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On-the-go execs create security concerns

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A company's data is most at risk when executives are traveling with their devices. But there are ways to ensure risk is mitigated, according to a panel of security experts.

Highlights

- "When you're an executive and you're traveling with the keys to the kingdom, you have to be careful," NC4's George Johnson said.
- Instead of using a personal smartphone for business use, consider an unlocked GSM device.
- If a laptop is carried along on the trip, it might be helpful to utilize a flash drive containing a pre-configured VPN system.

By **Shawn A. Turner**

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HOUSTON—Hotel executives spend a considerable chunk of their time on the road. Unfortunately, that's when their company's data is most at risk, security consultants said during a panel earlier this year at the 2012 Global Congress on Travel Risk Management.

Data thieves target laptops, mobile devices and other technology on-the-go executives tote with them on business trips. All it takes is for these thieves to get access to the company's email—a bigger concern now that many executives are getting corporate emails on their smartphones—and they can hack their way into a company's network.

"When you're an executive and you're traveling with the keys to the kingdom, you have to be careful," said George Johnson, chief security officer of the consulting firm NC4.

Security measures

It's impossible to remove all risk from every situation, Johnson said, but there are steps executives can take that will help mitigate risk. Strategies should be developed to fit the risk profile of the area where the travel is taking place.

For instance, many countries in the Middle East keep tabs on Internet usage, said Tom McElroy, principal and managing member of Hospitality Security Consulting Group LLC.

"I hate to tell you this," said John S. Gray, an attorney at Gardere Wynne Sewell, "other countries we're talking about here don't care about U.S. law."

To help increase the level of security, Johnson suggested company officials use an unlocked global system for mobile communications—or GSM—phone, which uses encryption to make phone calls more secure. But if it's necessary to take along a personal smartphone, it's best to ensure the phone's Bluetooth is disabled and it should be carried with the official 24/7.

Johnson said a friend of his takes along three phones with her when she travels: one for phone calls, one for company email and one for personal use.

He also said executives should think twice about taking a laptop or tablet with them. The security threat might outweigh their usefulness on a quick business trip. "Really consider if you need it with you," he said.

If a laptop is absolutely necessary, it should be carried in a TyVek protective case—a strong, flexible material that protects the laptop, or left in the safe at the hotel's front

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desk, Johnson said. Full-disc encryption should also be enabled, the panelists said.

Housekeepers know all the usual places where a laptop might be stowed away, he said. "These housekeepers aren't stupid. They weren't born last night," he said.

McElroy said 99.9% of housekeepers are honest, but that remaining 0.1% could create a huge security headache for companies.

"Desperate people do desperate things," he said.

If a laptop is carried along on the trip, it might be helpful to utilize a flash drive containing a pre-configured virtual-private-network system. That way, Johnson said, if the laptop is stolen, a company's network will not be put at risk.

"When I go out dancing, I keep my laptop in my pocket," Johnson said of the flash drive.

McElroy understands there are some people who view the tactics discussed during the panel as perhaps going overboard. But better safe than sorry, he told attendees.

"There's a certain thing called healthy paranoia," he said. "It's called awareness."

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