Road Warriors:
Secure Your Laptops

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When staff members travel using such powerful computers, they are subjecting their personal office to possible loss, penetration, and damage – and possible legal consequences. In today’s article, I’m presenting simple defences that I hope will be useful for employee security-awareness training.

Many computer users know that portable computers can fill all their computing needs. With terabytes of disk space, gigabytes of RAM, GHz processors, fast DVD drives, multiple high-capacity and spare rechargeable batteries, excellent wireless and Ethernet connectivity, and bright, rapid displays of whatever size and shape best suits a particular user, laptop computers may obviate the need for a desktop machine for users who can afford the surcharge placed on portability. However, such computers are exposed to a wider range of threats than desktop systems that sit behind the physical and electronic corporate barriers to unlawful access.

Physical Damage

Carrying case: Many laptop computers have their own padded cases; these often provide modest protection against abrasion but offer little padding to cushion their expensive cargo against vibration and shocks. Another, more serious disadvantage of original-equipment cases is that they look very much like what they are: computer bags. Another disadvantage is that most computer cases are soft-sided and too small to include much of the paperwork and books you need out of the office. To avoid announcing your suitability as victim to passing thieves and to ensure sufficient room for papers, you can use a standard briefcase with foam padding for the laptop. Some luggage stores will, at modest cost, cut foam to fit your equipment exactly.

Electrical power: be sure that your computer’s electrical supply is capable of functioning on both 60 Hz, 110 V US/Canadian power and also on other standards such as the 50 Hz, 220 V electricity provided in many other parts of the world. In any case, if you are travelling overseas, you will need a set of plug adaptors to fit the various sockets found in different countries.

Theft

Laptop computers can be stolen both for their hardware value and for the data they contain. Don’t leave your laptop unguarded in any public place; keep the strap over your shoulder with your arm placed so that the bag cannot easily be snatched. And if you sit down in a waiting area where you put down your laptop in its carrying case, put your leg through the strap so that a thief will have to contend with that obstruction if they try to take the laptop.

Another problem occurs in hotels. During a 20-minute break at a business seminar, thieves can easily get into even a locked seminar room – for example, through the unlocked access doors used by hotel staff – and steal lap-top computers with ease. At all seminars and conferences I attend, I routinely take my laptop with me even for coffee breaks.

As for leaving your laptop computer (or anything else of value) in your room, that depends very
much on where you are. In the US and Canada at business-class hotels, it seems to me that the risk
is low; I certainly don't worry about it (but I encrypt all confidential data on the disk — see below).
At worst I might store the portable in the hotel safe and get an official receipt. However, during my
three week visit to mainland China years ago, I never left my laptop computer (or passport)
anywhere at all; I carried it everywhere, including meals. In countries where industrial espionage is a
normal expectation, leaving proprietary data accessible is always a bad idea.

Next time, I'll focus on protecting data and data communications via our laptops.

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