



Your new ID-theft worry? Photocopiers

Experts aren't aware of any known incidents but say potential is very real

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SAN JOSE, Calif. - Consumers are bombarded with warnings about identity theft. Publicized threats range from mailbox thieves and lost laptops to the higher-tech methods of e-mail scams and corporate data invasions.

Now, experts are warning that photocopiers could be a culprit as well.

That's because most digital copiers manufactured in the past five years have disk drives — the same kind of data-storage mechanism found in computers — to reproduce documents. As a result, the seemingly innocuous machines that are commonly used to spit out copies of tax returns for millions of Americans can retain the data being scanned.

If the data on the copier's disk aren't protected with encryption or an overwrite mechanism, and if someone with malicious motives gets access to the machine, industry experts say sensitive information from original documents could get into the wrong hands.

Some copier makers are now adding security features, but many of the digital machines already found in public venues or business offices are likely still open targets, said Ed McLaughlin, president of Sharp Document Solutions Company of America.

"You actually have a better chance at winning 10 straight rolls of roulette than getting those hard drives on copiers rewritten," he said.

Sharp plans to issue a warning about photocopier vulnerabilities Wednesday — just ahead of tax time.

The company, one of the leading makers of photocopiers, commissioned a consumer survey that indicated more than half of Americans did not know copiers carried this data security risk. The telephone survey of 1,005 adults, conducted in January, also showed that 55 percent of Americans plan to make photocopies and printouts of their tax returns and related documents.

Of that segment, half planned to make the copies outside their homes — at offices, libraries and copy shops. An additional 13 percent said they plan to have their tax preparers make copies.

Although industry and security experts were unable to point to any known incidents of identity thieves using copiers to steal information, they said the potential was very real.

"It is a valid concern and most people don't know about it," said Keith Kmetz, analyst at market researcher IDC. "Copying wasn't like this before."

Added Paul DeMatteis, a security consultant and teacher at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York: "We know there are bad people out there. Just because this is difficult to detect doesn't mean it isn't being exploited."

Daniel Katz-Braunschweig, a chief consultant at DataIXL, a business consulting firm, includes digital copiers among his list of data holes corporations should try to protect. He couldn't specify names but said a few of his company clients did learn about the vulnerability after their copiers were resold and the new owners — in good faith — notified them of the data residing on the disks.

Sharp was among the first to begin offering, a few years ago, a security kit for its machines to encrypt and overwrite the images being scanned, so that data aren't stored on the hard disks indefinitely. Xerox Corp. said

in October it would start making a similar security feature standard across all of its digital copiers.

Randy Cusick, a technical marketing manager at Xerox, said many entities dealing with sensitive information, such as government agencies, financial institutions, and defense contractors, already have policies to make sure copier disks themselves or the data stored on them are secured or not unwittingly passed along in a machine resale.

Smaller businesses and everyday consumers are less likely to know about the risk, but should, he said.

Sharp recommends that consumers take precautions, such as asking their tax preparers or the copy shops they are using about whether their copier machines have data security installed.

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