RANDOM THOUGHTS
Communications With A Purpose

William Blinn
COMMUNICATIONS
179 Caren Avenue
Worthington, Ohio 43085
614-785-9359
Fax 877-870-4892
www.Blinn.com

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Data security requires more than good fortune

Audits of 5 federal agencies (Bureau of Prisons, Drug Enforcement Administration, FBI, Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the United States Marshals Service) by the Department of Justice in 2001 may shock you. Three of the agencies lost or had stolen 400 laptop computers. Data from the DEA was so unreliable that it couldn't be used and the INS didn't make note of missing computers.

The audit (Report No. 02-31, August 2002, Office of the Inspector General) showed that the FBI alone lost or had stolen 317 computers.

If FBI agents, who are trained to be cautious, can lose 2% of the computers assigned to them, you probably won't be surprised to learn that portable computers are one of the most common losses that business managers report to insurance companies.

The cost of replacing the computer, substantial as it might be, pales when compared to the value of the data. A list of your clients or a detailed report on product development that disappears with a computer could find its way to a competitor's office.

Be a highway engineer: Assume the worst

People who design highways know that errant motorists will hit anything – signs, light standards, guard rails. If it's located on or near a roadway, somebody will hit it. They design with that assumption in mind. It's why these devices are built to break apart when hit. The objective is to reduce injuries.

If your business owns portable computers, assume that they will be stolen. As desktop computers become smaller, assuming that they will also be stolen isn't a bad idea, either.

Once you've made that assumption, the way forward is clear. The information on the every computer must be protected. This goes beyond the obvious steps of installing an antivirus application and ensuring that it's up to date. It goes beyond installing a software firewall. And it goes beyond sending a cable lock along with every computer that leaves the building.

Cable locks can provide a false sense of security. Few hotel rooms have anything secure to which you can attach the cable. Besides that, any halfway competent computer crook knows how to defeat the lock in 15 seconds or carries along a bolt cutter that reduces the time required to about 2 seconds.

Most computers have the option of installing a CMOS-based password and this should be used for any computer that's removed from the office. Because the CMOS password is effective only when the machine boots, users should encouraged to shut machines down, not to put them in "sleep" or "hibernate" mode.

If even the FBI can "lose" 317 notebook computers, what makes you think yours is safe?

Consider using data encryption on computers that leave the office, but be certain that data on those machines is backed up at the office in an unencrypted form in case the user forgets the encryption key.

Allow users to create their own passwords, but insist that those passwords be strong. A system-assigned password such as "eI8%FoWQQw" isn't secure because few people will be able to remember such a password and will write it down. A password such as lLij2316Ner@k is just as secure and easy to remember if the person who created it has two daughters ("lLij" is "Jill" backwards, "Ner@k" is "Karen" backwards with @ in place of "a", and "2316" is the house number the user had as a child). A secure password must have upper case and lower case letters, numbers, and symbols.

If you routinely carry mission-critical data, consider buying a removable flash drive (also called USB drives and thumb drives) that includes data encryption. Keep the flash drive with you at all times so that it cannot be stolen when you leave the computer in your hotel room.

Common sense

Imagine that your portable computer case is stuffed full of $100 bills. You wouldn't leave a stack of $100 bills on the front seat of the car while you step in to a Chinese restaurant for take-out food. You wouldn't leave the case unattended in an airport. You wouldn't leave it in your hotel room all day as you're attending conference sessions.

Computers have many enemies. Failing to recognize those enemies and protect against them is costly and embarrassing. Just ask the federal agent who lost his computer when he left it in his car when he stepped in to a Chinese restaurant for take-out food. ß

