

One minute with...

Jay Abbott

I'm on the hunt for the next generation of ethical hackers, says the cybersecurity guru

Is cybersecurity a lost cause? Hackers seem to be able to penetrate secure systems at will - I'm thinking of last year's hacks of Sony and the security firm RSA.

Security is a game of chess and hactivism is simply a latterday enactment of a very old concept: civil disobedience. Any cryptographic system that people can engineer can be reverse engineered. Security is a process, not a thing you buy once in a shrink-wrapped box.

How do you get this idea of security across?

I have a global team of 200 ethical hackers who try to penetrate our clients' systems, and also run phishing and other social engineering attacks on their employees. Then we educate them - and show them how to secure their organisations.

You're running a UK government competition to spot cybersecurity talent among back-bedroom hackers. Why?

Because it's the right thing to do. There's a real skills shortage in info-security and there's so much talent among the people who learn via unconventional routes. I want to make sure the next generation get the breaks I didn't get as I stumbled through this.

What first grabbed you about computing?

I grew up in a family where everyone's hobby was related to electronics or computing. I wrote my first BASIC program when I was 7 and got hooked on keying in programs listed in my Commodore magazines.

Any early lessons in cybersecurity?

Yes! My mum unplugged my computer and erased three days of my programming work. That taught me the value of having data backups very early on.

Presumably you aced the computing exams at school?

'Fraid not. I left school at 16 with few qualifications - my focus was on music. After realising I probably wouldn't get the breaks I'd need to make it as a club DJ, I wondered if my computer



PROFILE

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interests could pay the rent. So I got a job building personal computer clones. I haven't looked back.

How did that lead to a job in cybersecurity?

I did a spell at a bank headquarters where the Love Bug virus struck, taking down 1000 back-office computers. The bank's then solution - the veteran Dr Solomon's antivirus - couldn't cope. But I worked out a secure way of recovering the network that prevented the Love Bug reinfecting the machines.

And after that?

I redesigned the online gaming security infrastructure for games like the FIFA soccer series, *Battlefield 1942*, *Road to Rome*, *The Sims 2* and *Medal of Honor*. These are under continual attack by people trying to artificially elevate their scores and/or steal source code. Keeping pirated game code offline for the first five days after a game's release makes all the difference to the sales revenue.

Interview by Paul Marks