Cybersecurity Legislation Nears With CIA Testimony

Congressional hearing highlights risk of using unsecure software, foreign workers

BY PATRICK THIBODEAU
WASHINGTON

U.S. BUSINESSES will "increasingly become the point of attack for enemies of the U.S." by hackers and national governments using sophisticated weapons, such as worms and viruses, that can be controlled and used for targeted attacks, warned a top CIA official. He was testifying last week before a congressional committee.

Lawrence Gershwin, national intelligence officer at the CIA, said U.S companies are facing a range of threats posed by the growing use of foreign contractors and an increasing reliance on commercial software with known vulnerabilities in critical networks. There are also threats from sophisticated, state-sponsored cyberwarfare programs, Gershwin added.

Defenders in government and business "will be at some disadvantage until more fundamental changes are made to computer and network architectures — changes for which improved security has equal billing with increased functionality," Gershwin told the Joint Economic Committee.

The hearing was used to underscore the need for legislative remedies. Sen. Robert Bennett (R-Utah), who organized the hearing, will soon introduce legislation to exempt cybersecurity data from Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) disclosure requirements.

Private-sector trade groups have argued that the FOIA exemption will allow companies to share data with government agencies without risk of public disclosure.

Duane Andrews, a former assistant secretary of defense during the previous Bush administration and an executive vice president at San Diego-based Science Applications International Corp., pointedly told the committee that the U.S. is losing ground in protecting its systems. "The rate of progress has been slower than the growth of the potential threat," which can be blamed on a "failure to act," he said.

"For a decade, we have had study after study and report after report pointing out that our economy and national security . . . is at risk," said Andrews.

But, he said, the companies and government aren't taking steps for several reasons. First, policy makers don't understand the technological threat; second, investment in cybersecurity comes at the expense of some mission or business function; third, there is no oversight agency holding government and critical business functions accountable; and fourth, the issue is being treated as a tactical problem and not a strategic one. ◗

Hackers: Lack requisite tradecraft but pose high threat of creating isolated or brief disruptions that can cause serious damage.

Hactivists: Most appear bent on propaganda rather than damage to critical infrastructures.

Spies, organized crime: Their goal is to steal, not disrupt.

Terrorists: Still prefer real bombs.

National governments: Have the discipline and resources to attack critical infrastructures.

Labor Department Teams With Monster.com

Job initiative among several launched at workforce confab

BY JULEKHA DASH

The U.S. Department of Labor and online job board Monster.com have launched a new partnership in which they will share their job databases with each another to provide the public with a more comprehensive pool of help-wanted listings.

The partnership was one of several initiatives that Labor Secretary Elaine Chao announced at the 21st Century Workforce conference in Washington last week.

The conference, featuring speeches by President George W. Bush, Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan and Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, focused on efforts to increase the government's dependence on technology to help it address workforce issues.

By teaming up with Maynard, Mass.-based Monster, the Labor Department can take advantage of the company's extraction technology, which lets users cull job postings from all Web sites, not just job boards, said Michael Boyd, an independent human resources consultant in Walpole, Mass. That could broaden the number of jobs that the Labor Department lists in its job bank.

Other programs announced included a $4 million grant to the Los Rios Community College district in Sacramento, Calif., to help disadvantaged individuals prepare for IT jobs, and a program to help disadvantaged youths participating in the Labor Department's Job Corps program earn high school diplomas through distance learning.

The Labor Department is also preparing to launch a new Web site designed to help disabled Americans enter the workforce. ◗

AT A GLANCE

E-Job-Hunting

The Department of Labor's technology initiatives include:

- A program to help youths earn high school diplomas through distance learning
- A new Web site to help disabled people enter the workforce

GI Bill to Cover Cost of IT Certification Examinations

BY JULEKHA DASH

Starting this month, GI Bill beneficiaries can get reimbursed for technology certification through the Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA).

Lombard, Ill.-based CompTIA offers seven certification exams that cost between $100 and $200 each, in areas such as networking, server hardware and IT project management. GI Bill beneficiaries will be reimbursed for as many tests as they want to take.

CompTIA Workforce Development Program director John Engman said he expects most participants to seek A+ certification, which covers entry-level PC support, since that's the program's most popular exam.

Without the GI Bill reimbursement, "if you fail the test, there goes the money," said Carlos Rosa, a GI Bill beneficiary and network administrator at Advance Office Electronic Center Inc. in Carolina, Puerto Rico. Rosa, formerly a sonar technician in the U.S. Navy, applied for reimbursement for an A+ exam last week.

Rosa said that CompTIA certification, combined with certification from a leading vendor, can typically lead to an IT job and that certification exams are good alternatives to a four-year college degree.

Howard Rubin, a vice president at Stamford, Conn.-based Meta Group Inc., said he agrees that certification exams are a good way for IT workers to obtain short-term technical skills. But given the current downturn in the economy, it may not be wise for IT workers to forgo the long-term skills investment that a college degree provides, he warned.

To qualify for GI Bill benefits, military personnel must contribute $100 per month for their first 12 months of service. Veterans can receive up to $650 per month for 36 months if they attend school full time, and a fraction of that amount if they attend school part time, said Terry Jemison, a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Jemison said 1.3 million veterans participate in the GI Bill program. He estimated that 85% to 90% of them haven't exhausted their benefits. ◗