

Don't Hire Hackers. Please.

One of the toughest decisions senior managers face today is whether to hire hackers to find security holes in their networks. (By "hackers", we mean people who break into computer networks without permission.) Some execs say it's the only sure way to keep your information safe. Is it?

Para-Protect® says, No.

The Myth

You've heard the tale: The only people who truly understand new arcane security bugs are eccentric young kids who spend their days and nights joy-riding around the Internet. Disciplined professionals are too stuffy, too slow, and just too un-cool to stay up to speed. "To stop a hacker," goes the myth, "you have to think like a hacker." Well, no you don't.

Where did this idea come from that the only people who can understand networks are folks you wouldn't want to invite home for dinner? Which is harder, throwing a rock through a window or glazing in a new pane? And is there a reason you can think of why a college degree, a full-time job, and a crime-free personal history should make it *harder* to figure out where the holes are and how to fix them? Come on.

The Aftermath

Now look at the situation you create if you invite one of the "bad guys" inside your web site to look around. Suppose they find a security hole. That's good, right? Oh, take a closer look.

The most obvious worry you've just triggered is that you may have opened the door to a burglar and showed him how your alarm works. But let that pass. After all, just because somebody used to break into web sites for fun or profit doesn't mean that they still do, right? And they probably don't have any friends that might like a crack at you, either. So what can go wrong?

Plenty. For example, your idea presumably will be to get a report about any security holes, then just fix them. But it might not be so easy to patch over right away all the holes your new best friend knows about. You should plan for any vulnerability he or she uncovers maybe staying unaddressed for quite a while. Consider:

- ✓ Many software bugs can only be solved by installing patches from the vendor. The patch you need might not be available right away. Ever, actually.
- ✓ Closing a security hole will sometimes involve giving up a feature or functionality you need. You might make the business decision to leave it open.

- ✓ Holes that have been closed often get re-opened, for instance when pre-patch software gets restored after a disk crash. So a risk exposed to strangers may recur as a risk, even after you've "fixed" it once.

Not only are security vulnerabilities hard to fix once and for all, but also they tend to come in clusters. When you nail one down, related bugs often pop up. A hacker who finds and reports one or two may remain hip to others you hear about the hard way.

Remember, too, that weak security is often the result of poor business practices. Failing to clean up logon accounts of departed employees is a good example. And if you've ever tried to move that mountain, you know a test attack and a quick hyper-technical report is not going to be much help.

Most importantly, consider this: A poorly executed test attack can wreak as much havoc on your operations as a real one. You need control, and coordination. You require accountability. It would be good, wouldn't it, to work with a partner who understands and respects the needs of business? And works under his real name?

The Truth

The truth is, you have choices.

The truth is, security engineering is a craft practiced by thousands of responsible engineers the world over. Bonded, certified, trained professionals. We're not hard to find.

The truth is, the best people to engage for this work are grownups. People who have invested their careers in the study of network security, who have dedicated their lives to building a safer Internet for the future.

The truth is, the best way to prevent computer attacks is to foster a culture of respect for other people's information, enterprises, and intellectual property. And that means not rewarding miscreants for breaking into other people's computers by hiring them to help secure yours. Doesn't it?