

Copiers can store information -- forever

by Kevin Tripp/KTAR and Bob McClay/KTAR (April 21st, 2010 @ 9:23am)

ID THEFT



PHOENIX -- Fake credit card offers, phony e-mails and dumpster diving are common ways thieves try to steal your identification. But did you know that copy machines have hard drives that capture and store everything they scan?

Data stored in a copier turns the machine into a thieves' pot of gold, according to software developer John Johnson.

"Social Security numbers, birth certificates, bank records, income tax forms -- that's information I would think would be very valuable," Johnson said.

Ira Winkler, a digital security expert, said people need to be aware.

"You have to take some basic responsibility and know that these copiers are actually computers that need to be cleaned up."

CBS News bought a couple of used copy machines and found hard drives full of data -- from medical records to police records from a copier that belonged to the Buffalo Police Department.

"From the sex crimes unit, detailed domestic violence complaints and a list of wanted sex offenders," said reporter Armen Keteyian. "On a second machine, from the Buffalo P.D. Narcotics Unit, we found a list of targets in a major drug raid."

Dave Underwood with Sharp Business Systems in Tempe recommends people treat a copy machine as they would a computer -- complete with password.

"Not many companies can you walk into and just walk up to a computer and start using it," said Underwood. "You have to use a log-in and a password. These devices (copiers) have that same capability, but many companies don't implement that capability."

Ramon Morales, also with Sharp Business Systems, said companies should make sure the copier has a data security kit.

"What the data security kit will do is it will do a scrubbing of the RAM and the hard drive," said Morales, "meaning it overwrites whatever was written on there. That latent image gets erased."

Underwood said people should be careful about where their documents are copied.

"If I go anywhere, indiscriminately, and I make a copy of my driver's license, I have absolutely no assurance that that information isn't going to be captured and stored on a hard drive and end up anywhere," said Underwood.

Mark Pribish, the Vice President and ID Theft Practice Leader with Merchants Information Solutions said information stored on copiers is an emerging problem, although it's been discussed for the last three to four years.

"The single largest action a consumer can take is to be very specific in asking that Kinkos, that dentist, that doctor, that tax preparer and any other business that might be copying your confidential information -- including Social Security number -- `What is your information security policy and what is your policy regarding the hard drive of the copy machine?'"

If a copy store, or an office, does not tell you that they clean the hard drive, Pribish advises that you take your business elsewhere.