

If the words 'private eye' conjure up images of a seedy bloke in a trench coat skulking in doorways, think again. Rather than Raymond Chandler's down-at-heel private detective Philip Marlowe, modern-day gumshoes have reinvented themselves as a vital tool for business.

Thanks to the recession, companies are falling over themselves to bring in investigators to tackle a growing problem of employee theft and fraud.

Mike Rees (*pictured*), who has just set up a branch of national private eye firm Answers Investigation covering Oxfordshire, believes the financial meltdown is one of the main reasons business is booming.

Mr Rees, 56, said: "Firms are finding the potential for fraud against them is greater in this environment because people are struggling financially and are more tempted to do things they might not otherwise have done. We are also being given more work because companies are taking legal action to recover debts."

Typically, the company charges £54.50 an hour plus VAT and travel expenses but it varies, according to Mr Rees, who worked in financial services for 30 years before being made redundant from the anti-fraud department of a large insurance company and adapting his skills to become a private investigator.

About a third of his work is for private individuals, following errant husbands or wives and tracing long lost relatives.

But the best-paid work is to be found in the lucrative corporate and legal sectors.

Often a firm will call in a private eye to find out whether or how employees are stealing from them. Another common job is to investigate staff who have had an accident at work and are claiming permanent injury.

Mr Rees added: "These people may be receiving lots of compensation from the firm, so we find out if what they are saying is true.

"And if not, we provide evidence, for instance, getting footage of people who are supposed to be unable to walk playing basketball."

A private investigator also comes in handy for solicitors who need to serve legal documents on people who would rather not receive them.

Another frequent commission involves mystery shopping for large retail chains.

Mr Rees explained: "We send people in to off licences or supermarkets to see whether they can buy alcohol, using someone who is over 18 but looks younger.

"We report the results back to the retailer's head office and they use that information to work out whether they need to provide more training to stop that sort of thing happening."

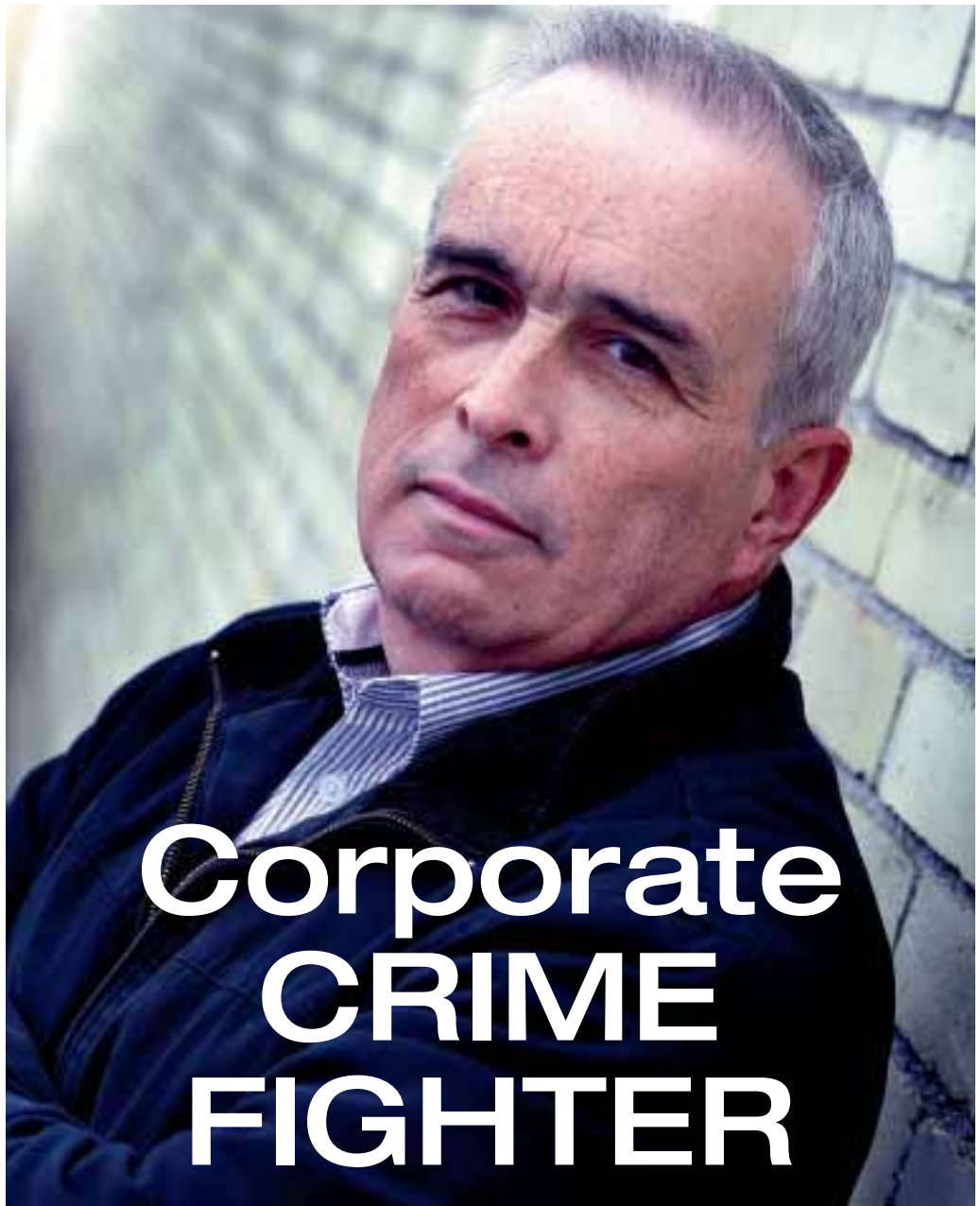
Half of Answers Investigation's 12 permanent staff nationwide are women, including a squad of females dubbed 'The Real Charlie's Angels' for their undercover activities. The company will also use freelance investigators based in Oxfordshire as and when required.

And gadgets are an essential part of the job, as Mr Rees pointed out.

"The big thing for us is capturing the evidence and most clients want pictorial proof, whether stills or video.

"If it is a static surveillance where we are sitting in a van somewhere, we will use large digital SLR cameras with long lenses. Obviously, if we are closer to the individual, carrying a big camera is a giveaway, so we use smaller, covert cameras.

"We have sometimes disguised a camera as part of a lady's handbag and used another that looks like a key ring fob. But we have to be very



# Corporate CRIME FIGHTER

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careful about how we use covert cameras because there is a privacy issue."

One of Mr Rees's most recent cases was for a London landlord who had let his premises out to a Chinese medicine shop and massage parlour.

After complaints that there was more than just massage going on there, the landlord asked if he would go undercover. He went for a massage and was offered other services so, as they say, made his excuses and left.

His affidavit saying that was what had happened was enough for the landlord to bring in police and start eviction proceedings.

Another mission involved intellectual property theft, where ex-employees were suspected of stealing their former employer's customer database. He explained: "We bought a tray of sandwiches and walked into the suspects' office saying we were thinking of starting a sandwich round for local businesses.

"We offered them a free sample and engaged

them in conversation about starting a business and how we were finding it difficult to get new clients.

"Eventually we got around to how they had found their clients and they told us they had stolen the database.

"As we were recording the conversation, that was enough for a judge to put an injunction on them and to have their computer equipment analysed and it was found they had taken the database."

Mr Rees says his firm has plenty of work and is not expecting this to change, at least not until the economy recovers.

He joked: "One of my clients said: 'When I have financial problems, I contact my accountant. When I have legal problems, I contact my solicitor. But when I have one of those problems I just do not know what to do with, that's when I contact you guys'."

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