

# Herding Cats: *Security is a Mindset*

July 2009



**BrandenWilliams**  
SECURE BUSINESS GROWTH

When we walk into our house during the hot summer here in Texas, we expect that the air conditioning will give us relief from the heat, the water in our refrigerators is cool and refreshing, and when we flip a certain switch on the wall that a ceiling fan will provide a comfortable breeze.

How often do we stop and think about these amenities that have, over time, become requirements for living? Usually at least once per year when a storm knocks out the electricity!

How different is that from security? We want to believe that security is always there; that regardless of our investment in security, it's doing its job every day we don't have a breach. Unfortunately, we tend to only stop and think about security when we have a breach. Unlike a ceiling fan, we cannot instantly turn security on with the flick of a switch.

Security programs take years to build—especially in larger companies where employees fight to maintain the status quo. Take retail for example. As long as there has been theft, security has been a part of retail. Over time, it seems, the concept simply has not evolved. Even today, when you speak to someone in the retail business about security, he tends to talk about theft and fraud, not a data breach. Therefore, his “To Do” list is loaded with tasks geared toward preventing theft and fraud.

Security is a mindset<sup>1</sup>. Try this someday for fun. Introduce yourself as an IT Auditor to someone in security, and tell her that you heard security was an easy transition to make from audit, and that you want to make the transition. Watch her demeanor change. If the security professional you meet is seasoned, her mood will either slowly sour over the duration of the conversation, or she will do her best to correct the misconception that you carry around in your brain.

We have a phrase in Texas that can be altered slightly to support this mantra. You can take the girl out of Texas, but you can't take the Texas out of the girl. Security is like that. You can put an individual into a security position, but you can't put the security mindset into a person. It has to be earned.

Security people think differently. For example, when filling out a recent new patient form at a doctor's office recently, I was asked for my social security number. My health insurance company has not required a social security number to pay a claim in years<sup>2</sup>, yet I guarantee that most patients simply start writing it in there before they think about the implications of doing so. After watching my doctor type in a four digit numeric password to access my electronic medical records, I was glad that I left that part of the new patient form blank.

If I were a bad guy, I would be going after private doctors in affluent areas to obtain information for the purposes of committing identity theft. Doctors and their employees think about fixing their patients problems, not protecting their information. Thanks to HIPAA, doctors now require you to sign a form about your patient data which is promptly put into your paper file next to the thousands of others just behind the sliding glass window. Doctors clearly do not have a security mindset.

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *I'm sure some security great coined that phrase years ago, and I apologize for not attributing it properly.*

<sup>2</sup> *Most larger companies do not require this anymore.*

Security experts are like artists. Watch a photographer pore over a photography exhibit. He will take in each piece and play the “If I were to do this, how would I do it?” game, which sometimes leads to the “I wouldn’t have used such harsh light” or “This shot needs more grain” thought. Most photographers would never externalize these comments—they internalize them and enhance their experience and knowledge vicariously through the work of others. They have a photography mindset, and will approach any image with photography-colored glasses firmly affixed to the bridge of their noses.

Security professionals should not expect every co-worker to be a security expert. It is, however, our responsibility to change the cultures in our companies, boosting security awareness and helping our employees create and evolve their security mindset. You will know it is working when you get that phone call after hours on a Friday from someone that just happened across a spreadsheet full of social security numbers.

No one said that reversing a river’s current was easy or that we should be able to do it in an instant, but that’s why we make the big bucks, right<sup>3</sup>?

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>3</sup> AAAAAHHAHAHHA... *Oh man, I just spilled my coffee.*

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Branden R. Williams, CISSP, CISM, CPISA/M, has been making a name for himself in the Information Technology and Security arena since 1994, as a high school Junior. Now, a graduate of University of Texas, Arlington earning his BBA in 2000 with a concentration in Marketing and the University of Dallas, where he earned an MBA in Supply Chain Management & Market Logistics, in 2004, Williams is sought after as both an Adjunct Professor and Information Technology & Security Strategy Leader in the corporate world.

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