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Access control is the process involved in managing admittance to and from your property or part of it. The actual control may be as straightforward as a doorkeeper or receptionist; it could be a mechanical control using keys and locks; or a sophisticated electronic system involving computers, biometric identification and other new technology. A combination of human and electronic security measures is generally referred to as a total security solution.

Regardless of the physical components used, at the heart of an access control system lie the policies which govern personnel, location and time. These are the rules governing who is allowed to enter or exit, where they are allowed to enter or exit, and when they are allowed to enter or exit. When put together, this matrix and its associated authorisation and maintenance protocols are the driving force behind any access-control operation.

It is the potential intricacy of these variants that has driven the trend for intelligent computerised access-control systems, which are much better suited to the management of changing circumstances. For example, someone may be permitted entry to a particular room on weekdays but not at weekends, unless a supervisor is on the premises. Technology is much better suited to the control of such algorithms than doorkeepers and, where mechanical keys and locks are used, these have no time-related constraint at all.

Electronic access control systems also have other significant benefits. Accurate records are automatically updated, providing information on all activity within the building. Remote monitoring can be maintained and closed-circuit television footage electronically stored for retrieval and review in the event of an incident. Manpower can be withdrawn in favour of one-off capital expenditure, thus reducing expensive overheads.

The benefits of human involvement must not be ignored, however. Decisions on site often require a level of judgement rather than blind observance of rules. The traditional security guard is fast being replaced by multi-skilled officers who combine access control with other on-site service activities as part of the facilities management team. In many establishments, members of the security team are the most familiar faces in the building and play the vital role of providing visitors with their first impression of the organisation. In the modern age, customer service is therefore part of access control as well.

For more information contact the Access Control Committee of the British Security Industry Association (www.bsia.co.uk).