Report on Business

Property Report

Card-carrying employees appreciate security simplicity

A new wave of corporate protection systems seeks to address new threats without bogging down workers

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Telus Corp. employees at 25 York Street in Toronto use one electronic card to get from the building's parking lot to their secure floor, to log in to their computer workstations and even to log in to the internal computer network from a remote location.

It's the crowning achievement in a security evolution for Telus, which has spent the past five years developing its key cards. They eliminate a gaggle of distinct security systems, inherited in a series of acquisitions, that required Telus employees who visited multiple locations across Canada to carry a stack of access cards.

"This has been a multi-year journey for us," said Bruce Fraser, Telus' head of corporate security. "We philosophically have taken security to a very different place from yesteryear, when security was seen as a necessary inconvenience."

Indeed, corporate security has come a long way in the past decade or so. From the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, through the jihadist-inspired "Toronto 18" plot to storm parliament and bomb Toronto, to this summer's G20 Summit, Canadian business and property owners have become more and more aware of the threats they face.

"It starts out with an understanding of what you're protecting," said consultant David Hyde, formerly the head of security at Cadillac Fairview Corp. Ltd. "Ten years ago, if you could find the person who was in charge of security and ask them what they were protecting, they might not have had a good idea."

Today's threats range from terrorism to more ordinary cases of vandalism, from simple property crimes by physical intruders to corporate espionage or fraud, and workplace violence committed by an outsider or, even worse, an employee.

At the same time, the modernization and integration of security systems, coupled with new training and licensing for the people who run them, is helping businesses achieve the delicate balance between total security, lockdown-style, and the openness required to keep employees and customers happy.

"Security has come to a much more informed place," Mr. Hyde said. "One, there are business-minded security professionals who understand what it brings to the business. Two, it's a more sophisticated understanding of what security needs to achieve."

Mr. Hyde says, perhaps hyperbolically, that before Sept. 11 "security wasn't much more than a bunch of people walking around and a bunch of clunky mechanical systems."

Now, electronic control access systems, cameras and panic buttons all work together. For example, in today's modern integrated systems, when a door gets forced open, the door system notifies the central command system, and the camera pans around to capture an image. An employee's access card can be set for specific

doors and tracked with an audit system. While many companies have had card-tracking for some time, improvements in computer processing power means the data can be analyzed more quickly and can more easily be exported so it can be analyzed with data from other systems, notes Mr. Hyde.

Businesses can easily accomplish that integration with one turnkey system from a single vendor. But modern systems can typically connect to each other, even if not from the same manufacturer, because of the way their software is written.

At the Telus Tower, says building manager Menkes Property Management Services Ltd.'s Roy Budgell, the systems can adapt to multiple software or security systems in part because of the tenant mix: Telus occupies just 60 per cent of the space in its namesake property, leaving the remaining 40 per cent to a mix of other tenants.

And, of course, cameras have become digital, eliminating the old systems in which you "stuck in an old eight-track type cartridge and hoped it worked to deliver a reasonably good image," said Gene McLean, a consultant and former head of security at Telus, and the current president of industry group the Canadian Society for Industrial Security.

Biometrics, or the use of things like retinal scans, thumbprint access, or voice-recognition software, is becoming more popular, particularly as the technology improves, Mr. McLean said. (Early voice-recognition systems could be thrown for a loop if the permitted employee had a bad cold.)

But they're limited only to the most sensitive areas – an executive floor, the data centre, or perhaps an animal-testing lab that has grave concerns about unauthorized entry. If they were universal, Mr. McLean notes, "you'd have a lineup of people for an hour, coming in the building."

While Canadian businesses are adopting many of the latest security measures, turnstiles, popular in the United States, haven't been embraced.

Mr. Hyde says there's only one major commercial office building in Toronto with turnstiles, which he discreetly declines to name. (Independent reporting, however, reveals it to be Commerce Court West, home of CIBC's headquarters.)

