Tracking the tables

By Neil Sutton

Analysis software helps the Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority keep tabs on player behaviour and incident management.

There's stacks of chips on gaming tables, thousands of coins in slot machines, wads of cash in safes behind closed doors, and dozens of people — players, dealers, cashiers, pit bosses — who at one time or another have had their hands all over it.

This is the situation facing Daniel Morin, director of surveillance and security for the Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority (SIGA), a Saskatoon-based organization that operates five First Nations casinos in the province (a sixth will open later this year).

Like any other security director, Morin is accountable for his department's budget. It has been said that it's difficult to justify a security budget, since security works optimally when nothing out of the ordinary seems to be happening. But Morin is in a position to show SIGA just how much his department is saving the company: all those chips and all that cash is closely monitored by cameras, which is in turn viewed by security personnel who can note any incidents they witness using iTrak software, an analysis suite from Oakville, Ont.-based iView Systems.

Daniel Morin, director of surveillance and security for the Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority

"We can say, 'This employee has overpaid this many times for this amount of money… has made this many mistakes, so we can target that person for retraining.'"

"Looking at a blackjack table versus a poker table versus a Caribbean Stud table, there are certain violation codes that employees can commit," adds Dan Vukobrat, iView's sales manager.

"We have ways to mine the data for violation codes. What that does is give the users of our system the ability to filter the data and find out if a certain dealer has paid out incorrectly too many times or if they've made too many errors in a certain game and they need to be retrained at that game. It's a very good tool from an employee performance point of view."

Another place iTrak can save the casinos money is in court. If a patron sues one of SIGA's casinos because he slipped on a step, iTrak will likely have a video record of the incident, which can then be entered into evidence should the matter escalate.

"If we've got the footage, the incident reports, the pictures, if we've got everything, we're able to bring that to court and if the case gets tossed out, then we know we've saved $10,000, or whatever it happens to be," says Morin.

SIGA has been using iView System's iTrak and Incident Reporting Risk Management Platform for just over a year. SIGA went through an RFP process to find the software, says Morin. Other vendors' products were considered but rejected since they weren't as well suited to the casino business.

iTrak "flowed very nicely with the way our operations worked, with daily logs and incident files numbers and the option to put subjects and banned patrons in there, and to track our own personnel," says Morin.

"Our system is a data collection tool and measuring tool," says Vukobrat. "There's lots of things that go on in a casino environment, both from a security and a surveillance standpoint that have to be documented and understand by the staff to minimize associated losses to that environment. Primary to that is knowing the patrons who visit your establishment.

"If you have a profile and a certain understanding of a patron or suspicious person, then you have a much better chance of success for dealing with that person in an appropriate manner. And also dealing with that situation in an appropriate way such that there's no real exposure to the other patrons as a disruptive situation."

Casinos are crowded places these days, says Morin. Thanks to the rise in the popularity of gambling due to televised events, the online poker craze (which peaked a few years ago), and movies like the *Ocean's Eleven* series, more people are walking through casino doors than ever before.

"Casinos are becoming busier, so that requires us to be paying more attention to a lot more activity now."

It's not easy to cheat a casino, but that doesn't stop some people from trying. The days of people trying to rig a slot machine to pay off may be over — Morin says modern slots are notoriously difficult to tamper with —

but table cheats are still plying their trade.

"With table games — well, you don't see a lot of swapping of dice, or things like that — it's a difficult manoeuvre to pull off — but you do see the smaller stuff: capping, pinching, taking money off of bets, some card counting," he says. "Card counting isn't an illegal activity, but it's considered advantaged play. You do see some of those types of things."

Morin says he isn't too concerned about card counters — math whizzes who can keep track of the number of winning cards left in the deck — since they have relatively low impact on the overall bottom line. "It's really not good to chase a player away. At the end of the day, the house advantage still holds."

A bigger worry is the potential for organized crime to launder money through a casino by buying chips with tainted cash then recouping clean currency by cashing the chips back in again.

"If we see someone who's bringing in a lot of $20s or $10s… we're looking at the money-laundering aspects," he says.

iTrak is able to log these incidents and build a player profile. A player caught cheating or involved in illegal activity might be banned — not only in the casino where the incident happened but in all of

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SIGA's gaming establishments. Since iTrak is hosted at SIGA's central offices, all of the casinos have access to the data.

SIGA also shares information with other casinos organizations like the SGC (Saskatchewan Gaming Corp.), says Morin. But not through iTrak. Not yet, anyway.

"We are approaching them and approaching our regulator, the Saskatchewan Gaming Authority, to amalgamate our databases and link them somehow. There's a feature within iTrak that would allow us to do so."

Morin is also open to sharing information more widely — perhaps with casinos in other provinces. He already compares notes with other gaming organizations at the various conferences geared towards the industry — mostly to swap tips about staff training.

Morin is convinced that the availability of data is helping his casinos save money, keep staff on their toes and discourage cheating, but the goal of the security department is to make the overall casino experience more enjoyable.

"We're more engaged with the customer, and more focused on providing that pleasant experience," he says. "Providing help and first aid, as opposed to being there to look big and tough and kick people out. We're trying to enhance that side of the security department." ■

"Say we have a gaming cheat, or somebody who's stealing from one of our tables, we look at the losses there and potential losses that could have occurred if we didn't track this information," he explains.

The software is designed to meet the particular needs of casinos, and includes modules such as game audits, player analysis, incident reporting and daily logs.

"Those are important in the gaming (business), because being perceived as a non-revenue-generating department, it's always nice to say, 'Hey look, we saved you money,'" he says.

It's not only the players and gaming tables that are under scrutiny. Cages, cashier windows and point-of-sale locations are also closely monitored. Almost every day, an employee is caught overpaying or underpaying a player.

But it's rarely a case of employee theft, he says. It's typically due to a counting error. The iTrak software logs the number of incidents and flags them so extra training can be scheduled for employees who need a refresher.