

Business must guard against viruses: executive

Computer hackers set record last year

BY PATRICK MANGION
Staff Writer

On the surface, their names sound as innocuous as the operating systems they infiltrate.

But over the past few years, Slammer, Gomer, Lovsan, Nimda and countless other computer viruses have exacted a heavy toll on the computing world.

What began as a relative annoyance has evolved to where international air travel has been crippled and global automakers stymied by hackers, or malicious code writers as they are now called.

And the bad news is, despite well-meaning legislative efforts by governments and millions, if not billions, in research and development from the software industry, the chances you will be technologically violated continues to rise, a York Region technology conference heard last week.

Addressing members of the York Technology Association in Thornhill, McAfee Canada vice-president Jack Sebbag said the more than 112,000 known computer worms have taken the problem from the back room to the boardrooms of corporate Canada.

The California-based anti-virus software maker, with its Canadian headquarters in Markham, said 2004 was a record year, for viruses.

The number of bugs deemed medium to high risk grew steadily from three years ago, Mr. Sebbag said.

"The 15-year-old doing this, who couldn't



STAFF PHOTO/TIM BARNETT

Jack Sebbag, vice-president of McAfee Canada, addresses the York Technology Association.

get a date, is now 20 and still can't get a date but they're getting really good at this," he told the crowd.

McAfee now has an anti-virus response team of 120 engineers to deal with the problem.

"With the Internet, viruses go global in hours now."

Aside from the creators of viruses, spyware, phishing and spam, the makers of popular, but often vulnerable, operating systems Microsoft, Macintosh and Linux are also to blame, Mr. Sebbag said.

With \$25,000 to \$2.5 million an hour lost due to a network failure caused by an external virus, business needs to take a more proactive

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approach, Mr. Sebbag said.

That includes a changing mindset, which equates computer violators to trespassing at a bricks and mortar building.

"Education is the key to understanding what's out there and how to protect ourselves better," he added.

Mr. Sebbag's comments followed an announcement earlier this month of 12 new vulnerabilities and news the world's first cell-phone virus appeared in the United States.

The biggest impact of the virus, dubbed Cabir, is a rapid draining of mobile phone batteries.

But, as more people continue to use cell-phones and PDAs, or personal digital assistants, they will be targeted by viruses as aggressively as personal computers, Mr. Sebbag said.

Projections have the number of hand-held PDAs in use at 1.2 billion by 2007.

But few of their users protect their technology with the same diligence they would their PC.

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