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Simple Security Tips for Solos and Small Firms

by

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It can be an ugly world out there in cyberspace. Viruses, worms, spyware, adware, and hackers all threaten the security and stability of your computers. Then there are the security lapses we bring upon ourselves due to lack of knowledge or simple carelessness. But there are several simple, inexpensive, and sometimes free things you can do to protect the security of your computers, network, and data.

Anti-Virus Software: You absolutely must run up-to-date anti-virus software on all of your computers. Anything less brands you as an irresponsible cybercitizen. Use software that makes the virus definition update process as simple and automatic as possible. I like Symantec's Norton anti-virus software for its easy to use Live Update feature. But programs from McAfee and Computer Associates work just as well. If you don't want to pay for anti-virus software, Grisoft distributes a free version of their AVG anti-virus program at www.grisoft.com. Check your definitions now. If they are more than a week out of date, you are taking an unnecessary risk.

Spyware/Malware: Unfortunately, anti-virus software will not protect your computer from the latest category of threats on the internet. These include spyware, adware, and malware. These are often small programs that secretly install on your computer when you open email attachments or visit certain web sites. They monitor your web browsing habits, send the information to third parties, cause pop-up ads to appear on your screen, and sometimes completely disable your computer like a virus or worm can do. The typical symptoms are excessive popups, changes in your web browser's home page, and just plain slow performance of your system.

Use one of the free or commercially sold spyware removal programs to scan your computer and remove the offending files and programs. The best of the free programs are Spybot Search & Destroy and Ad-Aware SE. Both are available for download at www.download.com. The best commercial program is Spy Sweeper by WebRoot. Download a trial copy at www.webroot.com. The registered version costs \$30 for a one year subscription. Once you install spyware removal software, make sure you update and run it weekly, or more often if you notice more pop-ups, slow performance, or other unusual behavior.

Firewall: Never connect your computer directly to a cable or DSL modem. Unfortunately, many Internet Service Providers (ISP's) come to your office or home, install the cable or DSL modem, then connect that modem directly to the network port on your computer. Unless you take the time to install and properly configure firewall software, your computer and everything on it could be exposed to intruders on the internet. Software firewalls can be difficult to configure, and often users end up with less protection than they need or accidentally disable their ability to browse the web, run programs, or receive email.

The best solution for home or a small law office with just a few computers on a peer-to-peer network is a broadband router. This device acts as a simple but effective firewall that prevents outsiders from hacking into your computer over the internet. No firewall is 100% foolproof. But a modern router, especially a new model with both Network Address Translation (NAT) and Stateful Packet Inspection (SPI) protection, should be all you need. A router also gives you the added ability to share your high speed internet connection with other computers in your home or small office. I recommend routers from Linksys for their reasonable price, ease of

use, and reliability.

Metadata: Many lawyers and law office staff forget that a Microsoft Word document (or Excel spreadsheet) contains far more information than what is visible on screen. This hidden information, known as "Metadata" can reveal more about your document, how it was created and edited, by whom, etc., than you typically want others to know. In some cases, accidental exposure of this information has lost cases and ruined careers.

Your first line of defense against metadata is to avoid sending documents via email in Word format. Unless you absolutely want the recipient to be able to edit your work, first convert it to non-editable format, such as Adobe's Portable Document Format, or PDF. PDF files also contain some metadata, but at least they are not editable. Sending files in PDF format has the added advantage of preserving the formatting and appearance of your document. If you create a document in Word 2003 and send it to someone in standard Word (DOC) format and they try to open it with Word 97 or WordPerfect, the appearance and formatting may be substantially different than what you intended.

If you must send a document in Word format, use one of these tools to remove the hidden data before you send it. The leading utility to remove metadata is Payne Consulting's Metadata Assistant. This software, by leading Microsoft Word expert Donna Payne, gives you complete control over how much information is, or is not, transmitted with your Word or Excel document. For more information, go to www.payneconsulting.com.

If you are looking for a simple and free, but less flexible, solution to the metadata problem, Microsoft has released its own tool that removes most of the hidden data from Word, Excel, and PowerPoint files. It only works with Office XP and 2003, so those of you using Word 2000 or earlier are out of luck (one of many good reasons to upgrade to Office 2003). You can download the free Microsoft Hidden Data Removal Tool at www.microsoft.com/downloads/.

Safely Disposing of Old Computers: Clean off your data before donating or disposing of your old computers. You may have finally taken the smart step to replaced those old Windows 98 dinosaurs that were costing you so much money in lost productivity (not to mention the added aggravation for your staff). Now you have a pile of old computers taking up space in your file room, many containing confidential client, personal, or law firm information. You can't just throw them in the dumpster or donate them to a church or school with that information on the hard drive.

Utilities (small computer programs) are available that will wipe the hard disk of a computer completely clean, destroying all of the data on the disk. A good one is Darik's Boot and Nuke. It can be obtained at <http://dban.sourceforge.net>.

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Scott Bassett is an attorney licensed in Michigan, but now doing technology consulting for InTouch Business Consultants, Inc., in Seminole, Florida. He resides in Bradenton, Florida, with his wife, two children, a Labrador retriever, and two kittens. Scott continues to handle a small number of Michigan family law appeals via the internet. He is a past chair of the State Bar of Michigan Family Law Section, a Fellow of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, and an amateur musician.