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COVER STORY

Who ya gonna call when bad boys filch a computer? Laptop cops

Who ya gonna call when bad boys filch a computer? Laptop cops

By FRED O. WILLIAMS
News Business Reporter
5/24/2004



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Photo illustration by Bill Wippert/Buffalo News

Lugable laptops appeal to all kinds these days, from college students to traveling professionals - even some grade schools hand them out.

Also attracted are thieves.

Who can blame them, when the electronic swag is worth an average \$1,800 or more, easily plucked from a conference room or drowsy airport gate. Precise figures are hard

to come by, but estimates put laptop thefts at more than 100,000 annually. In a survey by the Computer Security Institute in San Francisco, 251 corporate respondents said laptop theft cost them \$6.8 million in 2003, an average of \$27,000 per company.

How to protect your lugged one?

You can chain most machines like a bicycle using a built-in slot, providing at least a deterrent. But carrying a steel cord is a turnoff - and it won't help you while on the go anyway, unless you chain the machine to your wrist.

Now, laptop cops are coming up with new technological bells and whistles - literally, in some cases - that use electronic brains to outwit snatchers.

Motion sensors like the \$100 Targus Defcon, an add-on PC card, take a car-alarmlike approach, sounding off when jostled. Some alarms come with a remote control that lets you squelch the siren, so they can be left on during travel.

Then there's the LoJack approach, used by tracking software that will signal the laptop's location when it's connected to the Internet. Hidden on the hard drive, programs like LapTrak



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and xTool secretly transmit the machine's Internet address. For \$49 a year xTool maker Stealth Signal in Houston will track your laptop and, if stolen, figure out the user's location. Then it's up to police to make the bust.

That may sound like a lot of trouble, but if you're using a company-provided laptop, you may already be running tracking software and not know it. Corporate laptops are increasingly protected - and trackers are finding that theft is often an inside job.

"We've caught a lot of people in companies," said Victoria Correa, director of sales and marketing for Stealth Signal. "One lady reported it stolen, then took it on vacation and used it the whole time," Correa said. "When she got back, they already knew (the thief) was her."

Daniel M. Deakin, associate director of local-area-network systems at the University at Buffalo, calls tracking a "pretty neat technology."

"With the software they put on there . . . the next time (the laptop) shows up on a network, it phones home," he said.

Tracking technology doesn't get the endorsement of Buffalo police, however. Lt. Jacob Ulewski said he went to an address on Oak Street once that was fingered by a computer company as the location of a stolen laptop.

"The guy denied everything," and there wasn't enough evidence to obtain a warrant, he said - especially for a relatively small property crime. "The whole thing isn't worth it."

Correa said Stealth Signal recovers 72 percent of stolen laptops. Not always quickly - the company recently recovered a machine that went missing back in 2001, she said.

If you're carrying corporate secrets or your Ph.D. dissertation, locking down your data is more important than your hardware. Some operating systems like Windows 2000 Professional block access with a password, while software like Pretty Good Protection, distributed free for personal use, locks individual files and folders.

"People should think about the data that's on their notebook," said Robert Richardson, editorial director at the Computer Security Institute. "You really should imagine your worst enemy sitting down and rubbing their hands together" over the trove of information on your hard drive.

That's the approach that Russ Miller takes. As director of the supercomputer center at the University at Buffalo, Miller runs one of the academic world's biggest number crunchers. But on the road, he takes a "relatively inexpensive" laptop with him.

"I never put anything confidential on there," he said, restricting the lightweight machine for e-mail and whatever presentation he might be giving. The computer code he develops for simulating molecular structure? That he leaves at home.

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