

OFFENDER SELF-SERVICE

Technology in the hands of offenders

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1.0 Executive Summary

This paper looks at the prison sector and demonstrates how technology inside prison walls is catching up with technology in general society – where it plays a big part in everyday life. Prisons around the world are feeling the effects of the economic downturn as less tax funding is available for prison services; providing services to prison populations that continue to grow in many cases. Prison services are under pressure to deliver “more with less” and this paper outlines how technology can play a key role in running over-crowded prisons with shrinking budgets.

Technology helps deliver efficiencies in wider society by streamlining operational processes. Examples are drawn from industries who have successfully adopted technology to deliver increased effectiveness and efficiency, such as the airline industry and the banking sector.

Interviews conducted with Prison Officers suggests that up to 60% of their time is taken up with offender-based administrative tasks and dealing with direct enquiries and requests for information. . The automation of these processes has the potential for significant efficiencies particularly as staff costs today are estimated to account for up to 70% of facility operating budgets.

The paper introduces offender self-service as the answer to this issue; discussing its current and future capabilities and how these functionalities also serve as a vehicle for unlocking offender independence and helping to break the cycle of re-offending. The impact of offender self-service on rehabilitation, re-offending and intelligence is outlined with a clear emphasis on delivering better outcomes for the prison service.

2.0 Introduction

2.1 The Current Situation

Today many prison departments throughout the world are struggling with high prisoner numbers, reduced prison budgets and consistent reoffending. Secretary of State for Justice in the UK, Chris Grayling quotes “The cost of running our prisons is too high and must be reduced. We can do this by being more innovative and efficient” ¹. Prison facilities must look for alternative methods which can reverse this trend and benefit the prison environment. One such alternative that prison facilities are shifting towards is technology. The Minister of State for Policing and Criminal Justice in the UK, Damian Green mentions that criminal justice systems are failing to exploit technology which could save thousands of police man hours ².

There will always be concerns regarding security, public perception and return on investment in terms of introducing technology into a prison environment. However reduced resources and an increased demand for prison places along with secure, innovative, and user friendly developments in the technology sector has meant that alternatives have to be considered. In recent years technology has been introduced into prisons in many forms including CCTV, automatic key locking units with RFID tags, body scanners, biometric access control and offender self-service kiosks. Offender self-service allows offenders to access information, communication and carry out administrative tasks for themselves. This technology is traditionally delivered through communal, ruggedized kiosks and was first introduced by commissary companies in the US Department of Corrections (DOC) in the early 2000’s.

Technology such as offender self-service transfers responsibility to the offender and reduces staff time being spent on administrative tasks meaning resources can be deployed more effectively. These accepted technology advancements in the prison environment have had positive impacts on prison environments in areas such as saving money and freeing up Officers time from mundane tasks.

An offender self-service kiosk was initially introduced to the US correctional facilities in Hawaii and California in 2004 ³ to provide offenders access to legal information instead of using law books. Rather than replace expensive hardbound law books year after year or waste time stapling updated information into law books prison departments are using technology as an alternative. In New York the DOC introduced the same system and expected to save State taxpayers \$900,000 in the first year and \$2.4 million annually after installation is complete ⁴. Since then additional applications have been developed including electronic messaging, video visitation, offender bank accounts and shop ordering systems. In the U.S. offender self-service technology is widely available in many DOCs with promising signs that the UK and Europe are gaining ground on technological use within prisons.

2.2 The Technology

Self-service kiosks are commonplace nowadays in society, but particular industries have adopted them at a faster pace than others. In the early 2000's airline check-in kiosks became popular; offering a high level of convenience to passengers whilst enhancing efficiency for the airline and airport involved. ⁵ The pioneers of the technology in the industry experienced initial adoption rates of anywhere between 25-60% which made for a promising start. ⁶

The technology involved with electronic money management became popular in the mid 2000's when online banking became widespread. Banks have further developed their systems since then with some banks operating a paper-less policy (using e-statements only) and some banks now even being entirely an online operation, with no physical high-street presence. In the UK in 2012 47% of the population were using online banking, with its usage being particularly popular among those aged between 25-44. ⁷

The technology timeline (Fig. 1) represents the advancements in technology in society and the prison environment. Technology has advanced rapidly over the past two decades however the prison environment trails behind society in adopting and integrating emerging technologies.

