

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

How AI, apps, and tech are
changing the security industry.



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INTRODUCTION

Security services companies have recently rolled out a number of tech tools, apps, and “artificial intelligence” platforms with the goal of modernizing the security industry.^{1 2 3} Companies now use GPS and geo-fences to monitor movement, bluetooth beacons to track guards and trigger specific instructions based on location, and automated apps to manage workers.^{4 5 6} But, while promising increased efficiency and safety, security officers report serious errors and operational failures with many of these new tools. This report relies on over a dozen officer interviews across multiple states and a review of union grievance materials to examine three areas where new technology is changing the security services industry:

- Automated/AI HR and work management systems,
- Remote monitoring and command tools, and
- Online and mobile training platforms.

SEIU’s 80,000 security officer members put their lives on the line everyday to protect people and communities, and their experience using new technology and AI tools offers valuable insight into a changing industry. Besides operational shortcomings, new technologies in the security industry also raise questions related to mass surveillance, deskilling, data insecurity, and privacy.⁷ While technology can provide useful assistance to security officers, its implementation should be done in consultation with the frontline workers keeping us safe.

AUTOMATED HR AND WORK MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Following corporate trends, some security companies are attempting to automate much of their human resource management.^{8 9 10} The perceived benefit of AI-assisted employee management is clear for security services companies that employ thousands of officers across thousands of worksites, often without on-site supervisors. To manage and schedule this many workers, companies have developed apps and tools that officers use to clock-in and out, call out sick, sign up for shifts, or take leave.^{11 12} Some companies also claim they use AI to predict and optimize staffing and scheduling, and even use AI to send automated text messages to potential job applicants, verify contact information, and screen qualified candidates.¹³

But these automated systems can fail in practice. Security officers have reported being repeatedly scheduled by automated systems for shifts they are ineligible for, or without their knowledge or consent.^{14 15} A union security officer in San Francisco described how scheduling technology at his worksite creates serious instability and disciplinary issues for officers:

So they have an app, meaning they go to the app and then they schedule officers there without letting any officer know. Then, if you don't show up and they call us on the day of the shift, saying "Hey, you were scheduled for today." I have responded with, "I didn't, I hadn't agreed to work on the day I have to

*work, you know." And then he says, "Okay, we can remove you." And then later on, they add demerit points on your record. Then slowly, slowly the points can go up and then they remove you from the schedule basically. They don't call you. So there's no communication with a manager or anything. It's all through the app.*¹⁶

When officers provide proof that they were scheduled without agreement, demerit points can still remain in the system. *"Even after it's cleared, the app doesn't allow you to fix that error,"* the San Francisco officer explained.¹⁷ In this case, it took months and union intervention for him to be reinstated in the system, and when he returned, it was only as a flex officer without a stable schedule.¹⁸

In another case, a union security officer reported that an automated workforce management system repeatedly sent employees to a worksite that was already fully staffed and that did not need additional officers.¹⁹

"AI, frankly, is dumber than a bag of hammers."

Sometimes, these tools just don't function. One security guard working in San Jose described the company phones that employees use for communicating and for clocking in and out:

*They give us phones we use while we're at work for all security related communications. They're electronics. I don't know if we're guinea pigs and this is the first year that these phones came out, but they're horrible. They're very militant about us clocking in and clocking out on time through them, but when you have a device that there's like a couple keys that I don't know if it's an electronic function error, you have to mash on it and you're still not able to get it to properly like connect. It's crazy.*²⁰

Security companies are also following the lead of companies like Amazon and Uber in using automated decision systems for workforce management.²¹ Automated decision systems (ADS) are programs which use technology, particularly AI, to assist or even fully replace human decision-making. ADS can even be used to dole out discipline.²² But minimizing and sometimes even eliminating human oversight in these processes can create problems for officers. This sort of broad disciplinary action, lacking individualized and human review is a risk of any automated decision system.

REMOTE MONITORING AND COMMAND TOOLS

Security companies have also expanded the use of remote and AI-assisted monitoring programs.^{23 24} These systems promise automated threat detection and instant communication with officers, but the reality on the ground raises questions about how this technology is being utilized. One security officer who works at a California art museum detailed how an AI-powered monitoring system frequently generates false alarms, flagging schoolchildren sitting on the floor as a "person down" or erroneously flagging staff and visitors for touching art.²⁵ *"AI, frankly, is dumber than a bag of hammers,"* she said.²⁶

Instead of improving officers' ability to do their jobs, the system creates constant noise and distractions, making it harder to identify real incidents.²⁷ One security officer noted that this technology has been used to justify reducing floor staff, framing it as efficiency.²⁸

*And they keep cutting, and then they use it as an excuse of we don't need as many officers. But the thing is, we get so many false alarms from AI that it's getting to where the alerts I take seriously are the ones where an officer reports an art disturbance.*²⁹

At the same time new security technology is being used to justify staffing cuts, it has also expanded the job responsibilities for security officers. Remote command apps may instruct officers to visit certain locations or perform specific tasks, and then document having done so.³⁰ One union security officer in California described the demands placed on officers to collect photos and data for their employer's remote incident reporting team:

