

What is Information Security?

Jay Jacobson, April 2003

Allow me to make this a little bit personal. Before you can understand the concept of information security, you must decide what 'security' means to you and your business. Perhaps to you, information security means building a virtual Fort Knox to keep your business safe from hackers. Alternatively, maybe in your mind, information security is nothing more than a nifty buzzword. The point is that 'security' means different things to different people and there is nothing wrong with that.

However, there is some common ground. If your business is connected to the Internet, even if it is just "a little cable modem only for email," information security is important to you. Sure, you may not believe it yet, but trust me, someday you will realize that information security is a *business issue*, not just some geeky nirvana. If someone attacks your business causing significant damage, whether physically or electronically, that is not just some "technical problem" – it is a *business* problem. This is why it is important for you, the business executive, to take information security seriously.

True story: A successful businessman owned a thriving professional services company. His business was not a technology company, but they did have a small web site and used the Internet for research and communications. The business had an "I.T. guy" who handled all of the computer and networking issues and did a fantastic job. One day, hackers, just playing around for their own malicious fun, attacked this prosperous business and gained access to their private customer records through a vulnerability in the company's computers. The businessman had incorrectly assumed that information security was just "a technical thing" and thus their I.T. guy was taking care of it, however the I.T. guy had assumed the businessman did not consider security important. There was no executive-level mandate for information security. The sensitive customer data was released on the Internet, the business' reputation and trust was destroyed, and over 85% of their customers went to competitors. The successful businessman's once-thriving company is bankrupt today.

When it comes to information security, most companies fall somewhere between two extreme boundaries: complete access and complete security. A completely secure computer is one that is not connected to any network, not plugged in, and physically unreachable by anyone. A computer like this is unusable and does not serve much of a practical purpose. On the other hand, a computer with complete access is very easy to use, requiring no passwords or authorization to provide any information. Unfortunately, having a computer with complete access is also not practical because it would expose every bit of information publicly, from customer records to financial documents. Obviously, there is a middle ground – this is the art of information security.

Like many specialized trades, practicing the "art" and science of information security is left to professionals. However, that does not mean business executives should ignore it or assume "...the technical guy is taking care of that..." You may not be a locksmith, but you still lock your doors. Information security does not have to be a painful and expensive process. Just like locking your doors, information security can be very simple and affordable.

This article was written by Jay Jacobson, CEO of Edgeos, Inc.

<jay@edgeos.com> 480.961.5996

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