

Computer Security

Dave Oxley and Andy Mercer, McAfee, September 2017

If, before the presentation, members of the Science and Technology Group were just mildly conscious of computer hackers acquiring their most personal data it was certainly alarming to learn how easy it would be for an imaginative criminal to persuade the unwary to hand it over without realising it. The watchwords, said Dave, were: "Stop"; "Think"; "Connect". The technique employed by scammers was not to give the victim time to think but rather to panic him into believing that he might be missing out on something of great value if action was not taken immediately. Beware of the tell-tale signs of a scam e-mail, advised Dave. These included: a mis-matched URL; poor grammar; an offer that seems too good to be true; a request to send money by bank transfer to someone in dire need!

Three of the most common forms of criminal activity are: identity theft (particularly scary if the hackers get hold of banking details); the transmission of computer viruses to wreck a hard-drive with offers of software patches to reinstate it; and social media scams. Browsing websites poses further threats, said Andy, and to be safe when doing so, it is advisable to make sure that a "green padlock" appears in the top left-hand corner of the website (before [https://www](https://www.....)) To close down any 'pop-ups' use Alt+F4 rather than clicking on the Red X button, which might contain hidden codes allowing access to information held on our PC.

Passwords need 15 digits to achieve the highest level of security, advised Dave. For example, these could be based on the initial letters in lower case of the words of a song well-known to the user and then scrambled even further to include upper case letters, numbers and characters (such as & or %). And, of course, he advised never to write passwords down and leave them next to the computer! With a high level of security, passwords need only be changed every six months, he added.

It was a sobering discourse and one wonders whether life would be safer and simpler if we returned to writing letters with a quill pen and using snail mail!

Thank you to Colin for arranging an interesting presentation.

Janet Cato,

September 2017