Technology Timeline

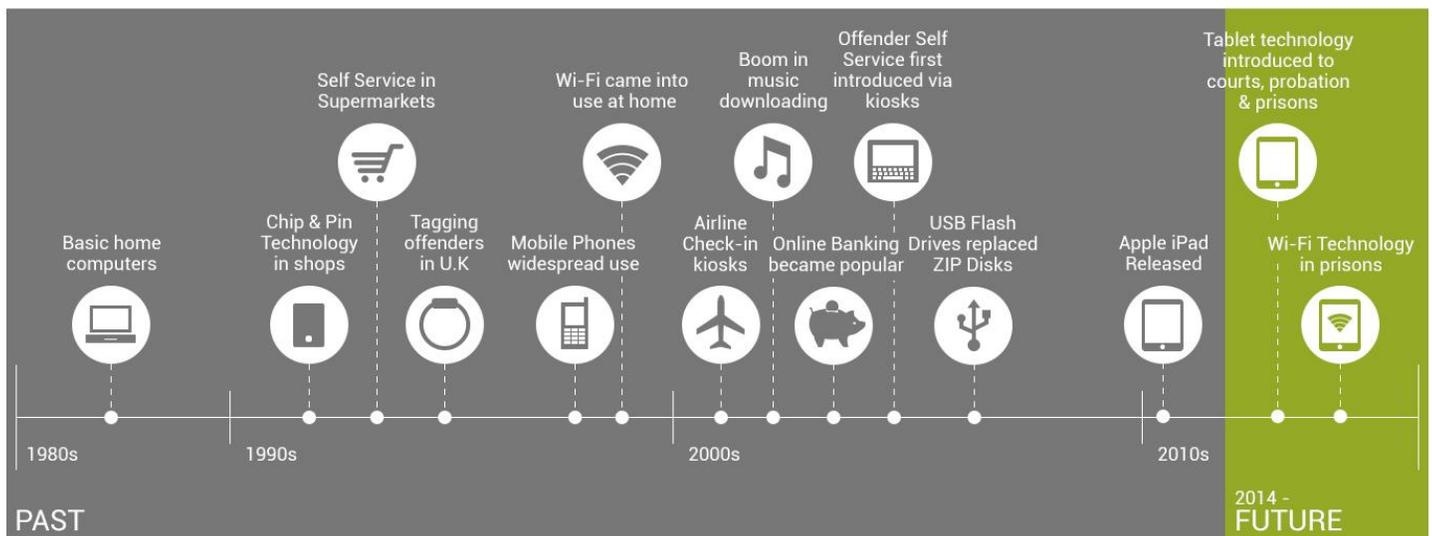


Fig. 1

The digital divide between prisons and the community is diminishing as facilities are becoming more and more accepting of technology in streamlining everyday processes. HM Chief Inspector of UK Prisons, Nick Hardwick, stresses "We can't go on with prisons in a pre-internet dark age: inefficient, wasteful and leaving prisoners woefully unprepared for the real world they will face on release".⁸ Technology in prisons is revolutionizing everyday practices – delivering operational efficiencies whilst preparing offenders for release. This can be achieved without any additional security risk in an environment where security is understandably paramount.⁹

2.3 The Shift in Service Delivery

Enabling offenders to access information and communication for themselves signifies a fundamental shift away from Prison Officers delivering these services; to offenders doing so for themselves. This enables the delivery of offender centric services rather than a “one size fits all” approach. Self-service technology empowers the offender to manage their own information and communication; maintaining independence and reducing the risk of institutionalization.

“Technology is so tightly woven into the fabric of society today that ICT deprivation can rightly be considered alongside, and strongly linked to, more traditional twentieth century social deprivations, such as low income, unemployment, poor education, ill health and social isolation. To consider ICT deprivation as somehow less important underestimates the pace, depth and scale of technological change, and overlooks the way that different disadvantages can combine to deepen exclusion.”¹⁰
 (Dr. Helsper, Oxford Internet Institute 2008)

This offender centric approach recognizes that each offender has individual needs in working towards their rehabilitation. Time served during a sentence can be productive in terms of increasing levels of education and other skills necessary for employment such as communication, time management and computer skills. The systems are designed to be user-friendly for offenders who may have low levels of literacy or numeracy, and templates and images are used where possible. This allows the offenders to use the system independently despite dealing with literacy challenges.

Putting technology in the hands of offenders raises certain security challenges for the facility. These are overcome by using a secure logon (often biometrics) and using separate machines for staff and offenders. The operating systems running the kiosks are locked down to a degree that ensures offenders cannot tamper with them, and access to the internet is often restricted or even blocked.

3.0 Capabilities

3.1 Current

Offender self-service applications typically fall under the three groupings of offender information, communication and services.

Offender Information	Offender Communication	Offender Services
Personal Details	E-messaging	Money Management
FAQs	Grievances	Canteen
Case Management	Video Visitation	Meal Selection
Law Library	Telephone Service	Requests

Offender self-service involves streamlining areas of offender care which are time and resource intensive for Officers and staff. By digitizing these traditionally paper-based services; human error is reduced, missing paper records no longer pose such an issue and the time once spent by prison staff on these tasks can be redeployed to security based activities.

