MOBILE POLICE TECHNOLOGY

Simon Hall *investigates how the police use technology to bridge the generational divide on the frontline*

After nearly a decade of austerity, UK police forces will soon be enjoying an influx of 20,000 new officers over the next three years. But how will they cope with so many new recruits in such a short time? Albeit highly welcome, and many would say long overdue, any recruitment drive after such a long freeze would be a challenge for any organisation to adapt to. But policing isn't just any organisation. Crime affects everyone, whether directly or indirectly, so how quickly and effectively these officers can integrate into their respective forces is important. The technology used by officers makes a big difference to this.

These new officers will not be entering the same environment that their counterparts were enjoying prior to austerity. For example, many police stations have been sold off or mothballed, so where will these new officers operate from? Are there even enough lockers for them to store their kit?

FRONTLINE POLICE IT MUST BE AS INTUITIVE TO USE AS ANY OTHER SMARTPHONE APP

Once deployed, 20,000 new officers will account for over 17 percent of the UK's total policing frontline. This is a huge number of individuals to skill up and integrate into an existing workforce in a relatively short space of time. But there is another aspect to this that must not be overlooked; such an influx of an entirely new generation of officers will change the face of UK policing significantly. Are our police forces geared up to make the most of this new generation? Can they avoid a 'Clash of the Generations'? It is fair to assume the majority of these new recruits will be of the post millennial or "Gen Z" generation (defined as those born after the mid-nineties), whereas the vast majority of their colleagues (and most certainly all of their superior officers) will be from the preceding generations — Generations X and Y specifically. This presents a unique challenge. The technological ambition and enthusiasm of these Gen Z recruits may clash with their more seasoned colleagues. Many serving officers will tell you they are tired of years of interference and changes to their working day; either from failed technology initiatives (such as the poorly executed BlackBerry rollout early in the millennium) to the inevitable changes to procedures and protocols that are typical of any large organisation over the years. Will these new recruits bring a refreshing wave of enthusiasm to do things differently or will their ideas clash with the way things have always been done?

Those hailing from each generation will have their own preferred way of working and skillsets, largely borne from the environment in which they grew up. Could this be a cause of tension? The incoming Gen Z (or post millennials) are regarded as being very tech-savvy, internet-native and highly politically active. They grew up with tablets and smartphones, and rarely use a 'traditional' PC. They have never known a world without the internet, they have had smartphones since they were teenagers, and they are used to having access to the world's data wherever they are. It only follows that they will expect data and technology to be embedded into every process of the workplace, and the devices they use to be intuitive to use and available to everyone. Clearly, they are in for a shock when they enter most workplaces, let alone many police forces!

For the millennials who came before Gen Z, technology is still a part of their DNA, but they came of age during the rise of the internet. They are still digitally savvy, but can remember a time before tablets and social media, so their digital expectations are a little more tempered. Before millennials we have Generation X, the children of the Baby Boomers. They have lived through a technical revolution like no other. In the workplace they have had to adapt to every change you can imagine — from paper-based working to the introduction of the mainframe, personal computers, the internet, and now smartphones and tablets. They have been asked to change how they work more often than any generation before them. They have seen technological changes for better and for worse, and I doubt they enjoy having to learn a new way of working every five to 10 years just to continue doing their job.

Every new employee entering an organisation must go through the inevitable induction process. While the breadth and depth of an induction varies from employer to employer, the process is broadly the same; you are shown your place of work, educated on the rules and processes that govern your employment and are handed the tools you need to do your job. In our highly digital economy, most employee tools are technological in nature — phone, computer, tablet *etc*. Most Police officers have these technological tools too, alongside their more traditional items like their uniform, handcuffs, truncheon, notebook, radio, *etc*. Policing, like everything else, is not immune to the digital transformation trend sweeping across every other organisation in the world. As a result, an officer's digital tools are becoming a far

more integral part of their kit than they ever used to be. Given the growing role of technology in UK policing, it has a very clear role to play in tackling the generational divide caused by the influx of Gen Z into the workforce. But with so many generations rubbing shoulders together, you cannot expect everyone to be on the same level of technical experience or, indeed, enthusiasm. There is no point in deploying new technology, no matter how good it is, if only those under the age of 25 can use it. Unfortunately, new technology has a habit of creating barriers between the generations, not reducing them. The opposite must be true if we want these 20,000 new officers to make the biggest impact they can. New technology must be adopted by everyone, irrespective of their time in the force, if it is to have a positive impact.

The only way for new technology to help the frontline is for it to be as intuitive as possible. Police IT needs to model

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the ease of use and intuitiveness of smartphones, where anyone over the age of three can use them proficiently within minutes. Did you ever read a manual to use Facebook for example? One of the most overlooked features of smartphones is their ability to cross the generations. If someone who has never even used a PC can FaceTime their grandchildren with ease, you know you've hit the cross-generational jackpot.

