quickly without having to re-enter the same information over and over. The system also helps me locate evidence much faster and easier. I no longer have to search by hand.”

Sheila has found the feature of EvidenceOnQ that helps her most is the retention system. “I just run a report of all the evidence that is due for destruction, and I have a list in just a matter of seconds. I used to physically review each item of evidence to see what was ready to be destroyed. Then after the destruction, I would have to go through the log books and physically mark each item as having been destroyed. Now the whole process is fully automated.”

Since the implementation of the EvidenceOnQ system, Sheila can change the status of those narcotics that have been destroyed with one simple command. Hundreds of items

can now be transferred in a matter of seconds where it used to take hours to document these items manually.

In just a few months, the San Francisco Crime Lab has already seen the benefits of an automated evidence management system. Based on this success, other divisions of the crime lab are also moving toward implementing EvidenceOnQ to manage their evidence.

The narcotics unit is also preparing for a change in procedure in the near future. Narcotics evidence used to come to the crime lab directly from the investigating officer. After the evidence was analyzed, it would be stored at the crime lab until destruction. The new procedure now requires the evidence to be transferred to the general evidence inventory at the San Francisco Police Department.

Marti Blake, a San Francisco Crime Lab Manager, comments on the magnitude of this change. “The EvidenceOnQ system will be vital in the success of this procedural change as well as assist us in preparing for accreditation.” She estimates 30 to 50 items per day will be transferred to the San Francisco Police Department after forensic testing. “The ability to quickly scan the bar codes, change the location, and have an instant, unalterable chain of custody is the key. The workload involved in this procedural change would have been staggering if we didn’t have this system.”

The adoption of bar code-based evidence management technology is rapidly becoming an asset to the San Francisco Crime Lab. After full implementation in all aspects of the lab, the new system will save time on laborious day-to-day procedures, provide a solid chain of custody, and increase the overall efficiency of their agency.

Josephine County, Oregon

When Deputy Kari Babson started working in the evidence unit at Josephine County, Oregon, there was no computerization at all. She implemented an interim tracking system on Excel, but having to manage over 6,000 new evidence submissions each year, she quickly determined it was vital to obtain a proficient evidence management system to properly manage their evidence inventory.

Deputy Babson explains, “After researching five different systems, I chose EvidenceOnQ because I could modify just about everything to meet our department’s needs. From the very beginning I was impressed with the people I dealt with and their thorough knowledge of property and evidence management.”

Kari’s ability to manage the evidence unit by herself is largely due to the efficiency of her evidence management system. “I now have the ability to quickly provide information to detectives and other departments rather than spending valuable time in laborious searches.”

Kari goes on to explain how her daily duties are now streamlined. “My evidence room has become mostly paperless. I just scan a barcode now instead of hand writing everything. The retention reports have been the most beneficial to me. I can clear evidence in a timely manner and don’t have the space problems I used to have.”

Implementing technology into their evidence room has been a very positive experience for Josephine County. Kari has openly shared her endorsement of EvidenceOnQ with other Oregon agencies in search of advanced technology to manage their evidence units as well.

The technological advances of evidence management have proven to enhance a growing number of property and evidence rooms that span all corners of the nation. From the East Coast agencies of Metropolitan D.C. and Plantation Police in Florida to the West Coast's Burbank, California and Seattle, Washington Police Departments, the technology provided by EvidenceOnQ has been a tremendous asset to the effective management of property and evidence.

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Shannon Turner has worked in the criminal justice system for 23 years, most recently as an evidence technician for the Pasco Police Department in Washington State. She has worked over 130 crime scenes in the past six years and has also provided evidence management training for several police agencies. Information regarding the EvidenceOnQ™ evidence management system can be found at www.evidenceonq.com or by calling 1-800-603-6802.

Visual #1: (Photo from Josephine County, Oregon Sheriff's Office)

Caption: Deputy Kari Babson of the Josephine County (Oregon) Sheriff's Department scans a bar code label generated by a Zebra on-demand printer. Using the EvidenceOnQ automated system, the agency's virtually paperless office processes over 6,000 new evidence submissions each year.