



TechTalk

Passwords ©

by John McCarthy

Hi and a warm welcome once again to Tech Talk. Trojans, bots, worms, backdoors, spyware, malware, viruses, hackers ... The World Wide Web is vitiated by nightmarish creatures, ever-ready to ensnare the unwary and imprudent surfer in their deadly, arachnid embrace. I'm sure that practically all of you listening in at the moment will have taken precautionary measures to protect yourselves against these dangers by installing antivirus software in your computers. Programmes such as Kaspersky, Norton, McAfee, and a host of similarly efficient free software are considered essential parts of the armoury to keep data safe from the unwanted attention of malevolent hackers. Ironically, one of the best protections that people can employ is usually the one they take least seriously: The humble password.

Passwords are used for many things we do online. They protect our identities on websites, discussion groups, online games and forums, e-mail accounts, social networking and are indeed considered as an essential, if unloved, pre-requisite of the digital age. More importantly, they're also used for bank transactions and making secure purchases; as such, with all this sensitive data within potential reach of cyber-criminals, creating good passwords is one of the main defences against computer hackers, and of course password security is in direct proportion to password complexity. However, even the best password can be defeated with enough time and computer processing power, but if you change a complex password which comprises alphanumeric characters with random capitals on a monthly basis, you can add a further degree of impregnability to keep your valuable data safer.

Also bear in mind that the passwords you may think are the least important, are in fact the ones that matter most. For example, some believe that the password to an e-mail account is inconsequential because they never receive any correspondence of paramount importance. Well, the bad news is that statistically, a fair proportion of people use the same password for all their logins blissfully oblivious of the fact that this could be a recipe for disaster. If hackers manage to guess or brute force attack their way into various logins, they can then possibly gain entry into many different areas of their

victims' personal information and cause irreparable damage to their private lives and finances.

Be warned that some internet providers in France will freeze your e-mail account if they suspect it's been compromised – for example, if a third party is using it to send spam. I know several people who've suffered the inconvenience of not having access to their treasured e-mails for weeks while the problem was sorted out.

Rather than jotting down all your different passwords on a sheet of paper, it could be worthwhile investing in a password manager. This is a piece of software that can generate and store as many complex passwords as you require, and automatically fill in your logins at the click of a button. Some of the most common are 1Password, Last Pass, Dashlane and RoboForm.

One final piece of advice. All your passwords and logins are stored in your computer at home, connected to a router or firewall, so remember to change regularly the password on these devices. Don't let yourself become wiser after the event.