

Network Update

Is your guests' data safe?

It's now possible to strengthen the security of the wireless network your property provides for guests. However, a new study from Cornell University finds that guests who log on to the Internet at many hotels and resorts aren't protected because the networks don't have these security features. "Hotel Network Security: A Study of Computer Networks in U.S. Hotels," by Josh Ogle, Erica Wagner, and Mark Talbert, explains how unauthorized computers can intercept your guests' data using commonly available software.

The chief problem is that many properties use, at best, a router to operate the network. This is better than the old hubs and switches, but not as good as the approach known as virtual local area networks, or VLANs. Ogle personally visited nearly four dozen hotels, where he was able to gain unauthorized access to their guest networks. At the same time, he found that

the hotel's own operations network was totally separate from the guest access network.

Although Ogle was simply testing the guest networks, the problem you face is that a hacker can use readily available software to redirect your guests' transmissions through the hacker's computer. As Ogle demonstrated, the hacker could thereby intercept potentially sensitive information, such as passwords or even corporate data, creating a public relations or financial nightmare.

This redirection can be defeated by making each node on your network a VLAN. This relatively inexpensive procedure isolates anyone who attempts to intercept your guests' transmissions.

The authors suggest that properties maintain the greatest possible security for their networks because so many guests use the networks to transmit what could be sensitive data. He found that some hotels did use encryption to protect guests'

Information Interstate

More and more cable companies are using the term "fiber" to draw customers to their networks. But what does the term really mean? What qualifies a network to be a fiber-optic network, and why does it matter?

Fiber optic networks use light, instead of electrical impulses, to send and receive information. Travel at the speed of light creates much greater capacity than traditional copper infrastructure for services such as television, phone and Internet.

"It's the difference between sending traffic down a multi-lane interstate and a dirt road," says Steve Jones, a vice president at Connexion Technologies, a Cary, N.C.-based provider of fiber networks. "Just as more vehicles can travel faster on an interstate, much more information can travel faster over fiber."

But fiber optic's benefits may be lost if providers revert to copper miles from the Internet access point. "This is a critical difference for resorts that offer high-speed Internet and Video on Demand," Jones says. "Guests won't be satisfied with slow connections, and many services just won't work to potential."

Jones also notes that while WiMax networks may also appear to also offer high bandwidth, it is more difficult to provide guaranteed bandwidth because of sharing and radio shadows. "With wireless, the signal is sent over the air," he says. "The strength and therefore speed of your connection can vary a great deal due to environmental factors."

According to Jones, resorts can add fiber-optic networks without tearing down walls and with minimal disruption of landscaping and community amenities. But before making a switch, take time to find out just how far the fiber will go. If the fiber in your resort's network stops short, you may have a traffic jam on your hands.

transmissions, and several also required a “terms of use” agreement before allowing someone to log on. Ogle, Wagner, and Talbert point out that although those are good beginning steps, the VLAN is a better approach.

This setup is in use in the W Dallas-Victory Hotel. Each computer or node on that property’s network is set up as a VLAN. In addition to isolating potential hackers, the hotel then maintains greater control over each of those network nodes. In fact, if the hotel’s technology director spots a “rogue computer,” that network node can be shut down.

Ogle, Wagner, and Talbert do warn that no defense is entirely impregnable, but they suggest that hoteliers consider every possible step to securing their guests’ data as it goes through the hotel’s network. Those steps include encryption for wireless connections, requiring “terms of use” agreements, and implementing virtual local area networks.

You can download the report free of charge by following links provided at www.resort-recreation.com. **R+R**



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