New computer security guide can help safeguard your small business (w/ Video)

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Just in time for October's Cyber Security Awareness Month, the National Institute of Standards and Technology has published a guide to help small businesses and organizations understand how to provide basic security for their information, systems and networks. NIST has also created a video that explores the reasons small businesses need to secure their data (at right).

The guide, Small Business Information Security: The Fundamentals, was authored by Richard Kissel, who spends much of his time on the road teaching computer security to groups of small business owners ranging from tow truck operators to managers of hospitals, small manufacturers and nonprofit organizations. The 20-page guide uses simple and clear language to walk small business owners through the important steps necessary to secure their computer systems and data.

Small businesses make up more than 95 percent of the nation's businesses, are responsible for about 50 percent of the Gross National Product and create about 50 percent of the country's new jobs, according to a 2009 Small Business Administration report. Yet these organizations rarely have the information technology resources to protect their sensitive information that larger corporations do.

Consequently, they could be seen as easy marks by hackers and cyber criminals, who could easily focus more of their unwanted attention on small businesses. And just like big companies, the computers at small

businesses hold sensitive information on customers, employees and business partners that needs to be guarded, Kissel says. He adds that regulatory agencies have requirements to protect some health, financial and other information.

"There's a very small set of actions that a small business can do to avoid being an easy target, but they have to be done and done consistently," Kissel says.

In the guide Kissel provides 10 "absolutely necessary steps" to secure information, which includes such basics as installing firewalls, patching operating systems and applications and backing up business data, as well as controlling physical access to network components and training employees in basic security principles.

He also provides 10 potential security trouble spots to be aware of such as e-mail, social media, online banking, Web surfing and downloading software from the Internet, as well as security planning considerations. The guide's appendices provide assistance on identifying and prioritizing an organization's information types, recognizing the protection an organization needs for its priority information types and estimating the potential costs of bad things happening to important business information.

More information: Small Business Information Security: The Fundamentals can be downloaded from the Small Business Corner Web site at www.csrc.nist.gov/groups/SMA/sbc/ .

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