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Network Security Audits

TUESDAY, 17 JUNE 2008

Every 3 months or 3,000 miles.

By Lee Barken, CPA, CISSP, CISA, CCNA, MCP
 IT Practice Leader, Haskell & White, LLP

Taking care of an automobile is a concept that we can all understand. Like the old saying, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure", paying attention to vehicle maintenance is a way to prevent little problems from becoming big problems. How about when that car is on the Information Superhighway? When it comes to Internet security, what steps are you taking to protect your network and prevent a crash? According to a 2007 CSI/FBI Computer Crime Survey, over 80 percent of organizations conduct regular security audits. Who's watching your network? The answer might surprise you.



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Every device on the Internet is scanned hundreds of times each day. Most of this traffic is harmless probing. It's up to companies to be vigilant about network security threats and plug the holes before the attackers find them.

To understand network security audits, the following are steps companies can take to evaluate their security posture.

What is a network security audit?

Simply stated, a network security audit is a review and assessment of a company's network security protection, like having a police officer walk around your house and help you understand likely points of entry by a criminal. The idea is to learn from an expert before an attacker exploits a point of weakness. In fact, network security audits frequently use many of the same tools that attackers use. The primary difference is that you get to discover the vulnerabilities and can fix them before any actual damage happens to your company's assets and reputation.

Network security audits can be performed from an "external" perspective (outside the network perimeter) or from an "internal" perspective (inside the network perimeter.) Given that network threats exist from both internal and external sources, a review of both should be considered.

Will a network security audit provide 100 percent protection against future network attacks?

Unfortunately, no. The goal of network security is not necessarily to provide absolute assurance. Rather, security professionals recommend an approach based on "security in layers" because the objective is to prevent the most common attacks and encourage attackers to move on to easier targets.

From another perspective, what steps can you take to defend against an attack on your car's security and protect against theft? The most common answer is to lock your car doors when leaving the vehicle. But this will not stop all car thieves. A determined attacker will likely find a way to exploit a door lock vulnerability. How about if you add a steering wheel locking device? It won't stop everybody, but statistics tell us that most attackers will simply move on to the next, less protected target.

Ultimately, a cost/benefit analysis will help you determine how far to go in order to protect your information assets (or car). While each company will answer this question differently, the point remains the same: New vulnerabilities are discovered on a daily basis and network security is an ongoing battle. So every now and then, somebody needs to check if the doors are locked and the steering wheel locking device is securely in place.

How about wireless networks?

Everybody loves wireless networks because they enable us to enjoy the freedom of mobile computing. Once you "cut the cord" and experience the pleasure of uninhibited roaming and increased productivity, it's impossible to go back to the mundane era of tethered PCs and work environments that require you to be "chained" to a desk.

The great thing about radio frequency wireless networks, such as Wi-Fi, is that the signal goes through the walls. The bad thing about wireless networks is that the signal goes through the walls.

An attacker could be in your parking lot or even 25 miles away. With specialized wireless gear, they can pick up your company's wireless network signal and attempt to gain unauthorized access. This means that your company's investments, like network firewalls, door locks, key cards, cameras and guard stations, can be circumvented by an improperly configured wireless network. For this reason, wireless networks should be included in all network security audits.

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