

Privacy: Is your data really secure?

By Lynn McGregor

We hear a lot these days about security breaches with electronic data, an issue with high stakes for administrative professionals.

I witnessed the potential for trouble on a visit to one of my office design clients – a law firm.

On a tour of the office, I noticed an unlocked file drawer marked “China wall files” – the name for documents to be handled in strictest confidence when lawyers in the same firm represent opposing parties. Worse yet, the files were out in the open in full view.

All companies, not just law offices, are responsible for meeting their obligations under federal and provincial legislation to safeguard the privacy of clients and employees. A knowledgeable administrative professional can be a leader in preventing privacy problems before they arise.

For starters, ask these key questions:

1. Who is allowed to have formal access to this file / information? The answer will determine the best way to store this particular information.
2. Could anyone not formally authorized to see this file / information gain access without



Lynn McGregor

others knowing? If so, you have a severe privacy problem.

3. What tracking system is used when a file is signed out? Establish a protocol for re-securing the document before it goes out again.
4. Who could gain access to sensitive documents after hours? In rooms with after-hours access, file storage systems must have secondary locking systems.
5. Are storage systems actually locked? Surprisingly the answer too often is “no.” Establish a plan for sensitive documents to be secured over lunch or at the end of each work period.
6. What are your insurance company’s rules for fire protection of records? You need a plan to guarantee your coverage.

If the answers to these questions are not satisfactory, reconsider your storage protocols.

Administrative professionals need to be vigilant about privacy, not only for themselves but their employers. Think about taking ownership of issues related to privacy protection.

For example, to ease the burden on a busy supervisor, can you take responsibility for locking files away at the end of the day? Alternatively, with an understanding of the rules and regulations on privacy, you may be well positioned to suggest improved office practices on privacy.

Meanwhile, private information



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can be leaked inadvertently to others through telephone conversations carried out in open-plan areas or when office doors are left ajar. Information transmitted through overheard conversations is as bad as leaving a sensitive file out on the desk. Think about when – and where – to share private information.

On other occasions, a colleague at a neighbouring desk may be working on a file with private information about a person known to you. Alert your boss so that the company can establish protocols to limit access to sensitive data.

Lastly, if there’s a privacy breach, the administrative professional can be part a team to ensure everyone follows a reporting protocol free of reprisals. With a responsive system in place, you can safeguard your – and your company’s – reputation.

Lynn McGregor, principal of McGregor Design Group, is a registered architectural interior designer who has worked in the private and public sector for more than 37 years. She is president-elect of the Association of Registered Interior Designers of Ontario and has won multiple awards for her work in the profession. www.mcgregordesigngroup.com