



THE SECURITY CONSULTANT'S ROLE IN HELPING YOU SELECT, PURCHASE, AND INSTALL AN ACCESS CONTROL SYSTEM

BY STEVEN R. KELLER, CPP

It has been said that 99% of all technological innovations since the dawn of mankind were made in the past 20 years. Times, they are a changin'. Who can keep up?

As an independent, non product-affiliated security consultant who generally has at least one major access control system design and specification project on the drawing board at any given time, it is essential that I keep up with the changing technology in the field. I rarely specify the same system twice in a row, and each project involves a preliminary fact finding survey to learn exactly which system is best for that specific client. So how can you, as a specialist in security management, be expected to make intelligent buying decisions involving high tech access control systems? A look at how the professional security consultant approaches the problem might be helpful to you.

All access control systems are not created equal. Some integrate just about every type of security hardware into one neat package. Alarms cause cameras to activate, cards cause

doors to open and computer printers to record the identity of the authorized employee entering the space. Some systems do even more. The degree of efficiency at which they operate, their comparative cost, their level of high, medium or low security, and other factors make some products more attractive for some facilities than for others. High among the considerations in selecting an access control system is the availability of reasonably priced, prompt and reliable service. If an East Coast firm has to wait until noon to reach a West Coast manufacturer for technical support, there better be good, local service! How generic is



the system? Will it be necessary to "marry" the manufacturer in order to get parts or service, or can you obtain them from a third party?

The first step in selecting an access control system is to become familiar with the market. People ask me why I try to visit at least four security trade shows per year and try to be on the exhibit floor when other attendees are attending seminars. My reason is that I need to spend a great

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deal of time meeting with the technical representatives of the many exhibitors.

It takes many trade shows to keep up with changes. I avoid the pretty model hired to hand out literature and candy. I go to learn from those who know the product. So should you.

An important first step is to understand exactly what you want the access control system to do. Will it control doors? Will it monitor alarms? Must it do more? How well must it do these things? What is the level of security that you want to achieve? How "fancy" must the system be? Are graphics needed, and if so, must they be in color? What card or biometric technology is appropriate for your firm? If you are protecting high value assets, you better make sure that the system is fully supervised and meets the requirements for high security that you require. In short, you must relate the infrastructure of the facility to be protected, i.e.: how the facility actually works with the access control system itself. I can assure you that the proper access control system can greatly enhance both your company's security and its efficiency, but the wrong access control system can bring your company to a grinding halt!

There are so many considerations in selecting, laying out, specifying and buying something as complex and expensive as an access control system, that the preliminary survey of the site and an analysis of system requirements are critical. Many facilities even commission an in-depth financial analysis of the access control system manufacturer before they make a purchase to help assure that the

company will be in business for a reasonable period of time.

Once a system has been identified as being appropriate for the facility, serviceable, and affordable, it is best to make sure that your organization is ready for an access control system. Particularly, if card or biometric technology is to be used, will it be accepted? While this may sound ridiculous, I've seen hospitals, colleges, museums, and law firms where prima donnas have refused to cooperate, thus making an access control system or, as a minimum, some of its better features like anti-passback, impossible to implement. While you may think that the answer to your prayers is biometrics--retina scanners, etc.--it is best to obtain concurrence from your company before pursuing a particular technology.

I've outlined just a few of the hundreds of complicated questions that need to be answered in selecting the correct access control system for your facility. For the complex but critical task of preparing specifications and bid documents for a large ticket purchase of high tech equipment, you may want to obtain the services of a security consultant. Possibly one of the most important steps in the acquisition of an access control system is the preparation of specifications. "Specs" help assure that you get what you want at the best possible price. And, they can define how the system will perform for you when it is installed. I once worked with a client who previously purchased an access control system without a performance spec. The system was great for controlling doors. It would have



worked well for monitoring door contacts. But when motion detection was included, the system's processor simply could not keep up, reporting alarms 15 minutes after they came in.