*And then they just implemented this new thing where because [the remote team] is so busy now, they are like... the tech guys, we have to create tickets for things, which I kind of feel is completely inappropriate because we're not tech guys. We're just security officers. Like now having to go in and document precise things – area, pictures of problems, and then type everything for their data, and then that gets sent out. Before, we would let them know of the issue, and it would be [their] job to create tickets and stuff. Now, for us, they said it has to do with the fact that they're too busy doing other stuff and they can't be bothered to do it now. So now it's our job to do it.*³¹

Security officers have also described how the constant stream of notifications on their work phones is overwhelming and can distract from actually doing their jobs.^{32 33} An officer working in Silicon Valley described it this way:

*Going to work.... is stress. You have to be like a machine. Your eyes have to be on the phone at all times... I almost got hit by a car, because I'm just always on my phone.*³⁴

The rise of remote and automated command tools also poses a risk of de-skilling the security officer profession. Some remote command apps break down simple tasks into multi-step checklists in lieu of training officers to operate independently.³⁵ Employees tasked with completing checklists on their phones and instructed to follow step by step instructions are not equivalent to experienced security guards that know their worksites and clients and have the training and skills to respond to dynamic situations. The human element and professional expertise are essential to keeping people safe, and an app is not an equal substitute.

“You have to be like a machine. Your eyes have to be on the phone at all times.”

ONLINE AND MOBILE TRAINING PLATFORMS

Security companies have also developed online and remote training platforms for their officers.^{36 37 38 39} Given the high turnover of the security industry, the need to train new officers is constant, and remote training platforms can be useful with a workforce spread across thousands of worksites. But officer interviews raise questions about the quality of this training, with guards reporting that the online trainings are generic.⁴⁰ A union security officer in California described her employer's mobile training app as such:

*One of my criticisms is they don't really tailor the training to where you're at. I mean, I know during the winter, I had to keep answering questions on protection in snow and ice. That comes in real handy in Kansas City, but I mean, it might come in handy if you live in South Lake Tahoe or Grass Valley or something up in the Sierras where it does get snow, or living near Donner Pass, but on the coast, we don't get snow.*⁴¹

Besides training content that may be irrelevant to specific worksites, online learning platforms may fail to provide the personalized instruction and correction that in-person training offers. An officer described his employer's online training in the following words:

*I just feel they just want you to go through the training. And just that you did the training. To be honest, people are not paying attention to the training. You know, you fail, you do it again, then you take pictures of that one... People are not really getting knowledge.*⁴²

Students clicking through modules, skimming slides, and answering short quizzes, may also not be fully prepared to handle the emergency situations that arise from frontline security work. A union security officer in New York spoke about her desire for in-person and practical training:

*The training we desperately need in the immediate future is on-the-ground shadowing. New guards need to be paired with seniors for a full eight-hour shift to map out the geography and learn every exit. If a real crisis hits, a handbook won't save your life—knowing your site and having real de-escalation skills will.*⁴³

Online and remote training platforms cannot provide this type of learning and may leave officers unprepared for their job. These inexperienced, under-trained security officers may lack the judgement to make critical decisions which can lead to errors, exposing both the security firm, the client, and the public to risk.⁴⁴ As one union security officer in California stated:

*You know that saying, fake it till you make it? That's kind of how it is with the security industry... we don't do that to police officers, you know? And we're dealing with a lot of the same things police officers deal with, but we don't have the training, or any of the authority.*⁴⁵

PRIVACY AND SURVEILLANCE CONCERNS

The integration of tech and artificial intelligence into the security services industry also raises broad concerns around privacy. The push towards remote surveillance relies on networks of cameras and sensors capturing tenants, clients, and the broader public without their knowledge.⁴⁶ How that data is used, stored, and protected is an open question. There are also concerns around the use of facial recognition and license plate readers, and how private businesses share that data with law enforcement and government agencies.^{47 48}

Job site surveillance can also have a chilling effect on the ability of workers, such as security officers, to exercise their union rights and participate in concerted activity.⁴⁹ Security companies use technology to monitor, geotag, and track employees.⁵⁰ A union security officer described the feeling of being surveilled:

*It feels weird because it's like you're supposed to be the ones doing the surveillance and taking care of the property and the people. But at the same time, we're under such a microscope. At all times.*⁵¹

This presents a threat to officers seeking to organize and coordinate with their co-workers around improving workplace conditions. Workers may fear retaliation from managers that can observe them speaking with their colleagues and exercising their labor rights, and as a result may forgo concerted activity entirely.^{52 53} A union security officer who works the night shift shared that she is working to become a shop steward, but cannot collect signatures from any day shift workers because their surveillance is so intense:

*[Our employer is] very militant with the day shift, so I don't want to really bother the day shift, because I wouldn't want to get them in trouble... I have not been able to approach, really, any of them without me not wanting to, like, endanger [the jobs of] any of my coworkers.*⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

There are existing models of employers and employees collaborating on successful tech implementation, and security services companies should follow these examples and work with officers to understand what tools compliment and support their responsibilities, and which detract from and frustrate their efforts to keep the public safe.⁵⁵ In the absence of a collaborative implementation of new security tech, elected officials will likely consider regulatory and legal checks on these tools. Already, states are passing regulations around artificial intelligence.⁵⁶ These efforts may soon include limits on mass surveillance and biometric recognition technology, or requirements for “human in the loop” decision-making, which could prohibit automated disciplinary actions absent human review. Officers and the public have a stake in ensuring that security tech is deployed in a way that doesn’t violate labor and civil rights. Their input and participation is crucial to ensuring public safety.

Endnotes

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