NUCLEUS RESEARCH

CELLEBRITE GUARDIAN
HARRIS COUNTY DA

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THE BOTTOM LINE

The Harris County District Attorney's Office implemented Cellebrite Guardian to add efficiency to its digital forensics operations. Previously limited by the lack of features and storage space of the agency's legacy evidence management solution, leaders selected Guardian due to the breadth of its capabilities and high levels of data storage capacity. Nucleus found that upon the implementation of Guardian, the DA's office was able to reduce its reliance on hard drives and flash drives, resulting in an approximate annual savings of $80,000. Additional benefits include improved digital evidence workflow efficiency.

THE AGENCY

The Harris County District Attorney's Office is located in Houston, Texas. The agency is unique as it does not work in a normal law enforcement capacity and must provide evidence directly to the District Attorney. This duty makes the ability to efficiently extract and share evidence from things like phone extractions, critical to its operational success.

THE CHALLENGE

The Harris County District Attorney's office has been a Cellebrite customer for more than eight years, using various products across the vendor's portfolio. However, prior to the implementation of Guardian, it was using a legacy evidence management system. The system had lightweight functionality, and leaders wanted a solution that was more feature-rich. Additionally, the DA's office was beginning to struggle with storage space limitations with its prior system due to the size of files that it needed to work with. This led to significant amounts of extracted data needing to be uploaded to flash drives to be shared with necessary parties. From a security perspective, this approach presented risk and often required physical travel between agencies to collect evidence.

THE STRATEGY

Upon recognizing the need for a new solution for digital evidence workflow management, the agency evaluated Guardian and another product with similar features. Ultimately, the selection came down to cloud storage, which was a top priority. Guardian was chosen as it not only met functionality needs but also offered more storage capacity than the other evaluated solution.

The initial implementation and rollout of Guardian took approximately three to four months, with an additional month of testing to ensure that everything was running smoothly. The DA's office took a piloted approach, initially rolling the solution out to the two primary agencies that submit data to it. Access permissions were a primary consideration, as the nature of the data collected is extremely sensitive. Once these agencies became comfortable with the system, the DA's office provided access to all the 150 agencies it works with. The bulk of the implementation, rollout, and testing was managed by a forensic investigator and administrator. A representative noted that it was easy to provide access to new agencies, with the only necessary steps including an e-mail composed by the administrator that prompts account creation. The intuitive, web-based nature of Guardian led to a minimal need for training. For example, internal training for one unit involved approximately seven employees who were trained on an informal, as-needed basis.

KEY BENEFIT AREAS

The primary benefit areas seen as a result of the agency's Guardian deployment include reduced hardware costs and improved workflow efficiency and collaboration, with the opportunity to expand benefits as the use of the solution continues.

- **Reduced Hardware Costs.** While the county-wide software infrastructure remained in place despite the deployment of Guardian, the substantial storage space afforded by the solution was able to save the Harris County DA's office significant hardware costs. Nucleus found that by virtually eliminating the need for previous methods of data sharing, the agency is estimated to save approximately $80,000 annually in flash drive and hard drive costs.

- **Improved Workflow Efficiency and Collaboration.** While not quantified as part of this analysis, the use of Guardian has added tangible efficiency to the agency's digital evidence workflow management. For example, the solution has made it easier for the agency to import data into Pathfinder, Cellebrite's digital evidence analysis automation platform. Additionally, cross-functional collaboration has improved as agencies can share digital evidence and reports with the DA's office more easily and no longer have to fill out physical forms to submit materials. Rather, the solution is available to agencies through a web interface that does not require downloads to access data. This has saved time for various agency representatives who would have had to otherwise travel to the DA's office to pick up or drop off flash drives.

- **Incremental Benefit Opportunity.** While the DA's office has only had Guardian in place for approximately six months, having e-discovery capabilities for the kinds of cases it handles will continue to deliver additional benefits in the long term. Previously facing limitations presented by the size of data, the agency can now assist with critical cases more quickly and efficiently, noting the importance of having a sophisticated, feature-rich solution and a vendor partner that is committed to innovation.

LESSONS LEARNED

The choice to roll Guardian out to two initial agencies before expanding use across all 150 agencies that submit to the Harris County District Attorney's Office helped to mitigate any potential adoption issues Overall, the agency's ongoing partnership with the vendor and its representatives has been pivotal to the initial success of the deployment of Guardian. Acknowledging that larger software vendors aren't always adept at providing ongoing support, the agency has made clear that Cellebrite representatives have made themselves available to the DA's office whenever necessary. This will be instrumental to the agency's long-term success with its Guardian implementation as it takes advantage of additional features to drive further incremental value.