

Investigator Spotlight: An Expert Q&A Series

Chatham-Savannah Counter Narcotics Team shares insights on how digital communications are key to clearing cases

Welcome to the first of a new series of Q&As where we'll be interviewing investigative experts to understand the impact of digital evidence in today's investigations.

This month, we sat down with Chatham-Savannah Counter Narcotics Team members Chris Hinson, Group Supervisor, and Sgt. Chaisson Gideon, Major Case Supervisor, to talk about how investigations have changed with digital evidence.

Both Chris and Chaisson started out writing tickets by hand, so they are true experts on the subject of how investigations have changed in the digital era.

Q: How has the investigative process changed over the last three to five years?

A: Investigations have broadened beyond calls and texts. We now need to capture what people are doing on the phone and in text, plus their activity on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms; we now even have people talking through gaming systems!

The one thing that remains constant in narcotics is that people must talk to each other somehow. It's our job to figure out how, where, and when. Today, investigators must think outside the box to see the bigger picture.

Q: What impact has digital evidence had on clearing your cases?

A: In 2013, we had an investigation that went to the Georgia Court of Appeals. The biggest thing the defendant was arguing about was digital

evidence—and even though it was from about eight years ago, we had saved it. That digital evidence allowed us to uphold the conviction. It was a lifesaver for us.

You always hope a case isn't appealed, but if that does happen, you want to be on the right side of things and make sure that you have everything you need. If you don't have the technology to collect and analyze digital data properly, you're going to be missing key evidence.

The thing with digital evidence in law enforcement is that once you download it, you have to keep it. You can't go to court and say, "Well, we just didn't have enough money for storage, so we don't have that data anymore." That's not going to fly. We're seizing phones now that are in the gigabytes in terms of data—and storing that digital evidence is important.

Here's another example. When we get subjects or suspects whom we know we've investigated four or five years ago, we can go back and pull pole-camera footage, audio calls, Title IIIs, etc. All that evidence is stored, so we can go back and listen for authentication and notice if that voice sounds like the person we just intercepted. Voices don't change much, so we can use that as a comparison to help us out through the court process.

Q: How has PenLink made your team more efficient?

A: Before we switched to PenLink, we weren't getting a lot of support, so we were doing a lot of hands-on work that took us away from

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Chris Hinson,

Chatham-Savannah
Counter-narcotics Team

focusing on the actual investigation. When we switched to PenLink, the answers to our questions came back quickly.

PenLink is user-friendly. We're able to reach out more with our tracking devices; when we're up on a wiretap and we're getting information coming in from the photographs on down to just a regular trap-and-trace, we're doing it all and not having any problems.

Having the newer agents be able to complete a task in PenLink lets me get my core agents back out on the street. When we bring people in who know nothing about PenLink, we can show them the basics right off. New agents in the unit are sometimes afraid of learning new technology, but we can show them how to run PenLink reports and graphs so they get comfortable quickly and build their confidence, which saves us a lot of time.

With our training subscription from PenLink, I can tell them to visit the website or watch a webinar that will explain what's going on, and we leverage in-person classes for more in-depth training. The information is available; it's just a matter of tapping into everyone's learning style and using the best method to get the training across to them.

Q: What is your favorite PLX by PenLink tip?

A: PLX has helped us out a lot with tracking. Our GPS trackers feed right into PLX, so we can use the PLX mapping system to see where a suspect is. Our agents are already logged into PLX for call monitoring, so it works out well for us to monitor a suspect's location right there in the same dual-screen setup on the workstation. Having all the information in one place, right in front of us, has helped us out a lot. Knowing where your suspect is, whom he's talking to, and what's going on is always beneficial.

PenPoint, the mobile app, is also a big help for our case agents when we're out in the field. We can see the actual live data without being tied down to a room. If we're doing active mobile surveillance, even if we don't know whom the target is going to see or where, if we're seeing there's communication, we can use that

information. By dumping those numbers and running them, our intel can say where the subject lives, or use tower information to put the target within a certain radius.

Q: As a user of PLX Connect, what comments or feedback do you have to share?

A: A lot of our cases take us outside of this jurisdiction, the Southern District of Georgia, and into other states. When we're looking at Texas and Florida, for example, PLX Connect is an easy way for us to reach out. They're seeing what we're seeing, and we're seeing what they're seeing. We're looking forward to making more use of that capability as more agencies start using PLX Connect.

Q: How are the expectations for investigations evolving, and how are you preparing for those changes?

A: The way people communicate changes with generational and age demographics. These younger guys hate to talk on the phone—everything is text, social media, Instagram, DMs, Facebook calls, and other communication channels. Today it's one thing, tomorrow it's something else—and if we don't jump in there right now, we're going to be behind. We have to cast a bigger net when we run investigations. If you're not looking at every corner, then you're missing something.

We're always trying to figure out what the next avenue that a target uses will be, and figure out what we need to do to auto-load and see the whole picture. We've got to keep pushing the needle forward and finding ways to stay ahead of these guys.

*Thank you to **Chris, Chaisson**, and the entire **Chatham-Savannah Counter Narcotics Team** for their devotion to keeping their community safe and their willingness to share their experience with us.*

If you would like to participate in our Q&A series, please contact info@penlink.com. To learn more about PenLink and view additional resources, visit penlink.com.