

Information Security Now – 1

John Mitchell

The recent fire at Kings Cross which stopped north/south trains into London lead me to query the resilience of our national rail infrastructure. Now I realise that at first sight this may not appear to be a computer security problem, but, service availability is a security issue and it wasn't the fire that stopped the trains from running, but the need to evacuate a nearby signal box. Now, if you needed to evacuate your data centre I suspect the powers that be would be pretty upset if your BCP was unable to deliver an adequate service. But this is exactly what happened with Network Rail. After all this was only an interruption and it bought travel chaos. What would have happened if the signal box itself had been totally destroyed?

So, I start tracking down who should be asking the awkward questions. First to NISCC (National Infrastructure Security Co-ordination Centre) where their Deputy Director informs me that it is not their bailiwick. "No, we deal with electronic security, not hardware". "But surely the signalling stuff is electronic". "Sorry, ask the Department of Transport". So I email the Secretary of State for Transport. The Right Honourable Douglas Alexander MP must be a very busy man (or perhaps stuck on a train), because neither he nor his minions cared to respond. After several failed attempts to get his attention I emailed Tony Blair (well, his email address at the No. 10 website to be totally accurate) with a query as to what exactly I have to do to get a response from his/my Secretary for State? Hey presto, I get a snail mail from a minion at the Department of Transport who states that the signalling failure is a Network Rail problem! Dooh! I agree that the lack of a viable BCP is a Network Rail problem, but the Department for Transport should be asking why Network Rail performed so abysmally. Surely everyone knows about single points of failure in their service provision? As an IT auditor it is my job to provide assurance, or otherwise, that my clients' systems have good availability; especially those providing a web based service. I always ask the single point of failure question. No reputable enterprise would host its key service on a single server without a mirrored back-up, but it seems that this is what Network Rail is doing with its Kings Cross signal box.

Judging by the response from NISCC there is doubt as to whether a signal box comprises part of our national *electronic* infrastructure. It's a debatable point, but as almost all of our national infrastructure from traffic lights through to sewer plants depend on computers we can't afford finger pointing between departments in the way that the hardware and software suppliers are sometimes wont to do. The system is the totality of its components and each component is just as important as the next. NASA's space shuttle uses three computers with majority voting in the case of a disagreement. It's the only part of that very complex system which is triplicated. We need to move away from thinking that computer security just applies to data processing. When my niece programmed my video recorder without my permission I pointed out to her that she was in breach of both the unauthorised access and unauthorised modification clauses of the Computer Misuse Act (I am a very sad person). My wife wondered if she would ever get the chance to level the same charge

against me with regard to programming the washing machine. No chance. I know the law and I have no intention for going down due to unauthorised programming of a washing machine. However, this may be a way for the authorities to detain suspected terrorists “I am arresting you under the Computer Misuse Act for the unauthorised programming of a video recorder/washing machine/teas-made, or whatever”. Or better still we could use the approach used against the Nat West three. “I am not charging you with any crime in the UK, so I will just deport you to America where they will charge you with wire fraud because that transaction went over the internet and it must have gone through an American computer at some stage”. I kid you not. It’s a crazy world that we live in where I don’t have to make things like this up.

John is editor of BCS IRMA’s award winning *Journal* and Managing Director of LHS Business Control, a corporate governance consultancy that he founded in 1988. He can be contacted at: john@lhscontrol.com, www.lhscontrol.com, or +44 (0)1707 851454.