Amateurs battle malware, hackers in UK cybergames

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The Cambridge University student who is named UK Cyber Security Champion Jonathan Millican, poses for a photograph with his trophy at the Science Museum in Bristol, England, Sunday, March 11, 2012. Millican is named UK Cyber Security Champion after beating off other contestants in the Cyber Security Challenge to seek out viruses and malware, raise firewalls and fend off hack attacks, in a competition aimed at pulling new talent into Britain's burgeoning cybersecurity sector. (AP Photo/Raphael Satter)

Amateur cybersleuths have been hunting malware, raising firewalls and fending off mock hack attacks in a series of simulations supported in part by Britain's eavesdropping agency.

The games are intended to pull badly-needed talent into the country's burgeoning cybersecurity sector, according to former security minister

Pauline Neville-Jones, who spoke at a closing ceremony held Sunday at the Science Museum in the English port city of Bristol.

"The flow of people we have at the moment is wholly inadequate," she said, warning of a skills gap "which threatens the economic future of this country."

The exercises, dubbed the Cyber Security Challenge, are intended to help bridge that gap, drawing thousands of participants who spent weeks shoring up vulnerable home networks, cracking weak codes and combing through corrupted hard drives in a series of tests designed by companies such as U.K. defense contractor QinetiQ and data security firm Sophos.

The challenge was supported in part by British signals intelligence agency GCHQ and Scotland Yard's e-crimes unit - a sign of the government's concern with supporting a rapidly-developing field.

The government is spending 650 million pounds (about $1 billion) to boost its electronic defense capabilities. Britain's military recently opened a global cyber-operations center in the English market town of Corsham, and last month police announced the creation of three new regional cybercrime units.

Event organizer Judy Baker warned there weren't enough skilled people to work in the newly created jobs, complaining that cybersecurity was barely on the radar of high school guidance counselors and that too few universities offered degrees in the field.

"The front door into cybersecurity is not clear at all," she said.

The competition was closed to cybersecurity professionals, so many of the 4,000-odd participants - such as the 19-year-old winner, Cambridge University student Jonathan Millican - were aspiring computer scientists.

Others were engineers or hobbyists.

Senior GCHQ official Jonathan Hoyle made a brief speech Sunday, inviting Millican and other prize-winners to come visit the secretive organization's headquarters in Chelthenham, about 95 miles (150 kilometers) northwest of London.

Millican was excited by the prospect, saying: "It's not somewhere many people just go."

More information: Cyber Security Challenge UK: http://cybersecuritychallenge.org.uk

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