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High-tech stakes: Casinos expand use of digital surveillance

Matt Hamblen

January 24, 2007 (Computerworld) Gambling casinos now monitor everything from card cheats at the poker table to break-ins in the parking lot -- thanks to newer digital video surveillance technology that incorporates sophisticated search algorithms such as facial recognition. But plowing through the images and video used to be a time-consuming process.

Now, casino operators are turning to digital technology that in seconds can search through hours of video recordings captured by hundreds of cameras at one gambling establishment: the Sho Ka Wah Casino in Hopland, Calif.

According to integrators and a surveillance manager for the Hopland Band of Pomo Indians Gaming Commission, which owns the casino, Sho Ka Wah moved from videocassette recorders to digital recording last July and is looking to add new digital functions as early as next month.

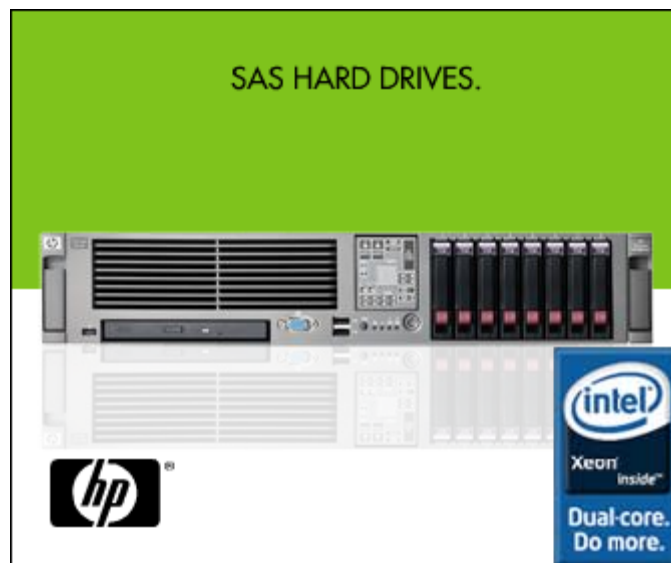
Terri Seigler, the surveillance manager, said in an interview yesterday that facial-recognition software, or other reporting programs, could soon be added to the casino's digital arsenal -- although the gaming commission is still weighing options.

As for the move to digital video, "the biggest benefit of the change has been time savings, number one," Seigler said. Under the old analog system, she said, just switching out videotapes took a long time each night and the time needed to search the tapes has been cut dramatically. "That's a drastic improvement," she said. "It's working well."

Sho Ka Wah and other casinos are required by law to have reliable video recording technology in place in case of problems. If the surveillance system goes down, gambling must stop.

The July upgrade cost less than \$350,000 and relies on a DVTel Intelligent Security Operations Center from DVTel Inc. in Ridgefield, N.J., and Intelligent Edge Switches by ProCurve Networking by HP, Seigler said. Alliance Systems Group in Tulsa, Okla., performed the integration, and recently completed a digital video surveillance system for Harrah's Prairie Band Casino in Topeka, Kans, according to John Pritchard, general manager at Alliance. His company has overseen 14 installations in Native American casinos.

Seigler said the slated upgrades in February could include a reporting program that would collate information on individuals. "If we were watching a certain employee, we'd enter that into the reporting program and every time there was any information of concern on that person we would be able to access the reporting program for a background of that person's activities in the casino," she said.



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DVTel offers software with a reporting program that can collate all video related to a certain person, whether it be an employee or a customer, said Paul Smith, chief operating officer of DVTel. By adding facial recognition software to the mix, a casino could watch for unusual movements. In fact, motion detection software could be set to track the movement of customers' hands at a craps table or spot a car idling too long outside.

With cameras in elevators, at parking lots and in hotel lobbies, casino operators can also now use software to detect automatically when a person slips and falls and look for evidence of fraud from a staged accident.

The conversion of casinos to digital video surveillance has been going on for two years, and should continue through about 2009, Smith said.

Said Pritchard: "Digital video surveillance has become the format of choice" for casinos.

In addition to DVTel, other major vendors include NICE Systems, Bosch Security Systems and Pelco, Pritchard and analysts said.