

Biometrics given a workout

Simon Hayes MAY 09, 2006

RUNNING a network of 20 corporate gyms in NSW is a challenge, but making sure all 800 members use their memberships correctly is harder.

Corporate health program operator Alpha One provides gym access to employees of large companies, including NSW utility Energy Australia.

Through a network of partnerships with gym owners, it on-sells access to businesses, which provide subsidised staff membership. It does not own the gyms, but sells bulk memberships to corporate clients.

To make sure staff were not misusing discounted memberships by passing them on to family and friends, Alpha One introduced a tracking system to audit use and ensure that only authorised employees accessed the gym network.

It ditched traditional cards in favour of biometrics because cards were too easy to pass on to others, and too hard to check.

Having tested various systems, including handprint technology, since 2004, the company opted for digital fingerprint readers, coupled with software developed by sister company Caretrack.

"Our service is for a company that has offices across geographic regions that wants to offer an equitable service to all its employees," Alpha One chief executive Troy Grogan says.

"It's perfect for banks, for example, because a member can go to any centre in the network.

"If you work in the CBD and want to continue your program on the weekends, your fingerprint provides instant entry to one of our gyms in the national network."

Caretrack uses a semiconductor sensor, with its software running on a standard PC to enrol members and register each use of the centre, connecting the terminal to its central system over the mobile phone network. The software, built in a modular way to allow upgrades, is written in Delphi and runs on Microsoft Windows XP.

"We add fitness centres to our network to suit the needs of our corporate clients," Grogan says.

"The advantage of the technology is that we can change or set up services at almost any national location with minimal lead time." The company is also considering biometrically based advertising directed at members, and could link the system to rewards programs and retail.

Members have welcomed the technology, and it seems the convenience outweighs concerns.

The system does not copy the fingerprint, but takes measurements that it matches with its file record. "We haven't had any negative feedback," Grogan says. "The information is stored on our central server."

Data from the system is provided to employers to track gym use, and for billing purposes.

Technological development director Max Andreas says individuals are becoming increasingly protective of their identities, and more accepting of systems that accurately identify them.

"We live in an untrusting world, and that means we need to prove and protect our identity," he says.

"Biometrics seemed to be the best all round. These are not high-value transactions, so we didn't need super-high security."

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