

Investigator Spotlight: An Expert Q&A Series

Law enforcement analyst shares how her team uses PenLink to be more self-sufficient and close their cases faster.

*In each edition of PenLink's monthly Q&A series, we interview investigative experts who understand the impact of digital evidence in today's investigations. This month we sat down with **Annette Shapiro, a law enforcement analyst with the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office**, to discuss how investigations are evolving with digital evidence. This month's edition explores Shapiro's thoughts on the evolution of digital evidence, her best PenLink tip, and what she means when she says that "digital evidence has an investigative trail that allows the analyst or detective to capture a detailed snapshot of a subject's life."*

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

A: The biggest change in investigations has been around communications evidence and the value it holds. Previously, video or photo evidence held more value than communication- or device-related evidence. Recently, obtaining records—whether CDR, PEN, pings, or geolocation—has become comparable to photo and video evidence. Most prosecutors want to see location information from the carrier and/or device to assist in placing subjects in the area. It is now widely accepted that a person is almost always in possession of their device, eliminating a common question from the past around who physically had the device during a specific time. CDRs and cell sites have become standard parts of investigations, where just a few years ago a tower dump was rare.

Q: What impact does digital evidence have on clearing your cases?

A: More and more, digital evidence has an investigative trail that allows the analyst or

detective to capture a detailed snapshot of a subject's life. You can learn about their pattern of life and any deviations to their routine. With digital evidence, you can place them within feet of their actual location or use EXIF data to visually

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follow the trail. In some cases, geolocation data from a device has been used to place a victim at a drug house and to trace the path they took to come and go, as well as the length of time they spent in each location. That type of information previously would not have been available, and in this case led to a 20-year federal sentence for the drug trafficker.

Q: Research shows that investigators believe that digital evidence is more important than DNA evidence. How would you say this applies to your jurisdiction?

A: In my jurisdiction, DNA is still important, depending on the type of case. Most prosecutors in my area do not rely solely on one type of evidence when prosecuting a case. In a sexual battery case, DNA would still be used and could

be supported with digital evidence from geolocation data and phone data to assist in identifying the suspect. In a narcotics case, digital evidence would be relied on much more heavily, and there would not necessarily be DNA evidence.

Q: Has PenLink made your team more efficient?

A: PenLink has made our team more efficient by enabling our people to be self-sufficient. Previously, a detective would have to wait for the analyst to export the records, format them, and import them into our RMS. Now, each detective can have a PenLink login and access their phone tolls at any time, whether the analyst is in the office or not. The analyst is no longer overwhelmed with requests to see the information.

Q: What's your favorite investigative tip?

A: My best PenLink tip is to save a view for yourself. For instance, when I am analyzing records, my brain reads the information in this order: target, direction, call type, contact,

date/time, duration, location. The PLX grid is customizable and can be rearranged in any order you wish to see. If I am in the grid view, I automatically apply my view and the columns are exactly how I need them to be, to be most efficient and work through the data as quickly and accurately as possible.

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

A: Investigators are expected to know how to access and handle new types of data and use those data types as evidence. Cell phones have existed for 40 years, but the real relevance of the information they contain has only recently become a part of building cases. The best way to evolve with those expectations is by preparing for these changes by taking any trainings available and working with the data to master the concepts and skills—even if that means looking back at old cases and applying new knowledge.

*Thank you to the **Pinellas County Sheriff's Office**, and to **Annette Shapiro** for her willingness to share her experiences and opinions—as well as for their commitment as a team to keep their community safe.*

If you would like to take part in our Q&A series, please reach out to info@penlink.com. To learn more about PenLink and to access resources, please visit www.penlink.com.