Frontline police IT must be as intuitive as any other smartphone app. This not only reduces training significantly, but for the first time, every generation of officer will be working to the same level of proficiency. This eradicates the digital divide that has existed in policing ever since the first typewriter landed on the inspector's desk. Senior officers will no longer be burdened with yet another training course just to keep up with the new recruits, and will never have to face
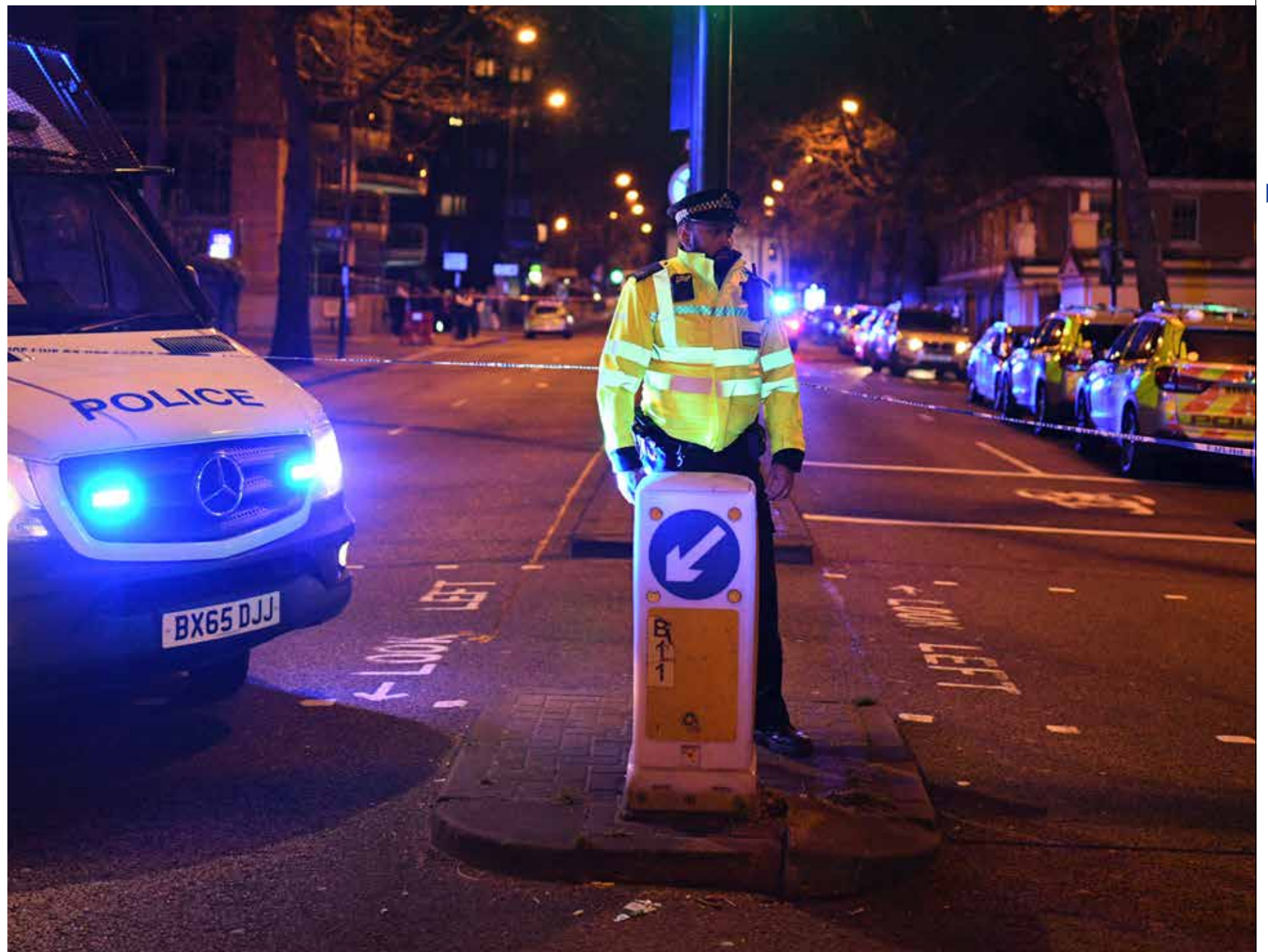
the embarrassment of asking a junior officer for help again. The best way to deploy an intuitive IT service that officers of every generation can use is to design a common working platform that can be deployed on any mobile and non-mobile device. There should be no distinction between working on the PC in the station and working on a mobile device in the car or on the street. Officers should have access to the same data and processes, using a consistent user interface/user experience (UI/UX), wherever they are, on whichever device they are using. So, for example, an officer could search the PNC on a mobile device in the same way as at the station, or file a police report from a mobile device as they would from their desktop.

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Forces should be working towards this goal now, so that they have a clear pathway to deliver cross-generational technology that delivers more effective and efficient policing.

