



New technology may help end tiger kidnappings

The recent spate of 'tiger kidnappings' has opened up the personal security market with firms looking at new mobile phone and GPS systems that offer greater protection to employees, writes **Éamon McGrane**

Wealth and boom times for the Irish economy have led to an increase in more targeted crime, particularly against staff in financial organisations.

The recent spate of so-called "tiger kidnappings" has opened up a debate on personal safety issues for keyholders and other employees of financial institutions.

Tiger kidnapping are robberies where an employee is forced to act upon the instructions of kidnappers while their family is held hostage by a gang.

The rise in such incidents has led the Irish Bank Officials' Association (IBOA) to advise its 20,000 members to think carefully before agreeing to become keyholders.

But can technology help prevent such attacks? A company called Top Security reckons it can, and recently launched a series of products aimed at the personal safety market.

The offerings come under the brand name of Toplocate and use a landline and mobile phone as security devices. The idea is that if a person doesn't arrive home at a predefined time, an alarm is raised to a designated person or persons.

The company's most interesting product and the one most pertinent in terms of financial employees' security, is called the VIP Service and uses GPS (global positioning system) technology on a mobile phone to track the person being attacked.

Instead of the alarm going to a individual, it is

directed to a security centre that notifies the Garda and locates the incident thanks to GPS on the phone.

The alert is raised by the user pressing the number five on the phone's keypad as a panic button.

Top Security chairman Emmet O'Rafferty says his company has been in talks with a number of organisations about the technology and has received a positive response.

"I think there are two aspects here to consider. Part of this falls under health and safety for employees and there is a duty on the employer in that regard.

"If I was a person who had responsibility for opening up a bank each morning and my employer came to me and said we've identified a solution that you should avail of, I know it would give me a greater level of comfort. And if I got into trouble, I'd have some method of communicating and letting

people know what's going on."

O'Rafferty is keen to stress that the technology won't, by itself, stop attempted kidnappings but would be another component in their prevention.

"What it does is help to co-ordinate the emergency response and provide the Garda with immediate detailed information.

"Everything to do with dealing and solving crime is about limiting time and good information. This technology should limit the exposure of people to attack."

Eircom, known for its Phonewatch security system, could also be eyeing an entry into the personal security market via mobile phones. With the acquisition of Meteor under its belt, Phonewatch chief executive Nick Quigley says the company believes there is a good business proposition in personal security at the moment.

"We're currently working on a number of products," he says.

"There are some interesting technologies coming down the track and we've seen the cost for GPS coming down. GPS is the key to a positioning product and we are working on a number of things in that area."

But what of the people in the line of fire? Echoing the anxiety of financial service employees, Larry Broderick, general secretary of the IBOA, says his union believes there is an urgent need for financial institutions and the Department of Justice to review

policy in relation to keyholders.

“The Tánaiste and Minister for Justice should initiate a joint working group involving the Garda, the Department of Justice, banking and security industry as well as staff representatives to monitor developments in the general area of security within the financial services sector.

“The IBOA believes this body should have as its main remit, an examination of practical measures that will enhance the security and safety of staff and their families.”

A Garda representative said any form of technology that could improve personal security was welcome.

“We would see technology solutions as a great benefit, in addition to simple things such as altering your movements, not taking the same route to work and being aware of your own personal security.”

An alarm is directed to a security centre that notifies the Garda and locates the incident thanks to the GPS system on the phone



The security van from which over €1 million was stolen after the family of the driver was kidnapped and forced to hand over the money in Carlow town. Photograph: Éamonn Farrell/Photocall