

Casinos go digital

Casino operators nationwide are set to re-invest millions into their surveillance departments in order to replace aging analog recording devices with new digital technology. While the upgrades might mean some will lose their jobs, it could also revolutionize the role surveillance technicians play in the overall operation of casinos, industry experts say.

„Surveillance is becoming the caretaker of the brand,“ said Dean McBride, corporate director of surveillance for Harrah’s Entertainment. „Pretty soon surveillance will be the gatekeeper for the entire operation.“

Changes in digital technology are spurring reluctant casino operators to invest in a facet of operations that is typically a necessary cost, not a profit center. Experts believe that will change and casinos will actually see a return on their investment as a result of digital technology’s capabilities, compared to the bulky limitations of traditional video surveillance.

MGM Mirage, for example, is embracing this new era in surveillance, currently conducting pilot tests at a few existing casinos and outfitting new properties with the state-of-the-art systems, according MGM Mirage spokesperson Yvette Monet.

„Our new Detroit casino and Project CityCenter here will have the latest systems,“ she said. „Older properties will eventually be retrofitted with new systems.“

One new capability, for example, involves video-analytics technology. Now, a property can program cameras and other recording devices to alert surveillance technicians when something out of the ordinary is occurring. Such incidents could include when someone is running when most typically walk, or when two people meet in an empty garage and only one

walks away, not to mention all the variables casinos can program for the gaming floor.

Big Brother vs. Cheaters

For example, if a suspected cheat is sitting at a blackjack table, surveillance uses a digital camera in the ceiling to snap still pictures of the suspect's face, as well as video clips of the his or her mannerisms, then sends it all digitally to a security officer with a PDA who happens to be near the table games pit. Instead of spending hours going through tape and calling a security guard up to the surveillance room, the whole process takes a few minutes and has little effect on operations other than quickly catching a cheat or quietly confirming that the person is innocent.

The systems can work for employee-theft detection as well. For example, cameras can be programmed to alert supervisors when an employee is voiding sales on a cash register or ringing-up small amounts that don't make sense. In a few minutes, a surveillance technician can locate every instance of such behavior, compile video clips of the employee at work, add voice-over commentary and send a CD of the digital archive to the human resources department for action.

The systems can help a property's bottom line by helping coordinate customer-service functions – a camera can alert staff that a long line is developing and a new cash register needs to be open. Or it can reduce litigation against casinos using sheer recording capacity – if someone slips and falls at a property, a camera or two that are programmed to record, save and send an alert about such „accidents“ will likely zoom in on the alleged victim.

Moti Shabtai, executive vice president of NICE, an Israeli surveillance-equipment manufacturer, said this technology is field-tested and proven. „We're trying to get the computer to do the brain work, let the video do the detecting,“ he said.

„What's left for the human being is what we're good at, which is decision-making.“

Surveillance technicians are highly vetted individuals who are used to working with the most sensitive information a property can store. Their hardest job now may be selling their bosses on the new systems.

„It's going to take time to convince corporate managers that the investment is worth it, that we can save you more money than it costs,“ said Ron Buono, corporate surveillance director at MGM Grand Hotel Casino. „It's hard to prove that you are saving money.“