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Digital surveillance has many advantages

Jon Van*Published July 11, 2004*

Electronic eyes, ears and noses are finding their way into nooks and crannies few would suspect.

But keeping track of all that data is more than some organizations can handle.

Northwestern University, for example, had two locations where it kept racks of computers up until a few years ago, said Tim Ward, associate director for information technology, telecommunications and network services. "Now we have 18. We don't have the personnel to watch those sites 24/7."

Using networked digital cameras and sensors from NetBotz in Austin, Texas, Northwestern monitors its computer facilities from a central location. NetBotz not only supplies images from the scene, but it also uses sensors to check the temperature, humidity and such things as whether there's water on the floor.

Ward's surveillance system is separate from the analog system used by Northwestern's security forces, but "it wouldn't be a problem to put security's video on our (computer) network," he said. "We already run video on it."

As more tech professionals turn to digital surveillance to monitor and protect their networks, they have increasingly become involved with corporate security, said Frank LaPlante, a NetBotz vice president.

"You can program digital systems to do things analog never could," he said. "You can get alerts, for example, whenever someone enters a particular area. When you move from analog to digital, you can move from just observing and recording to prevention--looking for suspicious activity."

The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department is installing surveillance at unmanned stations throughout southeastern Michigan.

Computers operating near raw sewage face special problems, said Marybeth Ruth, a project manager.

"It's not pleasant," she said. "It can be the worst place on Earth. We tend to replace a lot of computers because of the caustic environment."

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