

Problem Solver – Security Management

Problem

You have a talented senior team member who often takes sensitive information about the project outside the office (for example when working from home or on business trips). You fear they may unintentionally cause a breach of confidentiality. To date, they have lost a media storage device and one of their family members accidentally gained access to the data.

How do you manage this team member in order to prevent an unintentional leak? What processes can the project manager put in place to mitigate against the risk of this happening?

Solution

Information security is no small matter. In some organisations or situations, especially those involving national security, the activities of the senior team member would result in immediate dismissal and potential court action. Furthermore, in national security situations, the failure to report potential breaches of information security requirements could result in disciplinary action against the project manager.

In these situations the project manager has no option that to report the potential security breaches to the appropriate security unit within their organisations. The project manager could include a non-specific reminder of the information security arrangements that apply to the project at a normal meeting of the project team.

In national security situations the project manager should not provide one-on-one advice to the senior team member as this may be later seen by the security unit as an attempt to interfere with any investigation.

Outside of national security situations, the story is not much different as the leakage of information can be catastrophic to the project and the sponsoring client. Imagine if you would what would happen if the client information of a major bank were leaked to its competitors or distributed on the web. Not only would the client have a major public relations

exercise on its hand, it would be subject to legal actions by its customers. This could spell the end of the client, your career as a project manager and the summary cancellation of the project.

In these situations I would raise information security as a topic at the very next project team meeting. I would also take the senior team member aside and, whilst recognising their dedication to the project by their willingness to do work out-of-hours, point out the potential damage their actions would have on the client, the project, and their career.

It is this last fact, making the impact of a breach personal for the senior team member, which will prompt a change in behaviour.

There are also a number of technical solutions that will reduce the likelihood that sensitive information/data will be leaked. These include, but are not limited to:

- ☞ limiting or disabling the use of USB ports and/or CD drives to reduce or eliminate the possibility that data is copied from the client's information store;
- ☞ where media storage devices are still used, have these registered and controlled. With a formal sign-out process, users will be more inclined to treat information security seriously;
- ☞ creation and use of de-identified or 'dummy' data for use by developers and testers;
- ☞ establishing thin-client interfaces such that any off-site work does not entail copying client data to local machines;

There are also some business process solutions that will also reduce the likelihood that sensitive information/data will be leaked. These include, but are not limited to:

- ☞ establishing after-hours access and overtime arrangements so that any additional work can be done on-site rather than at team member's own premises;
- ☞ where not already in existence, have all team members sign agreements or other documents in which they acknowledge the sensitivity of data and their responsibility to prevent loss.



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Such agreements should ideally also require team members to acknowledge the possible implications to themselves (eg. dismissal and financial penalties)

This is P3 Management Solution's take on the Problem Solver published in the June/July 2012 edition of the *Project Manager* magazine