

Bulletin Board: Watch yourself - identity theft can occur at work

by Amy_Winter

You may want to think twice before you toss important documents into the trash at work. Careless disposal methods could lead to loss of confidential information or worse - workplace identity theft.

Ira Winkler, a certified information systems security professional, conducts corporate espionage simulations in order to examine crimes against companies. He is then able to tell the company how to shield important documents and computer files. During his investigations, he has come upon significant papers, such as an executive salary list and a letter accusing someone of sexual harassment, in office garbage bins.

Workplace theft occurs when company information or information about customers is leaked to outsiders. It can be passed through documents thrown in the trash, papers left on a desk or computer files improperly stored.

"Identity theft has always been a problem, but it is becoming worse," says Winkler.

Eighty-five percent of businesses have been exposed to a data breach involving the loss of customer, consumer or employee data in the last two years, according to the Ponemon Institute.

"With an ongoing exchange of paper in offices, the workplace is an increasingly desirable target for identity thieves," says Winkler.

Winkler believes theft occurs in the workplace because many employees don't use common sense. There is a lack of awareness that the simple things matter, and simple documents can add up to lawsuits. To avoid potential stalkers or a possible lawsuit, keep shredders near desks or close to copy machines.

"It is essential that businesses incorporate shredders into their office environment and proactively encourage employees to shred all of their confidential information," says Nancy Heaton, senior global marketing manager for Fellowes Inc., a shredder manufacturer. "Shredding with a cross-cut machine on-site is one of the easiest ways to guarantee that private information doesn't get into the hands of identity thieves."

Winkler provides some other suggestions for companies to prevent theft before having to deal with the consequences:

- Create office guidelines that outline the proper ways to get rid of confidential documents.
- Put sensitive information away at the end of the day. Avoid leaving papers on your desk.
- Write passwords in a hidden place. Don't jot down important numbers on a Post-it and stick it to your computer screen.

Winkler says computer software protection is essential to prevent stealing of files. Up-to-date anti-virus, anti-spyware and firewall software are examples of basic software used to protect files.

Fellowes Inc. offers businesses additional tips:

- Protect files with passwords.

- Reduce usage of Social Security numbers in the office.
- Conduct background checks on possible employees.
- Turn off computers and lock up workstations or offices at the end of the day.

"Small businesses are particularly at risk because they don't always have the resources to protect their information," says Winkler. "Protecting your data is protecting your business. No matter how big or small the business, you must ensure that the proper policies are in place to protect sensitive data."

For more information visit www.fellowes.com.

BE A TEAM PLAYER

It's the end of the day and the assignment is almost due. Each team member needs to complete his or her portion. Time is running out.

Meeting deadlines is an essential characteristic of a team player, according to 40 percent of executives polled in a survey by Accountemps, a staffing service, which questioned 150 senior executives. The percentage increased from 37 percent in a similar survey from 1997.

Twenty-five percent of respondents say avoiding politics is most important when it comes to classifying a team player. Pleasant to work with comes in third with 20 percent, while supports his or her manager is in fourth with 13 percent. And 2 percent of respondents are unsure.

"The term 'team player' has been used so frequently that it's lost much of its meaning, but it essentially refers to honoring obligations and being supportive of co-workers," says Max Messmer, chairman of Accountemps and author of "Managing your Career for Dummies." "These attributes have always been important, but they're especially valuable now, given the amount of collaboration required in today's workplace."

Accountemps suggests these tips for becoming a more valuable team player in the office:

- Produce practical objectives and expectations by creating early roles for each team member.
- Prioritize projects.
- Admit mistakes when something goes wrong. Don't resort to the blame game.
- Thank those who help assist in the group's success, and be generous in praise.
- Respect your group members and try to eliminate office politics.

For more information, visit www.accountemps.com.

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