

## Ask SCORE

*It seems as if every day I read about some company being hacked and its information compromised. How do I protect my small business from this threat?*

Disruptions to your small business IT system are not simply inconvenient; they're costly and downright dangerous. Studies have found that more than 70% of small businesses that experience a data breach go out of business within a year.

While there are many ways for an IT system to be compromised, many threats originate from the Internet. Plain-text emails rarely carry viruses, but inadvertently clicking an embedded link or downloading an infected file is enough to disrupt one computer and quickly spread through your network. Hackers and other unauthorized visitors can also access your system by using so-called "malware" and other methods to decipher passwords and penetrate inadequate firewalls. Clicking website links that you're not fully familiar with can also admit malware into your system.

Because computers and other IT hardware are critical to small businesses today, take steps to safeguard all components of your IT assets as quickly as possible. A good Internet firewall is a must, as is a secure, password-protected Wi-Fi system. Many types of small business-oriented antivirus and other security software are available from vendors such as Symantec ([www.symantec.com](http://www.symantec.com)). Update this software regularly, as new and mutated Internet viruses arise from around the world on an almost daily basis.

The resource website *SmallBusinessComputing.com* also recommends inventorying your small business' sensitive information and where it resides (e.g., individual computers, servers or file-sharing FTP sites). This information should be kept on as few computers as possible, and segregated from other data. Various applications are also available to encrypt sensitive data, creating yet another obstacle to unauthorized access and malicious use.

Educating your staff and yourself is another data security must. Longer, mixed-character passwords are more resistant to hacking than the names of pets and family members. It's okay to write them down; just make sure they're kept in a secure location and changed on a regular basis. Also make it a policy to avoid suspicious websites, immediately discard emails with suspicious senders or subject lines without opening them, and download applications only from known and trusted sources.

*This column is brought to you by the Merrimack Valley Chapter of SCORE, with nearly 70 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business mentoring and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit [merrimackvalley.score.org](http://merrimackvalley.score.org) for information on mentoring, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.*