Cyber Security – Protecting Your Computer and Data is now just as important as Protecting Your Property – Opinion Article by Jamil Ezzo

More and more we now live in a wired and wireless world – whether using computers in our offices or schools, tablet PCs in the home or Smartphones on the move – we are digitally connected in one way or another. We live in an "Information Anytime Anywhere society" and this is a trend that will only accelerate. This may enhance communication, productivity and even our leisure and entertainment needs but also leaves us more vulnerable than ever to Cyber Crime.

So what is Cyber Crime? The US Department of Justice categorizes computer crime in three ways:

1. The computer as a target - attacking the computers of others (spreading viruses is an example).
2. The computer as a weapon - using a computer to commit "traditional crime" that we see in the physical world (such as fraud or illegal gambling).
3. The computer as an accessory - using a computer as a "fancy filing cabinet" to store illegal or stolen information.

Computer crimes are not new but increasingly more daring and in the public domain. Recent research conducted by one of the leading trusted security software providers, showed an increase in the volume of malicious attacks in its latest 'Global Internet Security Threat Report'. This provider reported that it alone blocked 5.5 billion malicious attacks in 2011 a rise of over 80% from 2010. According to the report there were 232 million identities compromised in 2011, 18% of targeted attacks were aimed at companies employing up to 250 employees in the same year whilst 25% of targeted attacks were aimed at executive level employees. 2011 also witnessed 42 billion spam emails equating to 75% of emails considered to be spam, with the UAE having a relatively high spam rate of 73%, as outlined in the report.

You may have read about the very recent hacking incident at LinkedIn – the leading Professional Networking internet site. Hackers managed to 'crack' into the LinkedIn's IT systems and access 6.5 million profiles out of the 150 million members. This resulted in LinkedIn issuing a security alert and recommending to the relevant members to change their

passwords. This was not an isolated, high profile example. There have been cases of IT security breaches at household names such as Facebook, Twitter and others. Private corporations are not alone here; government departments and agencies are not immune to such attacks.

But what difference does that make to me, you may ask. The fact is that the entire region is experiencing a surge in technology adoption and the GCC boasts the highest internet growth rate amongst the Arab world with around 4 million users and growing exponentially, hence, the threat is closer to home than you may realize!

First of all, if you are a user of social networking sites it obviously does matter. More importantly, we are all spending more and more time online –be it to do our banking online, do shopping online, or just to upload our photos, music and videos online. As a result we are creating a larger digital footprint with some of our very private and sensitive information and we need to protect it as we do our homes and other valuables because our data is a very valuable asset. There is another important factor to consider – parental control to ensure that we monitor and control the content our kids browse and the chat rooms they use and so on.

Protecting our computers, our devices and our information may seem to be a daunting task but need not be. It is a well documented fact that many companies and individuals do not do regular backups and therefore are vulnerable to data loss. What would happen if your office computer was damaged, malfunctioned or became corrupted and you could no longer access your documents? How would you cope if you lost all those important videos and photos and memories? How would you feel if your identity had been compromised or your sensitive financial data stolen? These are things that we do not want to contemplate and can easily be mitigated. Everyone who uses a computer needs to stay safe online.

To respond to this growing need, ECDL Foundation has published an IT Security Syllabus that covers the main concepts of IT Security and its components. The module aims to familiarize common computer users with the relevant techniques and applications that can be used to maintain a secure network connection; use the Internet safely and manage data and information appropriately.
Working with content and test developers, ICDL GCC Foundation has recently made this certification available in the GCC with the aim of raising the level of security awareness for individuals across the region. We are now working with the relevant government entities to support and intensify their efforts to educate the general public on the best practices of cyber safety. And because it is critical for these awareness initiatives to be led by the authorities that will enforce them, we will strive to make this certification available to all government employees under job development and continuing education programmes.

This Security focused programme provides the learner with essential understanding of how to use a computer in a safe and secure manner, protecting personal data and that of other users. The secure daily use of ICT covers a number of important facets, such as the use of techniques and applications to protect network connections; data and information management; proper Internet etiquette or 'netiquette,' responsible use of Social Media, and Parental Control.

Although unpleasant and potentially very damaging, cyber crime is a real threat and one that we must face head on. Left unprotected, personal and office computers and data can result not only in missing information but identity theft and worse still fraud.

Of course, governments have an important part to play through legislation and appropriate punishments, corporations through new systems, policies and governance but we as individuals

have to protect ourselves and our electronic property. As the old cliché goes, 'Better to be safe than sorry'

The International Computer Driving License (ICDL) concept is a global initiative developed to raise the level of knowledge about Information Technology and increase the level of competence of using computers to all citizens of the world. ICDL GCC Foundation holds this responsibility for the GCC region and Iraq, and has, since 2001, helped educate and train over 50, 000 individuals through its curriculum of IT training modules.

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