Turnstiles are "very effective in deterring, even stamping out, certain kinds of crime dependent on getting access to the building," Mr. Hyde said. "It's not effective as a deterrent to terrorism, because they'll drive a truck up to the building and not even get in."

"It costs a lot to install and a lot to maintain because you need guards to maintain it. It's quite a decision to make, and it hasn't caught on in Canada."

Improved technology has enabled companies to reduce head count and expenses and "have a smaller security department that works smarter," Mr. McLean said.
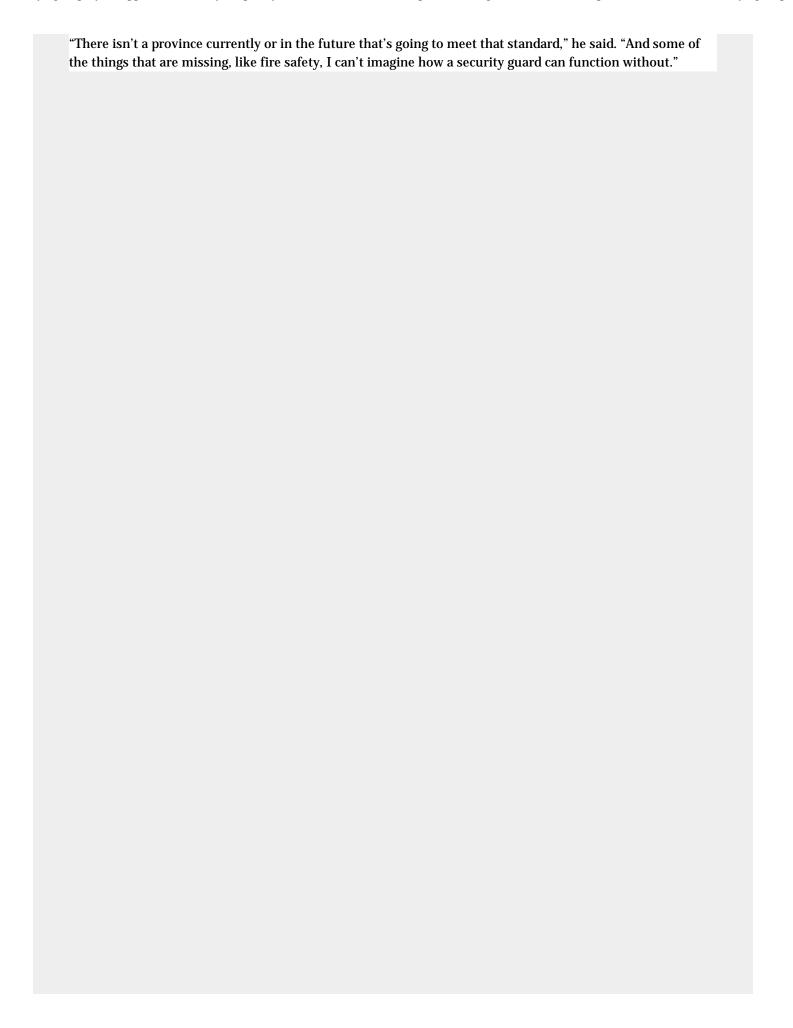
At the same time, says Mr. Hyde, the guards on duty are receiving more rigorous training.

Best-practice exercises and drills include simulations – say, of an armed assailant – that are videotaped to allow the staff to analyze how to improve their skills.

Gradually, the provinces are instituting training, examination and licensing requirements for employees of security firms, where none existed before.

Jim Foston of Contemporary Security Canada, who managed security workers both at the Winter Olympics and the G20, argues a lot more can be done, however. He was part of a study committee for the Canadian General Standards Board of Public Works Canada that recommended a minimum of 56 hours of training for security personnel. Most provincial licensing programs have set the threshold much lower, though.

"There isn't a province currently or in the future that's going to meet that standard," he said. "And some of the things that are missing, like fire safety, I can't imagine how a security guard can function without."