Publishing FAQs in one central location enables the facility to maintain up-to-date information surrounding orientation/induction, the offender handbook, policies and procedures and programs available to inmates. This can be used as a digital replacement for a noticeboard or announcement.

E-messaging services allow offenders to communicate with their family and friends in a secure and controlled way. Reducing the amount of parcels/letters coming into the facility can only help to make it a safer environment for staff and offenders as the threat of contraband such as weapons or mobile phones is reduced.¹¹

Replacing the need for manual canteen orders, offender self-service allows offenders to order items of their choice and have their funds automatically deducted from their account. Product images make the electronic store easy to navigate and to select the correct items. This makes it easier for offenders with low literacy and numeracy levels to independently and successfully use the service.

3.2 Future

Future capabilities of offender self-service are plentiful; both in terms of unlocking new functionalities within the application and in terms of delivering the service on a hardware agnostic basis ie. On personal devices or TVs in-cell. The future is already here in some forward-thinking states in the US where they are talking about implementing tablets for offenders ¹² but understandably concerns have been raised about the security implications.

Processing large amounts of data in the system can aid Prison Officers with intelligence based on behavior and activity which could provide insight into the offenders in their care. This information can help towards the prevention of security incidents, the protection of Prison Officers and offenders and ultimately help the facility to safely fulfill their duty of care. ¹³

The increased use of video technology where possible will help to reduce the security implications involved with the transportation of offenders in and out of the facility for things such as healthcare appointments, court appearances etc. ¹⁴ This technology could also benefit offenders whose family live far away and for whom visits are less frequent and less affordable – using remote, online video visits to facilitate communications with their family and friends. ¹⁵ Using this technology means that visitors can enjoy greater convenience and save on travelling time and associated costs. ¹⁶

4.0 Delivering Better Outcomes

4.1 Rehabilitation

Allowing offenders to access technology in a prison environment will increase chances of rehabilitation, improve opportunity for jobs upon release and help reintegrate offenders back into society.¹⁷ Keeping offenders up-to-date with technological advancements will better equip them for adjusting to society after their sentence; where technology plays a vital part in education, employment, communication and entertainment. Using offender self-service will help to provide practical life skills for the offender, as some of the applications closely resemble everyday activities in normal society eg. Electronic messaging to represent e-mails, canteen ordering to represent online shopping, money management to represent online banking. Using the self-service technology will help to satisfy the social needs of offenders¹⁸ and increase the likelihood of positive behavior in prison.

The offender self-service model facilitates offenders seeking information out for themselves, and helps to reduce levels of institutionalization. Increasing levels of independence and responsibility is good practice for the offender, and gives them an insight into living in society upon release. The information applications available to the offenders heighten the visibility of their individual release plan. Armed with this information individuals can prepare for release by communicating with relevant sources providing rehabilitative services such as a shelter or work scheme. With many offenders unable to return to their previous home, finding satisfactory accommodation is a vital influence in the likelihood of re-offending.¹⁹

4.2 Reducing Re-Offending

Offender electronic messaging systems increase levels of communication, both internal and external. Regular communication with family and friends can now be maintained by electronic means rather than relying on the slow system of postal mail. The messaging modules can be pre-loaded with templates and images to assist with communication as literacy level are often low amongst prisoners.²⁰

Communicating with friends and family on the outside can play a vital part in reducing re-offending rates and achieving more effective rehabilitation.²¹ Increasing those links with friends and family can only help to give offenders a better chance of settling back into society and making a positive contribution.²² Evidence shows that offenders are less likely to re-offend if they keep in touch with their families, provided with good support and education while in prison. For example in the Nordic prisons they strive for the goal of normalization; to closely resemble society leading to low reoffending rates. In Norway they have the lowest overall reoffending rate among correctional clients in the Nordics at 20%. In the other Nordic countries the overall reoffending rate varies from 24% to 31%.²³ Social integration is enhanced by providing offenders with the tools and opportunity to turn their lives around while in prison. This can be achieved through education, support and communication while in prison and continue upon their release with “through the gate” services.²⁴

Having access to this technology in prison helps to promote contact with rehabilitative services also such as employment and accommodation, establishing relationships and putting action plans in place for release. Employment²⁵ and accommodation²⁶ are two key measures indicating the likelihood of someone reoffending. There are many charities working with government bodies to deliver programs aimed at getting ex-offenders into employment – with some claiming that employment can help to lower the re-offending rate in the UK from 70% to an impressive 22%. ²⁷

4.3 Intelligence

Moving away from paper records to electronic records means that large volumes of data can be used for intelligence purposes. This can be used to give early warnings of changes in offender behavior or mood and can feed into more informed decision-making.²⁸

