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Weekly Review

Sticks and Stones

By David G. Hill

Sticks and stones can break my bones
But words will never hurt me

In the modern era of information technology, that old children's rhyme is now blatantly false from an economic perspective. "Words" such as your social security number and credit card information may not hurt physically, but surely can damage you economically through identity theft. The perception of the risk of identity theft has reached the point that the Congress of the United States is considering a "Personal Data Privacy and Security Act of 2005" (a.k.a. Specter-Leahy Bill) to address the issue. This proposed law would impose a number of sanctions on enterprises that expose information to the possibility of identity theft. The risk from such exposure, including both government and civil lawsuits and the loss of public trust when such breaches are exposed, is rapidly becoming unacceptable to enterprises.

The recent string of disappearances and/or thefts of tape media containing the personal sensitive information of large numbers of individuals are motivating factors for the Specter-Leahy bill. Forget the fact that the vast majority of tape transfers occur uneventfully, that most of the tape cartridges that do disappear are never seen by anyone, and that it would take some sophisticated planning to intercept tapes as well as sophisticated technology (from a lay perspective) to make any sense of them. Even though the real risk in any particular situation is low, the sum of the risk aggregated across all enterprises is high enough to spark the demand for corrective action. If there is no exposure, there can be no theft of readable data.

But legislation is not a panacea. Enterprises must ensure through policies, procedures, and practices that data which moves between two or more sites for disaster recovery or other protective purposes remains private and secure. Quite frankly, imposing such disciplines is an unnatural act for many enterprises. Although they know it should be done, without a hard and fast deadline like Y2K, things tend to slide. Although risk management is a prime concern in any enterprise, it is also costly. Finding people willing to pay a new data protection "tax" is no easy task. Yet there also is no sense in waiting for the arrival of a cost-free technological deus ex machina.

Yes, technology above and beyond what an organization is already using will likely be necessary to carryout such policies. However, there are also dangers in piecemeal approaches to this issue. Applying a simplistic technological patch to a potential-risk-exposure flat tire offers little more than a cosmetic fix for a deeper problem. Overall,

we believe businesses must consider these processes in terms of the broader issues of data protection, including data retention of which compliance is a subset.

And a large number of vendors are willing to help them. Two basic types of technologies are being discussed — improved data security itself, including tape encryption, and electronic vaulting, an alternative to transporting tapes via a long distance "sneakernet." On the data security side, NetApp recently announced its intention to acquire Decru, one of the recognized leaders in the space. NetApp will have to maintain the independence of Decru (as, for example, EMC has done with VMware). Both Kasten-Chase and NeoScale also have data security products that include tape solutions. Decru, Kasten-Chase, and NeoScale all collaborate with EMC, HP, and IBM. In fact, EMC has announced an increased emphasis in its own security solutions, which will probably lead to similar announcements from other vendors and heighten the visibility of the need for improved data security.

Electronic vaulting can be divided into traditional service vendors who design, install, and sometimes manage end-to-end solutions versus software products that customers can deploy in disaster recovery sites and other environments. Traditional electronic vaulting companies include Iron Mountain and SunGard, and familiar storage vendors such as EMC, IBM, and Symantec (the VERITAS side of the house) also offer electronic vaulting solutions. Companies that deal with replication such as Avamar, Data Domain, FalconStor, Kashya, and XOsoft also have the capability of playing in this space, as do backup and restore specialists like BakBone Software and Unitrends. In addition, companies like NetEx and Riverbed are working to make the cost of electronic vaulting over networks more cost effective through WAN optimization and other techniques.

These and other solutions offer a range of intriguing fixes for a growing, recognizable problem, but we believe enterprises should first focus on "what" they need to do about data privacy and security before they start to consider "how" to go about it. At this point, the choice to do nothing is no longer acceptable — period.

David G. Hill is principal of the Mesabi Group (www.mesabigroup.com). The Mesabi Group focuses on the revolutions in Storage Networking and Storage Management, and helps clients make the best and most efficient use of information for business value.

Contact:
Pund-IT, Inc.
Phone: 510-909-0750
E-mail: charles@pund-it.com
Web: www.pund-it.com