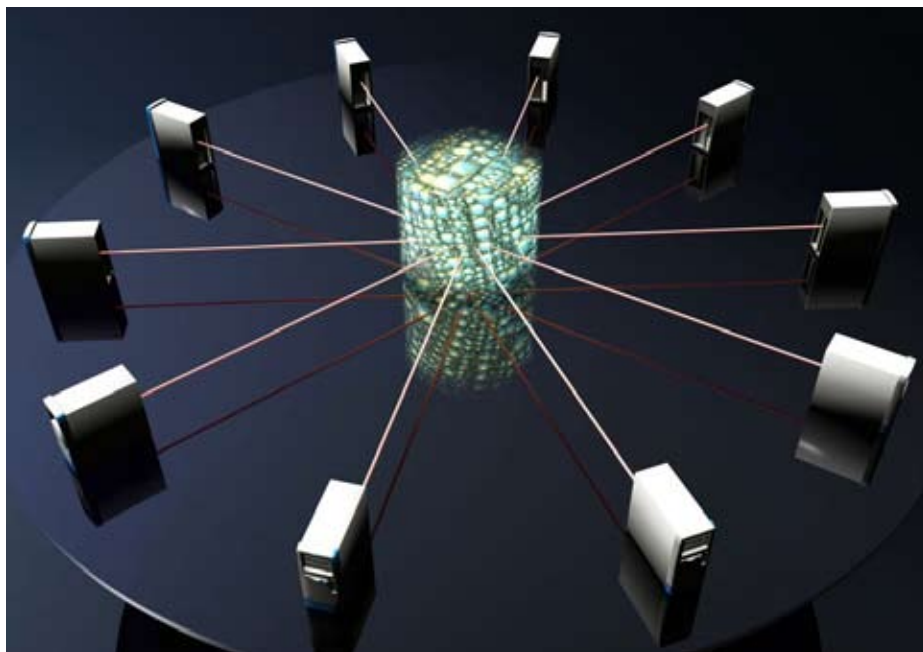*Bernard Collin, CEO of SafeComs*

Cyber threat – this year's top ten IT risks (part 2)

Beat the recession and protect yourself against crime with these handy tips from Bernard Collin, CEO of SafeComs

■ FACED with a surge in cybercrime, a crack down on copyright violators, new ingenious viruses, and competitors looking for ways to control costs, it's no wonder some businesses fall victim to poorly managed IT systems.

In last month's BigChilli Bernard Collins discussed how computer users could prevent disaster by protecting themselves from unlicensed software and pesky viruses. He also offered advice on how businesses could back up their computer systems.

This time he explores the opportunities that arise in the face of the recession, Thailand's new Computer Crime Act, and the threat posed by amateur consultants.

Look out for the third and final installment of Bernard's top ten IT risks in next month's BigChilli.

4. The Risk: Losing customers

It's a recession. People have less money to spend, but this doesn't mean they have no money to spend. Consumers who do have money are going to be looking for bargains. Customer loyalty is going to count for less than lower prices and better value. If you are running a company, you've got to find ways of cutting costs without compromising your brand image and losing your regular customers.

The Opportunity: Winning new customers

Spend some time exploring Enterprise Management and Customer Relations Management systems. I've been around long enough to have seen a few downturns come and go. I've learned that smart companies use hard times to build for the future.

When the economy is booming or chugging along at a good rate, company managers tolerate a lot of waste and unproductive practices. In the good times, the economic incentive to save a few Baht here and there just isn't strong enough to motivate action. That's why it takes a recession to get people seriously thinking about Enterprise Management and Customer Relations Management systems.

Safecoms has seen an increase in requests for ER and CRM systems over the past few months, and we think the reason is that business owners are looking for cost effective tools to increase their efficiency in 2009. Current customers had tried various solutions from brand name venders, but in the end they liked our systems best because of their simplicity, ease of use, security, and especially the customization we can offer.

5. The Risk: Thailand's new Computer Crime Act

Yes, there is a new Computer Crime Act in Thailand. It came into effect in August 2008. The new Act broadly defines three types of activity as criminal acts: hacking, spamming and virus attacks; distributing technology or data that could be used to break into computer systems or could affect public security (fraud); and invasion of privacy.

The risk here is failure to comply with the Act because you don't understand the implications. Compliance requires installing data logging systems, which requires a bit of expertise. The risk is you can spend a lot of time, effort and money and not get the technical stuff right and find out too late that you're not in compliance with the law.

The Opportunity: Set up compliance measures

Because it's so new, the Computer Crime Act is a bit of a puzzle and it's difficult to know if you are in compliance or not. While there is still some debate, the law seems reasonably clear on what data you need to keep and for how long. In this respect, it's a hardware and methodology issue.

Safecoms can install a 'SafeLogger' system to cover your compliance requirements. A SafeLogger can be set up to record data from any device used to access the internet from your internal network.

Don't go the do-it-yourself route unless you are confident your IT staff knows what they are doing. Just storing the data doesn't meet compliance requirements, you have to be able to open and read the files. We visited one site where after only a few weeks of logging they had over 7 bytes of data in a single file, which is unreadable and therefore not in compliance with the law.

The other big issue is respect for privacy. The law does not require that service providers retain data on the content of email or other communications. Be careful not to overstep your bounds here or you could be facing legal problems in other areas of the law.

6. The Risk: Good old fashioned theft

It's as predictable as the rise and fall of the tides: crime goes up in hard times. And it's absolutely shocking how easy it is to steal hardware from most company environments.

Given that more of your stuff is likely to walk out the door this year, it's a good time to take a look at your physical security policies and procedures. Expect an increase in petty theft of small items like mice, hard drives and printer ink cartridges and more expensive items like printers and laptops.

Laptop computers are the prime target for both the casual and experienced thief because they are just so easy to steal and so easy to resell. And please, lock up these extremely expensive CDs with your original software and licenses you paid substantial amounts of money for and are sitting on an open shelf in your office.

The Opportunity: Tighten up security

Use down time to tighten security. Start by updating your equipment inventory. Review security policies and procedures and do some awareness raising among staff. There are a number of strategies that can help prevent theft and aid the police in recovering stolen equipment. The first thing you need to do is record the make, model and serial number of you computers and any other devices. And never, as in not ever, not even just for a minute, leave your laptop unattended. Everyone I know who's lost a laptop laments, "I was only out of the room for a minute!"

7. The Risk: Amateur consultants

What do recently unemployed computer geeks do? They freelance. Expect to be flooded with offers of cut-rate work on everything from website and database design to Internet security. And yes, it will be ready next Wednesday if that's when you want it. People are out of work and need money and will promise you anything to get your business.

The Opportunity: Bargain rates on good work

The flipside is that there will be a lot of very good people available and willing to work at lower rates than before the downturn. Now would be the time to revisit some of those hardware and software projects you have wanted to do but never had time or budget for. In terms of talent, it's going to be a buyers' market. My advice is simple: don't rush into things, do careful background checks and talk to references.

SafeComs: www.safecoms.com SafeComs is a Bangkok based company specializing in network security for computer systems and for unique security solutions delivered over the Internet. SafeComs can provide Internet security audits, license legalization audits, critical backup solutions and anti-spam services.