

# An electronic eye on security

Oneberry automates labour-intensive jobs of security personnel. **TEO SI JIA** reports

IF SOMETHING needs monitoring, there are now new toys to do it with.

Homegrown Oneberry Technologies has put itself in the forefront of the surveillance business, including remote monitoring, by automating the traditionally labour-intensive job of security guards using both hardware and software. In doing this, it has also widened the scope of remote monitoring and opened up new opportunities for an industry long linked to low productivity.

It used to be that security guards had to observe and log their patrols. Now, virtual guards – cameras operated from a central command centre – can replace these guards' physical presence. Such devices can be customised to "talk", open doors, turn on lights and relay information to personnel at a command centre. This frees employees for other tasks, raising productivity.

Oneberry's chief executive officer Ken Pereira first identified, in 2003, the need to eliminate the physical aspects of providing security. He began by working on a software to bridge the communication channels among the guards, the security agencies and their clients.

Oneberry's first software, the Security Information Management System, digitised the recording and reporting processes inherent in the job of security guards, lowering manpower demand on-site.

Later, Oneberry incorporated better technology into its operations by introducing German-made Mobotix cameras and other functional add-ons.

Given that machines are more economical to use than human guards, surveillance systems have won converts from the construction, retail, food and beverage, transportation and healthcare sectors.

The government sector, which like businesses, is also facing a manpower crunch, has become a Oneberry client, using its software customised to perform tasks for government services that are far beyond the ambit of a typical security guard. For example, software has been configured to read water levels, to keep track of how long a car has been parked, to detect fires and track temperatures; Oneberry now monitors high-rise littering for the National Environmental Agency, the safety and security of reservoirs and flood risks for the Public Utilities Board (PUB), illegal parking and vacant sites for the Housing Development Board, among other things.

Oneberry has snagged S\$20 million in projects from government statutory boards in the last three years. PUB contracts alone account for S\$12.4 million.

The company's revenue hit S\$4 million last year, up from S\$1 million in 2011, and it expects to sustain the increase to reach S\$8 mil-



**Mr Pereira:** 'A lot of things have been automated over the years, but if you look at security, it is the last to automate, the reason being that it's at the bottom end of the market.' PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

lion in the fiscal 2014.

Oneberry has invested S\$3 million in research and development for the last two years.

It has not always been a smooth road to this point. Mr Pereira said that at the start, the security market had not been ready to automate, and that guards were still relatively inexpensive to hire.

But the cost of security has since swelled, with the salary of guards having doubled from a decade ago. If the labour movement's proposal, to raise security guards' pay by S\$300 to make their minimum monthly pay of S\$1,100, goes through, this cost will rise further.

It is thus the right time to tap the potential of remote monitoring, he said, but he has found himself face to face with old mindsets: "In any organisation, people always look at security as a cost. It is not a profit centre... It is so intangible that people don't care about security."

Another concern in the industry is manpower shortage. On paper, there are 70,000 certified security guards, but only 40,000 are in active service, said Mr Pereira.

To overcome this shortfall, Oneberry identifies and weeds out sources of manpower wastage by designing software to take the place of the manual work once required.

The unglamorous reputation of the security function, including its blue-collar nature, has not made things easier.

Mr Pereira said: "A lot of things have been automated over the years, but if you look at security, it

is the last to automate, the reason being that it's at the bottom end of the market. Next to security is cleaning. Who's going to put rocket science into the bottom end?"

Even the cleaning industry has ditched broom and mop for machines, leaving the security industry in the dust.

Mr Pereira cited traditional mindsets as another hurdle for the belated acceptance of remote monitoring: "I would say it is still new in this region because people still want to see the traditional guard there."

Oneberry has its competitors, but it is distinguishing itself from the pack through its holistic approach, by offering its clients a "total solution". He concedes that Oneberry's business model might be copied, but insists that it enjoys first-mover advantage; he reckons the company is "two to three years ahead" of the competition.

He welcomes competition, which he said will bring mass-market appeal to remote monitoring.

Though regional expansion remains on the cards, the company has identified another avenue of expansion – franchising its operation model to other Singapore security companies. Talks to license some security companies here are ongoing. For these typically-traditional companies, the advantage is that they can hit the ground running, with no need to invest in infrastructure.

Mr Pereira still believes, however, that not all jobs are going to the bots – at least, not yet.

"We still need that man inside

the machine to make that informed decision... We have the machines to do the work, but man makes the decision, not the machine. The machine cannot make the decision because the machine cannot go to court."

The job of security guards will not be phased out so soon. If anything, the new technology could resurrect it, but in a new form: with the physical requirements removed from the job, the position could be opened up to more people.

For Oneberry, this scenario makes its future more secure.



This profile is the 10th of a series of features on the 16 finalists of the Emerging Enterprise Award 2014. Jointly presented by *The Business Times* and OCBC Bank, the Emerging Enterprise Award 2014 recognises promising enterprises and startups which are up to 10 years old and have an annual turnover of S\$15 million or less. It is supported by RSM Chio Lim, MasterCard, SingTel, ACORN Marketing & Research Consultants, INSEAD and SPRING Singapore. The winners will be unveiled at a gala dinner on August 29.

