



Security Sense

Think Before You Send: E-mail Security Problems

Before you send that "cute" remark, that scathing diatribe, or that "private" thought via e-mail, stop and consider what you're really saying. Even Tina the Tech writer in the Dilbert comic strip says, **"One should never compose e-mail while one is snarling."** How we feel affects what we say, of course, but there is even a greater danger with e-mail than offending someone. As e-mail writers you should think about what would happen if other people had your e-mail records, because they may retrieve them. While e-mail is a simple and fantastic way to keep in touch with friends and business associates it also has some security and legal problems attached to it.

Unlike telephone conversations, which must be recorded to be preserved, e-mail messages automatically live on in computer hard drives -- even if people who send them don't realize it. For that reason, investigators are turning more frequently to retrieved e-mail as evident in court proceedings. Under federal law first-class letters, telephone conversations and e-mail messages cannot be intercepted (without a court order) during transmission.

A phone call, unless it's recorded, ceases to exist the instant a word is said. That's not true with e-mail messages. E-mail messages are stored and not just in one place, either. If you send an e-mail message, it will be stored on your hard drive, the recipients hard drive, possibly on an in-house server hard drive and possibly on the hard drive of an Internet service provider. Right there are four different places that an e-mail message could come back to haunt you. If under a court order, commercial ISPs are required to turn over messages for investigation.

According to a 1998 Forrester Research report, 15% of the U.S. adult population (30 million people) use e-mail. That figure is expected to escalate to 135 million by 2001.

Recently I had to re-install Windows on my computer. It was done at a computer shop. When I set-up the computer again at home I was astounded to find that my saved e-mail messages had been replaced by e-mail messages that I had deleted over a year before. I was dismayed that I had to delete them again, but I was happy that there was nothing embarrassing for the computer repair people to read and nothing that could be used against me in a court of law. E-mail just lives on and on and on.

Organizations and individual employees are facing litigation arising out of the illegal use of their e-mail systems. Messages that employees thought had been deleted are being discovered in back-up tapes and elsewhere by high tech detectives and used as evidence in lawsuits.



E-mail is informal, so managers often say things that would never go in a memo. E-mail (often recoverable after deletion) is often as potent as a formal memo

The scary thing about e-mail is that it's got the immediacy of a conversation but the permanence of a letter. . . Generally, you don't want to write anything you wouldn't want to see on the front page.

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So, before you send that off-hand remark over the Internet or your Intranet, stop and think it over. Maybe a phone call would be better. . . and safer. E-mail can prove embarrassing, can involve lawsuits and can harm other people. That's not bad for an easy to use communication tool.