Biometrics researchers see world without passwords (Update)

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Some Purdue University researchers are working on technology that could see all those passwords that computer users must punch in replaced with steps such as iris and fingerprint scans.

The basement lab of Purdue University's International Center for Biometrics Research is where such emerging biometric technologies are tested for weaknesses before going mainstream.

Iris and fingerprint scans as well as facial and voice recognition are just a few of the tools that can improve security while making lives easier, said Stephen Elliott, the center's director.

That technology can allow someone to log into a computer or activate a smartphone simply by swiping their fingerprint over a sensor—and eliminate the need to frequently change passwords.

"I think the average person would tell you they have too many passwords and it's a hassle to change them all the time, and therefore they use the same password for lots of things, which inherently makes that easier to break," Elliott said.

Biometrics is already in use at a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant in West Lafayette, where workers punch in by putting their finger on a fingerprint scanner attached to their cash register.

Chris Smith, the restaurant's assistant manager, said passwords were

sometimes shouted out among workers and that the fingerprint system improves the security of cash registers by better limiting access.

And the system means one less password workers have to memorize.

"I'm sure that they have a hundred that they have to remember for their things at home—their online banking and whatnot," Smith said. "So it's just one more ease for them that they don't have to have."

Elliott said that while many people now consider such scanners something out of the movies, he believes computer passwords could someday be a thing of the past.

"I think once people see the things in consumer's hands—the biometrics in there—then we'll just see people try to push other deployments of biometrics, because it's easier," he said.

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