Intelligence offers powerful insight, a more “joined-up” approach to shared data and a deeper understanding of activity within the facility. The intelligence allows the facility to become proactive rather than reactive in dealing with security incidences and issues; shedding light on the “blind spots” and can help make it a safer place for both offenders and staff.²⁹

5.0 Delivering Efficiencies

Today prison facilities are under pressure to reduce costs and rehabilitate prisoners with limited resources. The most alarming statistics highlight the total cost of reoffending in the UK is estimated to be £9.5 to £13 billion per year ³⁰ almost 90% of prisoners under the age of 21 reoffend within two years and almost two-thirds of adult offenders re-offend within two years.³¹

In the UK NOMS have set an ambitious target to reduce spending by £884m before March 2015.³² A cross-party group of MPs has warned that prison service funding cuts have led to a rising number of staff assaults and escapes from contractor escorts.³³ So in order for more to be achieved with less, cost-saving efficiencies have to be delivered whilst making the system more effective. Offender self-service can help to deliver these efficiencies in the following ways:

5.1 Staff Time Savings

It assists the reduction of staff workload through automation of information access, requests for help and medical assistance and full audit ability of all information flow. The systems allows staff time to be redeployed from administrative tasks to security based tasks and reduces time wasting exercises such as double keying. Interviews conducted with Prison Officers has suggested that offender-based administrative tasks and dealing with direct enquiries and requests for information from offenders are a common cause of frustration and can take up between 50-60% of their time. The introduction of an automation of these processes has the potential for significant efficiencies particularly as staff costs today in the US are estimated to account for between 75% and 80% of the facility budget.

5.2 Paper Usage and Waste

As with other industries who have adopted a paperless approach to administration, a huge reduction is seen in usage of paper and consequently paper waste being produced. The use of technology eliminates the need for unnecessary paperwork, saving literally millions of sheets of paper per prison per year. By unlocking access to e-mail services facilities can reduce the amount of paper used by offenders and kept in cells; reducing associated security risks concerning contraband while achieving a facility-wide “green” approach to minimizing paper usage ³⁴ and an industry-wide commitment to sustainability.³⁵

5.3 Lower Rates of Re-Offending

Having access to employment opportunities whilst in prison increases the offenders chance of integrating back into society and the economy, reducing their likelihood for re-offending.³⁶ Lining up a job as part of a release plan for offenders is a vital step in preventing re-offending³⁷ with some sources claiming immediate employment can lower chances of re-offending to as low as 10%.³⁸ Having less offenders caught in the “revolving door of re-offending” will help to reduce the prison population and therefore reduce associated costs. Studies have shown that access to education in prison can lower the chances of re-offending by as much as 46%.³⁹ Offenders who have served less than 12 months have the highest reoffending rates⁴⁰ and while taking on these extra individuals into the probation system will increase costs, it will help to meet budget cuts in the long term.

6.0 Conclusion

Offender self-service is still very much in its infancy; and is being utilized by early adopters across USA and Europe. It is the first step in the process of putting technology in the hands of prisoners.

Technology can be applied in various ways to deliver direct cost-savings but also indirectly through its effect on breaking the cycle of re-offending. Empowering offenders to seek out information, communicate and make service requests aids the rehabilitation process and ultimately helps to keep prison population numbers down. Access to technology is fast becoming a basic human right and the associated IT skills are perquisite to participation in everyday activities such as commerce, education and engagement with public services.

Evidence around savings and impacts is currently anecdotal at best. As adoption of offender technology increases, data from the early adopters will become available in the public domain – providing the empirical evidence and strengthening future business cases.

In a bid to deliver more for less, current service delivery and associated efficiencies will reach a finite point. The only way to achieve further efficiencies is through a disruptive step; offender technology is that disruptive step towards transforming service delivery. As we tap into future generations of technology the potential for new applications and benefits is only limited by imagination.

7.0 About Core Systems

Core Systems are leading-edge experts in Identity and Inmate Management solutions for high security facilities. Our innovative biometric solutions play a vital role in maintaining control within the highest security establishments in Europe; with our latest inmate self-service solutions leading the market in delivering efficiencies to the prison sector in times of constricted public sector funding. The company wide commitment to innovation has been the catalyst behind our growth, which has seen us mature from a small partnership operating in Northern Ireland to a company operating in global markets, recognised internationally as a leader in our specialist field.

Core Systems have a suite of solutions available to deliver efficiencies in the prison environment; with modules covering meal selection, requests and grievances, canteen orders and information requests among many others. These modules can be made available through communal kiosks, low-cost personal kiosks and personal devices such as TVs and tablets making our offering practical, affordable and scalable within all prison environments.