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security

Locking the Gates Tight

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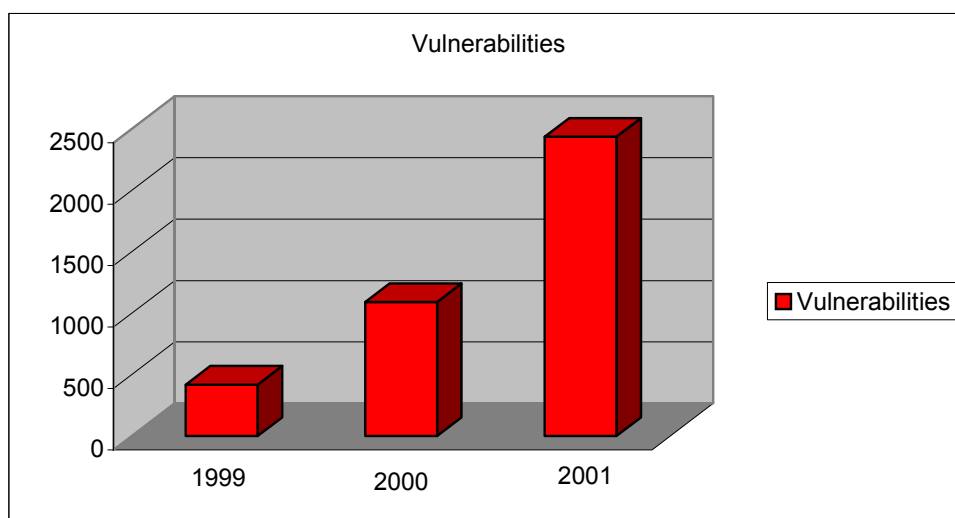
Information systems have become critical for every kind of business, but most companies have struggled to maintain adequate security measures to protect their confidential data and systems from compromise. With new Commonwealth privacy legislation now in effect, however, companies now face even stronger pressure to prevent unauthorised access to both their own information and that relating to its customers.

The chronic shortcomings of most corporate information security strategies are in some part due to customers' perceptions that system security is simply a matter of installing a specific program and forgetting about it. So while most companies now use anti-virus software, firewalls, intrusion detection and logging software, that software quickly loses its efficacy if it's not backed by constant vigilance and comprehensive security policies that extend well past the boundaries of IT systems.

Statistics from United States-based firm CERT (Computer Emergency Response Team), which continually probes commercial systems for vulnerabilities and provides technical security related assistance, highlight the growing nature of the online security threat.

The number of incidents reported to CERT has doubled every year since 1998, when CERT handled just 3734 incidents. Last year, that number had increased to 52,658 incidents. And despite growing awareness of the importance of security, the number of software security holes being discovered is growing at an alarming rate. In 2001, CERT reported that 2437 software vulnerabilities were discovered. That equates to more than twice the 1090 discovered in 2000, and six times the 417 vulnerabilities discovered in 1999.

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From an enterprise's perspective, it is critical IT partners with an organisation that understands the inextricable link between security and privacy. The key is taking the time to understand security is not only about installing security technology, it is about protecting business processes and adhering to comprehensive security policies.

As a major global provider of high-availability solutions for some of the most critical data environments in the world, Hewlett-Packard (HP) has years of experience securing data. HP's Tandem, Alpha and Intel-based servers run 15 of the world's largest stock exchanges, and carry 95 per cent of the world's equity transactions. HP's ongoing involvement with its customers has given it a unique perspective on the best practices of some of the world's most security intensive industries.

This unique experience has fostered a significant and ongoing security practice within HP's global consulting organisation, one of the world's largest. That knowledge has spread throughout the organisation to the point where security is a major part of every customer engagement. For companies concerned that they don't have ample in-house expertise to adequately address security concerns, the support of an end-to-end consulting partner, like HP Services, can be an invaluable ally.

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Security technologies, although they may seem like a universal remedy for security problems, are in reality only a way of implementing security policies that need to be formulated distinct from any specific technologies. Companies concerned that an incorrectly configured firewall would open a door into the company network, for example, might be alarmed at how easy it is for an intruder to tailgate a legitimate employee into an office, then copy data off of a networked system and leave without being challenged or even noticed.

Recognising that the security threat comes from inside as well as outside – and providing adequate training, facilities improvements, access control mechanisms and other elements – requires a holistic approach to security that many companies are uncertain how to execute. Equally important is risk mitigation: many companies haven't even fully considered which parts of their business are most vulnerable to attack, and which aspects of their information need to be protected most carefully.

"As a Financial Institution embarking on a new Internet Banking presence we pinpointed the areas of Security and Privacy to be the main areas of concern," said Brian Berry from Newcastle-based Hunter United Credit Union. "HP understands that security is not only about installing security technology, it is also about protecting business processes and adhering to comprehensive security policies".

Since December 2001, when the Commonwealth Privacy Amendment (Private Sector) Act 2000 imposed controls over the use of customer information by private enterprises, one of the most important parts of the business became the customer database that every business maintains.

Lip service is no longer enough to guarantee the security of customer-related data, which has proven to be a popular target for hackers in the past. Now that companies face the possibility of legislative and monetary sanctions for inadequate data protection, it's clear that security and privacy should be prioritised at every level of the organisation.

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Security is an integral business application. Often when customers have challenges with security, it's because they implemented a given technology without due consideration to the surrounding process.

Despite the increased awareness of security issues due to recent world events, people can easily forget lessons learned and slip back into old habits. That is why it is important to take advantage of the current momentum, adopt a top-down approach, and work with a partner that can help define a risk management profile, that is interwoven with custom designed business processes and IT infrastructures.

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