

Considerations for Professional Psychologists in the Digital Age

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The age of information technology brings wonderful resources to psychologists. An awareness of the “data crumbs” that are vulnerable to “data jacking” needs to be taken into consideration, not only for the confidentiality of clients, but more importantly, for the confidentiality of the professional. Following are some issues for your considerations. Not to be paranoid about these issues, but “how would you like a malicious borderline patient literate in computer skills know where you live or where your kids go to school?”

- Do not receive Board of Psychology mailings at your home address.
 - Your home address will be available on their website when someone does a search on the status of your license and if there are any BOD actions.
- Lock up or shred/destroy your organizer pages of previous years
 - This is the most sensitive compendium of information you create about yourself, your personal schedule, and your client appointments. Many are even sitting openly on a shelf in a Franklin binder that has 2001 on the spine.
 - Many of you even have a cheat sheet embedded within the pages, of your various passwords and PIN's.
- Shred potentially sensitive mailings, such as credit card offers.
 - Identity theft easily starts here, particularly with women.
 - Example: your first name, that matches with a valid maiden name and birthdate that is easily obtained from thousands of genealogy websites (Mormon's are well known for this), and your SSN, can lead to false applications and address changes, thus giving typically \$3000-\$5000 credit lines, and approximately 2-years of headaches, at least.
- Never disclose passwords to any accounts, particular email and website accounts.
 - This is another component of identity theft.
- Utilized a “throwaway” email account in addition to your main personal and professional email accounts.
 - Many free email accounts are available, and should be used for various login/signup requests with various web resources. This email address will be vulnerable to spams and various companies who buy email lists for marketing purposes, but your more important ones will be “off their radar screen.”
- Remove your auto registration from your car's glove box.
 - This usually contains your home address.
 - Have a photocopy of this behind your driver's license in your wallet/purse.
- A specific checking account for online purchases and transactions.
 - Free checking accounts with a debit card are available.
 - Only place \$500 or so into the account.
 - Provides a barrier from your main accounts from hackers, and those who steal your account number and PIN through social engineering.
- No personal mail or personally subscribed magazines in your office.
- Do not use the same PIN or password across different accounts, especially for credit/debit cards with ATM access.
 - “Shoulder surfing” is the simple observation of someone keying in a PIN. The 3x3 matrix of keypads makes it very easy to emulate the pattern. The premeditated theft of a wallet or purse will make a person vulnerable to losses through the ATM. With the typical cash out limit of \$300 per day, multiple cards used at 11:45pm, and then again at 12:15am, may result in over \$1200 cashed out in a 30-minute period.
- Passwords should be a combination of letters and numbers, and not words found in a dictionary.

- To many people use combinations that are easy to figure out, or cracked by software easily obtainable through hacking resources on the web.
- Examples of bad passwords: first name, last name, initials, birthdates, anniversary dates, pet names, or any combination of such.
- Password protect access to your computer.
- Password protect access to client files.
 - Psychologists show due diligence with client confidentiality with placing client charts/data in locked cabinets, but often do not do the same with digital client files.
 - Though there has yet been a court case to set a precedence for lack of due diligence of a Psychologist not appropriately securing digital client files, it is incumbent upon a professional with advanced education to fully understand and show due diligence when utilizing technologies in providing services to the public.
- Encrypt client reports when transmitting through email.
- Utilize antivirus software and weekly update virus definition support files for software
 - Norton Antivirus seems to catch more viruses than McAfee's VirusScan in tandem comparisons, from my personal experimentations.
 - There are many viruses in the wild that will not only go through one's address book and send virus infected emails to those listed with email addresses, but will also include a randomly selected file from the victim's computer.
- Utilize software or hardware firewalls for Internet connections to prevent port snooping and Trojan horse viruses.
 - Ports in an Internet connected computer are like open doors and windows for specific simultaneous functions. Port snooping is when a hacker is using various "network administration" software to query what ports are unprotected for unauthorized entry, allowing the hacker to "take root," to take control of the computer which includes examining and stealing files.
 - Highly recommend a hardware firewall for those with broadband connections due to inherent network vulnerabilities.
- Digital client files backed up on CD-RW, tape, or an external hard drive, and secured in a locked cabinet.
- Add "!00000" (without the quotes) and no other data, as the first contact in Outlook address book.
 - A simple cheat to thwart recent worm type viruses that automatically emails infected files to entries in Outlook's address book.
 - Does not prevent you from getting infected with a virus, just prevents from infecting others with automatic emails propagated from your infected computer.
- Use only mobile and cordless phones in digital mode for conversations involving sensitive and client related data.
 - Analog mode conversations can be eavesdropped easily, accidentally or purposely.
 - There is a significant subculture of those who's past-time is to scan the airwaves in search of conversations. Next time you're in a bookstore, review the contents of Monitoring Times magazine; you'll be amazed of what's available to the public. It is generally not illegal to scan and listen in on conversations over the airwaves, but is illegal to use this information in any form. Yeah, right.
- Utilizing "shredding" software when deleting a client file to ensure complete file deletion
 - Deleted files can easily be undeleted.
 - SecureShred from www.procreativesystems.com/shred is one resource.
- IMPORTANT! Show due diligence when selling your computer and completely delete client files.
 - Digitally "shred" client files, or
 - Reformat the hard drive and reinstall the original operating system, or
 - Remove the hard drive and secure it, and replace with a new one

My goal with these considerations is to bring into awareness, considerations for the psychologist and the data crumbs left behind in the wake of his/her personal and professional life. These issues and their precursor issues, were initially co-presented by Michael D. Angioli, PhD, FAClinP, ABPP, and myself at the August 1990 APA Convention in Boston, MA, "Computer Use in Independent Practice: Professional, Clinical and Ethical Issues." To date, the American Psychological Association nor any other Psychological Associations that I'm aware of, have not provided comprehensive guidelines concerning these issues. It is incumbent upon us as highly trained professionals to educate ourselves and implement appropriate strategies with our professional services to the public and to ourselves, in this digital age.

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