



New Year Means New Risks and New Plan of Action

What aspect of your life does NOT rely on computers? Communication, entertainment, transportation, shopping, business, medicine, and the list goes on.

How much of your personal information is stored on your own computer or on someone else's system? By now, you've heard of horrifying stories dealing with identity theft or the spread of email viruses. Actually, there is a good chance you have been a victim yourself. Whether you've been victimized or you know of someone who has, isn't it time to take action? The best place to start is by understanding what you're protecting yourself against. Here are some basic terms, as well as suggestions on how to protect yourself against them.

In cyber-speak

Hacker (also referred to as an attacker or intruder): Refers to people who seek to exploit weaknesses in software and computer systems for their own gain. By definition, their actions are in violation of the intended use of the systems they are exploiting. The results range from juvenile mischief to malicious activity, such as stealing or altering information.

Cyberbully: Those who utilize technology to harass, or bully, someone else. Forms of cyberbullying range from embarrassing rumors to dangerous acts, such as threats and stalking. E-mail, instant messaging, digital photos and web pages can all be used as tools to bully.

Malicious code: This is the hacker's primary weapon to exploit vulnerabilities. The malicious code may be designed to perform one or more functions, including:

- Interfering with your computer's processing speed, causing your computer to slow down or "freeze."
- Installing, altering, or deleting files on your computer.
- Giving the attacker access to your computer.
- Using your computer to attack other computers.

Different types of malicious code are commonly referred to as viruses, worms, and Trojan horses.

Viruses: This type of malicious code requires you to actually do something before it infects your computer. Examples include opening an e-mail attachment or going to a particular web page.

Worms: Unlike a virus, no user intervention is required for a worm to propagate. They typically start when a hacker exploits a software vulnerability. Once the victim's computer is infected, the worm will attempt to find and infect other computers.

Trojan horses: A software program that claims to be one thing while in fact doing something different behind the scenes.

Methods of protection

There are a variety of steps you can take to protect yourself from victimization by a computer hacker. Or if you feel more comfortable having a professional protect your system, simply take the following list to your I.T. specialist (or use this checklist as a guideline when contacting and/or interviewing an outside I.T. service).

- Use and maintain anti-virus software and a firewall
- Use caution with email attachments
- Avoid downloading files from websites
- Keep your software up to date by installing software patches
- Take advantage of security settings
- Regularly scan your computer for spyware
- Evaluate your software's settings and apply the highest level of security available that still gives you the functionality you need
- Don't clutter your computer with unused software programs
- Create separate account users
- Establish guidelines for computer use
- Use passwords and encrypt sensitive files
- Follow corporate policies for handling and storing work-related information
- Dispose of sensitive information properly
- Be careful where you post your personal information **HB**

Darryl Santa is the Owner of Alpha & Omega Computer and Network Services, which has been serving small to mid-sized businesses in Huntington Beach for the past decade. Alpha & Omega takes a proactive approach in supporting your network by customizing a preventative maintenance schedule that fits within your company's budget. Through preventative maintenance and technology planning, we'll spend less time fixing problems and more time utilizing I.T. effectively to grow your business. Whether your company needs to maintain its current network environment or deploy the latest in information technology solutions, Alpha & Omega wants to be the First and Last of all your technology needs. Check us out on the web at www.aobiz.com or contact us at 714-964-6932.