In this series, we are reviewing some of the implications of personnel management for information security. I started the series with hiring; the other end of the employer-employee relationship also deserves attention from a security-conscious manager. Taking our security mandate in the widest sense, we have to protect our employer and ourselves against potential damage from unethical, disgruntled or incompetent employees and against the legal consequences of improper firing procedures. Common sense and common decency argue for humane and sensitive treatment of people being fired and those who are resigning.

Resignations

The potentially most dangerous form of employment termination is the resignation. The problem is summed up in the caption of a cartoon I once saw. A savage attack is in progress against a medieval town; a clan war chieftain confronts a singed and dirty warrior. "No, no, Thor! Pillage, THEN burn!" Like the warriors, employees rarely resign without planning. An employee may have an indefinite period during which he or she knows that resignation is imminent, whereas the employer may remain unaware of the situation. If the employee has bad feelings towards or evil designs on the current employer, there is a period of vulnerability unknown to management. Dishonest or unbalanced employees could steal information or equipment, cause immediate or delayed damage using programmatic techniques (the so-called "logic-bomb"), or introduce faulty data into the system ("data diddling").

The policies discussed in previous articles for ongoing management should reduce the risks associated with resignations. Your goal as a manager should be to make resignations rare and reasonable. By staying in touch with your employees' feelings, moods and morale, you can identify sources of strain and perhaps resolve problems before they lead to resignations and their associated security risks.

Firings

Firings give the advantage to employers. The time of notification can be controlled to minimize its effects on the organization and its business. For example, employers might find it best to fire an incompetent or no-longer acceptable employee before beginning an important new project or after a particular project has finished.

Some people argue that to reduce the psychological impact on other employees, they fire people at the end of the day, perhaps even before a long weekend. The theory is that the practice gives everyone a cooling-off period outside working hours. These managers say they don't want the buzz of conversation and speculation that often follow a firing to intrude on the work day. This policy fails to regard the psychological stress to employees who have a ruined weekend and no way of responding constructively to their potentially catastrophic loss of a regular income.

A better approach to this stressful task is to fire people early on Monday morning in order to
provide an unrushed exit interview and job counseling to help the employee prepare for job hunting. In this scenario, the regrettable necessity (from the manager's point of view) of terminating employment is buffered by professionals in the human resources department who can give the departing employee a sense of hope and some practical as well as emotional support in their difficult time. This humane attitude is particularly important when there are many people being fired -- one of the worst experiences possible for both employees and managers and an event that has serious security implications.

Doing it wrong

A participant in one of my courses told the following horrifying tale of a firing gone wrong: in a large company, the personnel department asked information security staff to suspend the access codes for more than 100 people who were to be fired at 18:00 on Tuesday. On Wednesday at 08:00, the security staff began receiving phone calls asking why the callers' logon IDs no longer worked. It turned out that the personnel staff had failed to inform the "victims" on time. The psychological trauma to both the employees who were fired and to the security staff was severe. Several security staff members were sent home in tears to recuperate from their trauma. The harm done to the fired employees was even more serious, and the effect on morale of the remaining employees was a disaster. It's a wonder that there was no violence in that situation.

Cross-training again

One of the key organizational issues in planning or responding to termination of employment is training replacements for the departing employee. Such needs are voiced to justify policies allowing a more graceful, civilized and friendly approach to firings and resignations. It seems reasonable to encourage the departing employee to train the colleagues or new employees who will assume his or her responsibilities. However, cross-training should be part of the normal operations of all organizations.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, firing people is a stressful time for everyone concerned and leads to increased security risks. Managers should do everything in their power to ensure a courteous, respectful and supportive experience when terminating employment.

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