That Won’t Fly

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Some popular expressions came to mind recently as I was reading an article from SCIENCE magazine’s online version: “crash and burn,” “that won’t fly,” “running interference” and “the ultimate denial of service.”

I was reading an article by Mary Beckman entitled, “Hang Up and Fly” <http://tinyurl.com/gw4p3> that reviews some recent research by Naval Air Warfare Center aviation safety scientist Bill Strauss. He and his colleagues studied the incidence of unauthorized in-flight usage of electronic equipment such as cell phones and geographical positioning system (GPS) units.

Strauss’ team studied 37 flights from three different airlines over a period of a month. The results showed much higher occurrence rates than the team expected: “Not only did team members see people using their cell phones while flying, the recordings picked up between 1 and 4 signals in the cell phone range per flight. In addition, the team identified signals in the same frequency range as that used by some airlines’ GPS navigational equipment. Although the researchers did not evaluate the GPS navigation during flight, the signals coming from the passengers have the potential to cloud the navigation device, says Strauss, especially if 200 people suddenly feel the need to phone home.”

If the average incidence of such in-flight usage of RFI-producing equipment is confirmed across the industry, then we need better education, clearer policies, better monitoring and stronger enforcement.

In July 2005, the US House of Representatives Committee on Transportation’s Subcommittee on Aviation <http://tinyurl.com/epd4o> heard testimony from the US Department of Justice, the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), all of whom expressed concerns about proposed liberalization of rules preventing cell-phone use in flight. On a completely different note, writer Grant Gross noted, “Subcommittee members complained that airplane passengers can already be loud or obnoxious, without mobile phones to aid them.” <http://tinyurl.com/guh5c>

Network and security managers can contribute to the effort to maintain flight safety through their corporate security-awareness newsletters. As I have often mentioned, giving employees personally-useful security information is an excellent way to engage them in the culture of security. You can point your colleagues to the FAA “Fact Sheet on Cell Phone Use” at <http://tinyurl.com/f2baa>.

Let’s make sure we don’t suffer the ultimate denial of service.

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New information assurance journal – Norwich University Journal of Information Assurance

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