

PII – It's Your Identity!

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ON CYBER PATROL

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When is the last time a customer service agent asked for the last four of your social security number and your date of birth? Supposedly, when you answer questions like these, you are confirming your identity because the information you provide is only known by you and very few others.

However, it's not hard for others to know your address, and it's not a stretch for others to know your date of birth. Look at how many organizations celebrate employee birthdays.

Identity theft is the most prevalent crime associated with the loss/theft of personally identifiable information (PII) and this crime is growing at an exponential rate. Loss of PII costs individuals and companies billions of dollars each year.

Are you doing all you can to prevent loss of your PII?

First, let's define PII. You can't expect others to protect something if you don't know what it is. According to the National Institute of Standards and Technology, PII is:

- (1) Any information that can be used to distinguish or trace an individual's identity, such as name, social security number, date and place of birth, mother's maiden name, or biometric records; and
- (2) Any other information that is linked or linkable to an individual, such as medical, educational, financial, and employment information.

If any of the information above ends up in the wrong hands, it could be disastrous for the true owner. In the hands of a criminal intent on profiting from this information, the damage can be limitless.

What can you do to keep your PII safe?

Be selfish with your PII. This is the number one thing you can do to protect your information. When asked to provide your social security number to customer service, inquire if there is another way to verify identity. Some businesses ask for other information --such as the amount of your last bill, make/model of your vehicle, or previous addresses. Many companies now have phone passwords that combine with your name to verify identity. In addition, when you are providing information about yourself online, fill out only the required areas and refrain from providing "optional" information.

Be aware of your surroundings in public. Internet cafes, cyber cafes, and similar establishments offer a place for identity thieves to prey on their next victim. In these venues, customers rent computers for a limited time to search the web and check email. If unsuspecting customers save personal information on the computer and depart without properly deleting the PII, they may be providing sensitive information to a criminal.

For example, during tax season many people head to Internet cafes to print their tax returns because they may not own a printer. It only takes seconds for a criminal to grab tax documents left unattended on a printer, but the damage can take months or years to repair.

You are also at risk if the organizations and companies you do business with aren't safeguarding your information. There are many cases where companies lose customers' PII. In addition, you read about employee laptops stolen from airports, hotel rooms, and rental cars causing personal data to be put at risk.

The companies we do business with are required to protect and secure the PII we entrust them with -- or face legal repercussions. By law, companies must ensure they protect personal data from hackers, safeguard data from loss and theft, and serve as good stewards when releasing data. They must also teach their employees the importance of safeguarding personal information.

In short, companies must treat an individual's PII with the same care and importance as they would safeguard the money received from those very same customers.

PII is more than information. It's your identity. Do all you can to protect and secure your information and to ensure others protect and secure this information.

More OnCyberPatrol comics and articles can be found on the Army's OnCyberPatrol website located at:
<https://ciog6.army.mil/OnCyberPatrol.aspx>

And readers with an Army AKO account can access more information regarding PII and other Cybersecurity related topics at the Army's IA One Stop Shop (<https://informationassurance.us.army.mil>).