

'Living In a Tech World' Column

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10 Ways to Muck-up Your Tech World: #8 – Share Everything Openly and #9 – Pick Simple Memorable Passwords

“**Share and share alike**”, that is something most of us have heard since early childhood. Daniel De Foe appears to be the first to have used 'share and share alike' in Robinson Crusoe, or as he called it *The life and strange adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, 1719: Generally we still take that as good advice but when it comes to your computer sharing your printers and hard drives can be a very dangerous practice, a practice that can certainly muck-up your life if not your computer.

One of the options when you setup your computer to go on a network or just get on the Internet is file and printer sharing. In your home or business sharing these resources certainly save money and time. One printer can service a whole office of people; you can share documents with associates even when you are not there by sharing a folder or your entire hard drive. In a trusted environment with a protected network you have little risk.

The risks are greatly increased with laptops. A laptop that you carry from home to office and take out to use in public networks like hotel lobbies, airports or coffee shops is sharing, in public, the same files that were sharing in your safe home. That geeky looking person in the corner of the room may be rummaging through your hard drive getting valuable information as you surf.

If you have file and printer sharing enabled, others can remotely connect to your computer and access your data. Even if you haven't created any shared folders, by default Windows systems have hidden "administrative" shares for the root of each drive. A savvy hacker may be able to use these shares to get in. One way to prevent that is to turn off file and printer sharing—if you don't need to make any of the files on your computer accessible across the network. XP and Vista users should right-click on Network Neighborhood and choose Properties. Find the network card (labeled Local Area Connection by default), right-click on it, and select Properties. Uncheck File and Printer Sharing for Microsoft Networks. If you do need to make shared folders accessible, it's important that they be protected and ensures that your account and the local administrative account have strong passwords.

That brings us to the next way to muck up your life if not your computer, **Pick Simple Memorable Passwords**. I would hazard a guess that nearly everyone reading this hates passwords. Just as you find one that you can remember you find that you can't use it for your bank website because they require a password with 8 letters, 2 numbers and a symbol or other such limiting factor. It may be a pain but they are doing it to protect you.

You should not be using passwords that are easy to guess, such as your birth date, loved one's name, social security number, etc. Popular password-cracking methods use "dictionary" attacks so don't use words that are in the dictionary. It's worth mentioning that password crackers, software that figures out passwords using various methods, are easily downloaded on the Internet. These can have legitimate uses but also malicious ones. But how can one possibly remember all those different passwords particularly when they look like gibberish? This is what I do.

I gave up on simple passwords long ago. Longer passwords are harder to crack, so make your password at least eight characters long; 14 is even better. Follow the rules of the toughest protected sites, like banks and make up a password that contains a combination of alpha, numeric, and symbol characters for best security and you'll have a single password to use everywhere.

A long string of nonsense characters may create a password that's tough to crack, but if you can't remember it, you'll defeat the purpose by writing it down (where an intruder may be able to find it). Instead, create a phrase you can remember easily and use the first letters of each word, along with logical numbers and symbols. For example: "My cat ate a mouse on the 5 day of June" becomes "Mc8amot5doJ." That's a password (please don't really use this one) that meets the most stringent requirements, has caps, lower case, numbers and punctuation marks and is easily remembered.

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