In another project, the system was sold as having time and attendance capabilities. The system did in fact have those capabilities. Employees who did not report to work and pass through a reader controlled door were identified, but the computer took three hours to process the data and print a report. This made the data useless in identifying places where temporary clerical help was needed. So how do you find a security consultant who can help prevent this type of problem from occurring, and how do you know that you are getting what you are paying for in buying his services?

First, it is important to understand that while you may get free advice from "consultants" who are product-affiliated, they are not likely to make recommendations that are contrary to their own interests. In my years in the security consulting business, I have seen many situations where clients have been ill-served by system vendors who call themselves consultants. The purchase of such a large ticket item as an access control system requires independent advice from a technical security advisor. It is equally wise to realize that electrical engineers, architects, and other highly trained and educated professionals do not necessarily understand security. Unless the engineer has practical security management or operational experience, he knows electricity, not security.

The International Association of Professional Security Consultants is a non-profit professional association of security consultants who are non product-affiliated. Members are subjected to a background check before being admitted to membership and the membership requirements are stiff. Many of the largest corporations and institutions in the world use the services of IAPSC members. Your first step ought to be to contact the IAPSC at (301) 656-2880 and request a copy of their membership directory. This highly informative item is free to consumers of consulting services and available to vendors and other consultants for \$6.00 per copy, less than it costs to produce. It contains complete biographies and photos of each member, describing his specialty in detail. This is important. Not every security consultant can help you select an access control system, help you prepare specifications, work with your architect, or negotiate a contract. You need someone with a technical specialty and a proven track record. Organizations like ASIS also may be able to provide a referral.

Once you have identified several security consultants who claim a specialty in access control systems or high tech security equipment design, interview each. Ascertain the consultant's philosophy of protection. Find out what other projects he has done and call for references. You want to concentrate on projects of a similar scope that have been successfully completed. Find out if the consultant has worked with architects if your project involves an architect, and verify



his role. What systems has he specified in the past? How many times has he specified a particular product? Will you be buying "canned" specs off his word processor, or will he be doing original survey and design work for you?

When you have tentatively selected a security consultant for the project, bring him into your site-- at your expense-- to discuss your project. By this time, you are a reasonably well-informed consumer. Ask questions that will enable you to test his knowledge of access control systems and, at the same time, learn about his philosophy of protection for facilities like yours. Remember that any security consultant who claims to be an expert in every area of security is either a very rare person, or is misrepresenting himself. While there are many real experts out there, there are few who have expertise in both the technical design of systems like you may need AND expertise in your environment. How an access control system is applied in a hospital, for example, is much different from how it is applied in a warehouse operation. While you should try to hire a consultant with both skills, the technical expertise is what is important for this task. You may find that you want your technical consultant to work closely with your regular security consultant, who has a background with your unique environment.

Work with your consultant to assure that he includes all necessary considerations in the specification. Topics to be addressed include final

testing and acceptance of the completed system, warranty, "substantial completion," training of your staff, programming, card preparation, a payment schedule, cost of future service, fixed costs for spare parts, software updates, etc. Finally, consider using the services of your consultant to provide project management during the installation of your new system to assure that all problems are resolved properly.

What if you already have an access control system? With technology changing so quickly, perhaps you need to re-examine it to see if it is serving you as well as it can. At what point should you "bite the bullet" and upgrade to new technology? How much of your existing system can be salvaged? How can you use the equipment more efficiently? What trends in access controls can you count on, and how can they benefit you? And most important, are you paying too much for service and upkeep? These and other questions can be answered by a qualified security consultant. There are many consultants who offer "value surveys" to see if you are overpaying on your service or maintenance contract. Often they can find significant ways to reduce these costs. If he/she has experience with similar systems, he will know if you are overpaying compared with other clients and can help you negotiate a better deal.

There are many projects that justify the cost of using a professional security consultant. But few projects



require the consultant's expertise as much as a project involving the selection and design of an access control system, and few projects utilize the consultant's services so cost effectively.

About the Author:

Steve Keller, CPP, is an independent security consultant who specializes in work for facilities with high value assets. A substantial portion of his work involves the design and specification of access control systems and high tech security systems for clients, other security consulting firms, architects, and engineers. He is a former Executive Director of the International Association of Professional Security Consultants.