Visible Statement for Security Awareness

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Russ Mumford, a reader of this column, suggested that I examine his company’s product, “Visible Statement.” I went to <http://www.greenidea.com> and found that Visible Statement is a potentially useful tool for keeping information security issues in front of users in a palatable form as a series of amusing screen savers.

The FAQ says, “Visible Statement is a new computer-based delivery system designed to promote the retention and recall of your most important security and training messages. What makes it unique is Visible Statement delivers colorful, humorous, professionally-designed animated messages right where people work – at their computers. Visible Statement uses the proven principle of spaced repetition to support and enhance security and training programs. It takes care of the need to re-emphasize your message to increase widespread security awareness throughout your organization.”

This tool allows administrators to create their own animated messages as well as the supplied cartoons, to upload them from a server to any or all clients on the network, and to set specific time intervals at will for automatic display.

I downloaded a demo copy of the product and found that it was easy to install from the supplied WinZIP file.

The cartoons are very cute. In one scene, for example, we see a variety of Bad Guys stealing stuff from an office while the employees remain oblivious; characters include a spaceman, a colorful clown, a ballet dancer, the Pied Piper, a cowboy, and – at last – an employee who knows enough to ask the final unbadged stranger whether she can “help” him. She drags him away and, as an afterthought, snatches a coffee cup from one of the employees.

The most important aspect of the product, I think, is that it gives administrators complete control over content. As the FAQ suggests, such amusing cartoons – and you can add your own or buy more from the company – can enhance not only security policy compliance but also any policy that benefits from increased awareness. Privacy policies, legal compliance, financial procedures – every policy can be leavened with a bit of humor.

My sense is that it would be important NOT to allow the cartoons to get stale. As with many animations, once is funny, twice is mildly amusing, and three times is boring, four times is irritating, and . . . well, you get the picture. If you’re going to use the product, make sure that you plan your programs carefully. Have lots of variety, judge the messages carefully so that they aren’t perceived as belittling or insulting, and don’t overdo the usage.

The product also has Spanish, French and German versions. Unfortunately, they’re not quite ready for production, as far as I could judge from the samples I viewed. The French version has English labels at various points in the animation (e.g., on a user’s cubicle and on a folder); the French grammar is a bit shaky (e.g., it uses the second person singular for the imperative on a warning sign but the second person plural in all the instructions); there’s an English comment
(“Oh, OK”) smack in the middle of the sequence; and the words “helpful reminders” appears briefly before being overlaid by French; and there’s some outright gibberish that may be straight machine translation in one helpful hint. The German cartoon looked OK to me, but it ended with an English statement that wasn’t translated into German. I can’t speak to the Spanish version because I don’t speak Spanish. Once I notified Mr Mumford of the problems, he immediately went into high gear to have them fixed.

If you’re interested in the English-only version, I think you’ll be pleased. Congratulations to Russ Mumford and his colleagues at Green Idea on this project.

[Disclaimer: I have no relationship whatever, financial or professional, with the makers of this product. These comments should not be construed as an endorsement.]

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