behind the news

As more and more of us use our PCs to store and share personal data, Ursula Seymour asks IBM security expert Clain Anderson for some tips on how to keep our computers – and the information they hold – safe

With the rising tide of viruses attacking home and work PCs, the need to protect your computer has never been greater. Always-on broadband and wireless connections make devices even more vulnerable to the threat of malicious attacks, which is particularly worrying as so many of us send private information via the web and email.

PC Advisor spoke to Clain Anderson, IBM's director of security solutions for personal computing, to ask his advice on how to keep your data safe.

Security seems to be high on the agenda lately. Why do you think that is?

"Any report you read lately indicates an increase in security breaches and shows how much data can be lost via these breaches. It is hard to find someone who hasn't been attacked by a virus and, perhaps more worryingly, there are those out there who are unaware that their PCs are suffering from viruses. Any one of us can be exposed this way – if you had nothing on your PC it wouldn't matter, but we all use email and the web to share information, so it's important to keep our computers safe. "

What advice would you give people to help them ensure their data is kept secure?

"Security isn't an area where there is one single answer, it's more like a wall that you build – brick by brick. Everyday people are jumping higher [to get over it], so you also have to build it higher.

"The most significant problem for home users is viruses; they are much more sophisticated than they were a couple of years ago. Use antivirus software and, more importantly, keep it updated – ideally every week.

"Wireless technologies offer new exposures to PCs. Home wireless gateways are cheap and convenient, but without protection someone with a laptop can sit in their car outside your house and easily gain access to your network.

"To stop this, the most simple solution is to switch on password protection, which is built into the software. I'd also recommend using the 802.1x wireless security protocol, which is built into Windows XP and should provide adequate protection for the home user.

"If you're sending data via email you should always make sure you protect it. Microsoft Outlook has good encryption – unfortunately most people don't even bother to use it."

What is IBM doing to help users protect their data?

"IBM has developed a hardware encryption chip that can be built into a laptop or desktop PC for $25 [£16]. This will help keep all your passwords and personal data safe – it is like a smartcard attached to a motherboard. It has been designed with users' privacy in mind and, so far, we have shipped three million PCs embedded with this chip."

Is this security chip only available in IBM PCs?

"No. It is an open standard which we have shared with other manufacturers through the Trusted Computing Platform Alliance, which was set up with Compaq, HP, Intel and Microsoft. You will see HP/Compaq PCs with the chip built in towards the end of this year or early next year and others should follow."

What does the future hold for PC security?

"We are beginning to see low-cost hardware firewalls, which are being built into network cards. These provide much better protection than software firewalls and only cost about $100 [£65].

"These types of card mean it is almost impossible for someone to get into your PC, which is increasingly important with public access WLANs (wireless local area networks) and broadband becoming more popular. We think these types of [hardware security devices] will become standard within PCs over the next few years." ■

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