What's more, since officers are the ones who will use these IT tools, they should be more actively involved in their development and eventual implementation.
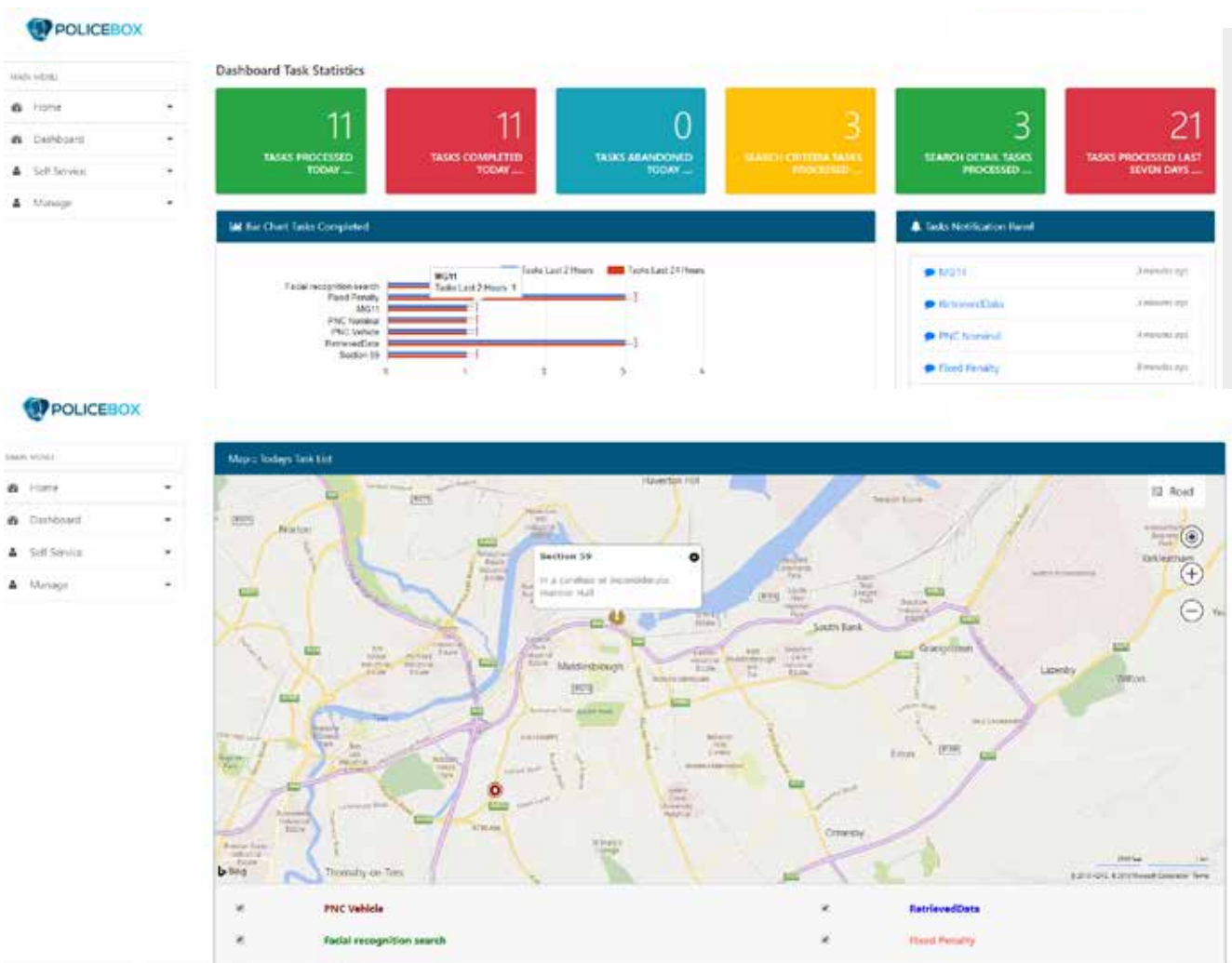
This will not only ensure that they are 'bought in' to the technology (so are more likely to use it), but that the solution meets their needs. We need officers across the generational divide to be able to complete their tasks in the same way, using the same technology, thereby delivering better, more intelligence-led policing across each force. The days of notepads, personal phone usage and paper forms is coming to an end.

In addition to bridging the digital divide among officers, better IT processes will ensure the influx of new officers can hit the ground running from day one. We know that simply adding more officers will not bring policing back to the levels identified before austerity because the environment simply isn't the same. Every other community-facing organisation that interfaces with the police – from social services to healthcare – is smaller too. But by handing our new officers a mobile working device with a common IT platform that covers everything they need to do in a day, they at least will be able to work effectively with their colleagues from day one, shift one.

While we cannot get back the many thousands of years of collective policing experience that were lost when good officers left during austerity, we can at least make it easier for the new recruits to work efficiently with their colleagues. With that we can ensure that every one of the 20,000 new officers can make an enormous difference to the policing of our communities – even if they don't necessarily have anywhere to hang their hats just yet ●

Simon Hall is the CEO and co-founder of PoliceBox and Coeus Software. He is responsible for the company's overall strategy and direction. Under Simon's leadership, PoliceBox has successfully evolved into a leading digital mobile workforce specialist, transforming workplaces with its intelligent and award-winning solutions.

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