The Federal Lawyer In Cyberia

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# Security and an Inspector: Did I Get Your Attention?

Cyberia is, as you already know, fraught with peril. Previous columns have addressed many security issues, ranging from theft of your laptop computer to the invasion of your computer by hackers seeking to steal your identity. We have also addressed firewalls and antivirus protection.

Secunia Personal Software Inspector™

This month's column begins with a suggestion about how you can further decrease your Cyberian vulnerability by installing and running a free program known as Secunia Personal Software Inspector™ (PSI). Secunia's free PSI analyzes the software installed on your computer and provides hyperlinks to update programs that are perhaps a bit decrepit and, because of their more feeble state, are potential sources of vulnerability to hackers. Secunia's PSI classifies your programs as "secure" (that is, not in need of patching or already properly patched), "insecure," or (and I can imagine Secunia's "Inspector" curling a lip at this) "end-of-life." The Secunia PSI enables you to secure your applications and to upgrade them to new and secure versions of applications installed on your computer quickly and securely. The program provides a graphic presentation of your computer's performance week by week.

At the top right of the program's window, users can elect either a simple or an advanced layout. Under the "simple" rubric, Secunia provides basic information about your computer's installed programs and their status, complete with a chart to enable the user to compare the security of these programs over time. And, of course, the screen displays a simplified listing of any errors. Clicking on an error's symbol leads the user through the Secunia's proprietary "Easy-to-Patch" program update process, keeping things reassuringly simple. Choosing the "advanced" tab exposes more details and lists more updates, looking deeper for mission-critical vulnerabilities and their corresponding updates and patches. Installed programs that show up on the list get flagged as "secure," "end-of-life," or "insecure."

I must confess that my initial experience with the Secunia PSI left me a bit leery of the program. The scanning process itself seemed a bit decrepit. I left the room for a cup of coffee and, when I came back, the Inspector had news to report. Voilà! The Inspector had completed the first lap around my hard drive and was ready to
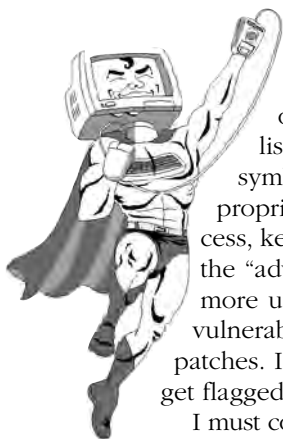
report. It seems that he/she/it had found six areas of potential vulnerability in programs that were installed. (I didn't feel much shame, though, because the Inspector also wryly informed me that I was better off than 94 percent of the other computer users in California.)

After each problem that has been identified, the program provides a link to the solution: a patch from the manufacturer. It was as simple as a mouse click to install each patch, in turn. After maybe five minutes, my update process ended and, with Secunia now running in the background, things began moving from the "insecure" list to the "secure" list. How reassuring! Fortunately for me, the Inspector did not recommend "end-of-life" measures for any of my programs. However, the PSI screen's "end-of-life" tab gives immediate access to the Windows™ add/remove programs screen, including the listed software's folder and online references. This was a good experience. Secunia is free and it is highly recommended. It fills a niche on a computer that would almost certainly otherwise go unfilled. Checking around, I noted (before installing it) that the program had received the highest recommendation awarded by CNet, one of the Internet's most respected sites. User instructions and explanations written in plain language, along with a spartan appearance, further enhance Secunia's aura of rock-solid dependability.

Avira AntiVir™

A second freeware program that deserves readers' attention is Avira AntiVir. At first glance, it looks like your father's antivirus program, but AntiVir has much greater power to ferret out malware on a computer than its appearance might indicate.

Consistently appearing at or near the top of lists

compiled by Web sites that monitor such things, Avira's AntiVir remains, in my opinion, one of the best freeware security programs available anywhere on the Internet. As with many such products, a premium edition is available for a fee as a download over the Internet. However, many users are quite happy with the no-cost version.

Despite a few issues still unresolved in Version 9 of the program—as well as the seemingly ubiquitous "nag screen" that follows each definition file update—AntiVir offers effective protection at an absolutely unbeatable price (that is, free). And, if the truth be told, the nag screens announcing updates to counter new malfactors are, in a very real sense, reassuring.

AntiVir is not without its detractors, however. Before you commit to installing the program, weigh the ringing endorsement by the staff at CNet against the lukewarm-at-best comments of the staff at *PC Magazine*. (See the former at download.cnet.com/Avira-AntiVir-Personal-Free-Antivirus/3000-2239_4-10322935.html and the latter at www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2129688,00.asp, then, decide for yourself.)

Conclusion

Beware, because it is not wise to slow down your computer by installing too much on it. And, of course, there are ever-present risks that the more you install the more some of your programs may conflict with others. In other words, "free" is not always the same as "worry-free." After all, Cyberia is, as you already know, fraught with peril. **TFL**

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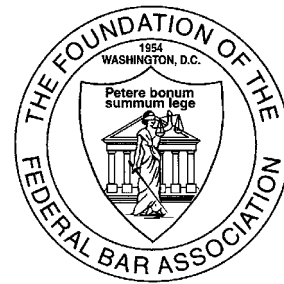
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