

Published by
The Society of Operations Engineers
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Registered in England
Company No 3667147

Registered Charity
No 1081753
A Company Limited by Guarantee

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Transport Engineer
is the official journal of the IRTE,
a professional sector of the SOE.
Produced on behalf of the IRTE by
MA Business
Hawley Mill, Hawley Road,
Dartford, Kent DA2 7TJ
Tel: 01322 221144
www.transportengineer.org.uk

Transport Engineer
is distributed free of charge to SOE members,
dependent on membership sector. For
non-members, the annual subscription rate
(12 issues) is £79.50 UK and EU, or £81.50
airmail outside EU. For other SOE members,
the discounted rate is £32.

Printed by
Pensord Press UK

ISSN
0020-3122



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Hacked off

Apologies if you received the phishing email that was inadvertently forwarded last month. Looking back, there were all kinds of signs that suggested that the PDF link was fake. Regardless, what unfolded was utterly predictable: the software took over the email and sent on similar messages to everyone. It also changed the email client's settings, configuring automatic replies to try to increase the credibility of the fake message, and covered its tracks with a delete-all-new-messages rule.

As the dust settles, two things are clear: the author demonstrated a remarkable lack of intelligence. But the little virus was even dumber. It had only a few simple tasks to do, and it did them. It had no part in devising these tricks, nor did it alter them to better suit the circumstances. What will become of us when electronic systems become more sophisticated, and machine learning is brought to bear on this problem? The stock answer is that there are two sides of that coin; our defences will continue to evolve. Still, as the arms race between order and disorder wages on, some attempts will continue to break through the protective net of even robust security systems.

So, like it or not, cybersecurity will play an ever bigger role in our professional and personal lives. And technical developments in that topic will be a major theme in an event on 7 November in Birmingham, when the first annual one-day conference, the SOE Symposium, is held. More details on p43.

Technology isn't the only defence against crime, cyber- or otherwise; humans' critical abilities should not be underestimated. The phishing email failed to trick two kinds of people. There were those who immediately recognised it for what it was. But also there were those who, by interpreting all of the details, sensed that something wasn't quite right; whether it was the message's poor-quality image, or the misspelling, or the lack of a real message.

The latter group were impressive because they demonstrated an attitude to risk - sceptical, questioning, alert, cautious and caring - that ultimately protected them. Those are the kind of qualities that should be encouraged, because they underpin safe working practices, whether underneath a 44-tonner or sitting at a desk.

Will Dalrymple
Editor