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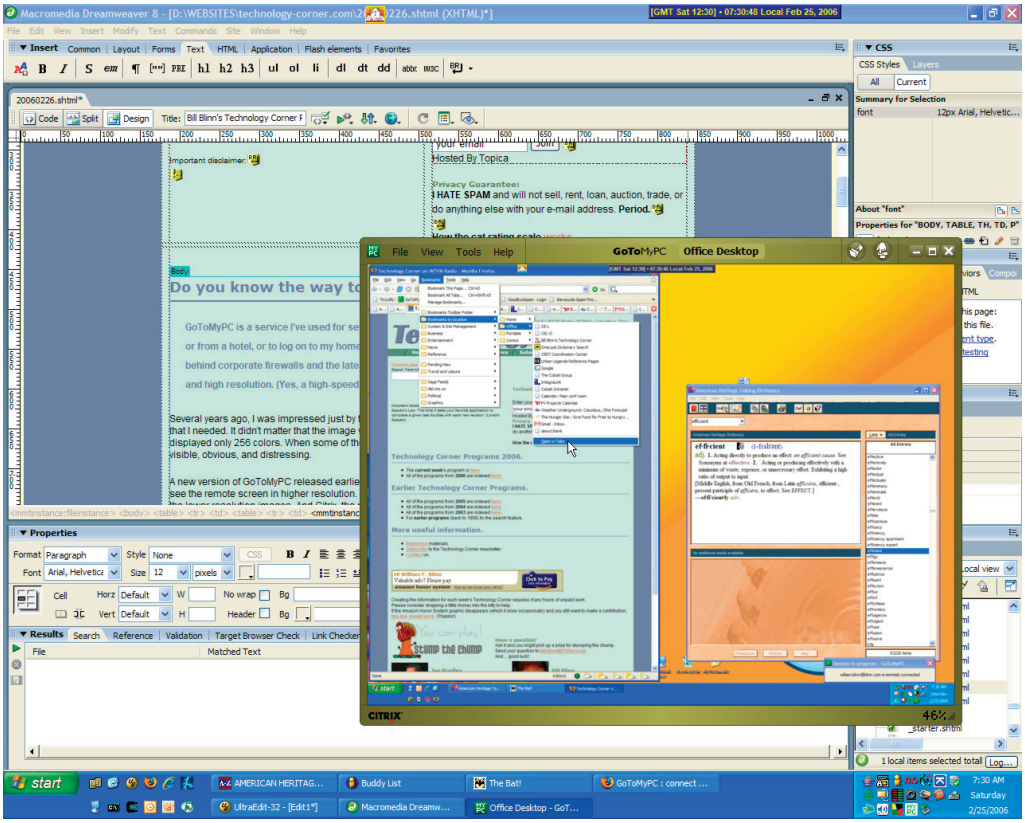
Do you know the way to your PC?

GoToMyPC is a service I've used for several years. It allows me to log on to my office computer from home or from a hotel, or to log on to my home computer from wherever I am. It works for computers that are behind corporate firewalls and the latest version of GoToMyPC displays the remote computer in full color and high resolution. A high-speed connection is helpful but not essential.



Here's an example that shows several applications open on the local computer with a smaller view of my office computer open on top. The ability to do office work from home can save both time and effort.

When I first encountered the service in the mid 1990s, I was impressed just by the ability to log on to my office computer from home so that I could get a file that I needed. It didn't matter that the image wasn't very good. It ran at a lower resolution than I use at the office and displayed only 256 colors. When some of the things you work on a full-color high-resolution graphics, the difference is obvious, and distressing.

Over the years, improvements were incremental, but the latest version does away with the 256-color limit and it also allows users to see the remote screen in higher resolution. Surprisingly, the high-res large images seem faster (or at least as fast) as the lower resolution images. And Citrix, the new owner of the service, has added the ability for users to drag and drop files from the remote computer to the local computer and vice versa. Previously the only way to transfer files was to use a slow file transfer component.

You may be here, but you're also there.

The real strength, though, is the ability to log on to a remote computer and work as if you were actually at the remote location. It's not quite as fast as if you were sitting in the office in front of your computer, but it's still a lot faster than driving to your office to sit in front of your computer if your office is more than a block from your home.

Security is important so logging on is a multi-step process. First you're validated by the GoToMyPC website, which asks for your user ID and a password. (Make this password a strong one.) Once you've been validated, you're shown a list of the computers you've told the service about. Selecting one establishes a connection with that computer, which will also ask for a password. (Make this password a strong one, too.) And finally your computer will require a user ID and password unless you leave the machine logged in when you're away from the office. If you do that, I have just one word for you: Don't!

At the left is a full-screen view of my home PC with the office PC inset. It's small and rather difficult to read this way.

Normally I run the remote PC at 75% magnification, which still allows me to see my local screen, but some people find the double Task Bar (local and remote) confusing and prefer to run the remote session full screen. If you have a fast enough connection, you may forget that you're not at the office.

When an application on the local machine is active, GoToMyPC dims the remote service.

What's really amazing is the ability to sit in front of your computer in Columbus when you're actually sitting in a hotel room in San Diego. Or San Jose.

And yes, I do know the way to San Jose: Take I-70 west to to I-15, I-15 south to Angeles, and hang a right on I-5, then a left on I-580 and watch for the signs. Or, if you want to avoid LA, head north and go west on I-80 to I-680 and hang a left. Tell Dionne Warwick(e) hello if you see her.

Overall: GoToMyPC is the best way to go there without leaving here. ß

CORNER on the market by A.J. Stinnett

"Managers are paid to do the right things. That is, to be effective."