

# Recognising the potential

**Gary Mason** talks to Stewart Hefferman, the new chief executive of UK face recognition company OmniPerception, about how biometric technology is being used in law enforcement and its potential to develop as a tool for frontline police officers

**Q Do you think that police forces in the UK are currently using facial recognition technology to its full potential?**

**A** Over the past few years we have seen a growing interest from forces in our technology – particularly the Digital Image Booths (DIBs) and Digital Image Recorders (DIRs), which are now playing an integral part in suspect management in many custody suites up and down the country, from Merseyside to Hertfordshire.

The technology is used to take good-quality images of suspects that can then be checked against an existing database to help verify identity. This is particularly useful for persistent offenders and to give police key information about suspects, such as their offending history. However, I think this is just the tip of the iceberg and the potential for use of biometrics, not just in the UK but also in Australia and New Zealand, is far greater than has been currently realised.

Handheld biometric recorders that are capable of checking and verifying a suspect's identity when an officer is out on the streets have huge potential for the future. Frontline police officers are already using head cameras and Blackberrys, so it is not beyond the wit of men to imagine they will be using CCTV and BlackBerry pictures against a facial recognition database in order to confirm identity or spot suspicious behaviour out on the streets.

**Q Do frontline officers support these developments?**

**A** We have to give them a reason to wave the flag for the technology. They need to be able to see tangible results from it. The officer on the beat will only be won over if we give them something that will make life easier for them, save them time and allow them to do their jobs in a more efficient way. It is important for technology providers such

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as ourselves to realise that there is no point putting face recognition technology onto a BlackBerry for the sake of it – real benefits have to be gleaned from it.

**Q Will biometrics be increasingly used alongside fingerprints and DNA evidence?**

**A** Fingerprint and DNA evidence are such virtually indisputable and

powerful evidential tools that I very much doubt whether facial biometrics will be used forensically as evidence that is admissible in court. Having said this, I see there is a real role for it to play in frontline policing but the key for us is to match the potential of facial recognition with what the police want from a workflow perspective.

**Q What are the main challenges about working with police forces in the UK?**

**A** Like many other public and private sector organisations, police forces in the UK are under pressure to constrain costs, to keep a tight rein on budgets and to be able to justify that any technology investment will bring tangible results. The benefit of using the DIBs and DIRs in a police custody setting is that forces can demonstrate clear value savings. Merseyside Police has said publicly that installing the DIB and DIR in its eight custody suites will save over 2,000 hours of police time a year, which is a pretty powerful argument for forces to install the technology.

**Q Do you think biometrics has been underused in the UK?**

**A** The UK has been reasonably slow to adopt the technology which is, in part, due to the reluctance of the Government to encourage adoption.

The UK Government has been much more sensitive than the US about issues such as civil liberties and the misuse of personal data. The US has embraced the technology as part of its overall homeland security strategy – so much so that the evolution of standards has happened as a direct result of the Homeland Security Act [2002].

I think the UK police will have a role in changing all this as it continues to embrace the potential that biometrics can bring to making our society a safer and more secure one. ■