



Jun 19, 2017 16:16 BST

Funding announced to research cybersecurity risks of digital hoarding

Researchers at Northumbria University in Newcastle have been awarded funding from the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) to explore the cybersecurity risks of digital hoarding.

Whilst extensive research has been carried out into physical hoarding, little has been done into the modern day equivalent; digital hoarding, which can cause stress, cost businesses and employers money and be a cybersecurity risk, with data not being stored securely.

The project will look into why people hoard data and information digitally; for example, emails, documents, the impact on organisations and how behaviours can be changed.

Previous research has shown, for example, that users typically keep half of the emails they receive and reply to about a third of them and that few people proactively tidy out their emails.*

Digital hoarding by employees has an economic cost for organisations as employees can struggle to find the information they need to carry out their work as well as impact on the carbon footprint with organisations having to back up lots of information and data, which is no longer required. Digital hoarding also has a cybersecurity risk as people can access and use information illegitimately.

Associate Professor of Psychology at Northumbria Dr Nick Neave, is leading the research. He said: “We all know how frustrating it is when you can’t find what you are looking for; even more so in today’s digital age. Not being able to find that document, image or email you need is not only frustrating, but costs organisations time and money and can cause stress and anxiety for those involved.

“This research project is the first to explore the characteristics of digital hoarding; who is hoarding, why and what can be done to change that behaviour in order to reduce the risk and to help staff and employers. We hope the findings will also help people in their normal lives too as our use and reliance on digital continues to increase.”

The research project involves carrying out a survey of employees at a number of large organisations, including local authorities, universities and emergency services; initially to identify hoarders, their characteristics and the extent of hoarding symptoms. Those individuals who score highly on digital hoarding will then be invited to take part in focus groups to look in more detail at their digital hoarding behaviour as well as how their behaviour could be changed.

The findings of the research will help organisations develop and refine their digital storage and data protection and digital security policies, and preserve their commercial integrity.

The research project is one of eight new projects announced by UK's Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats to address some of the security threats facing the UK.

After a rigorous and independent review process, the projects (subject to contract) were selected from more than 80 applications to CREST's recent commissioning call. CREST offered £900,000 to fund innovative economic, behavioural, and social science research relevant to understanding and mitigating contemporary security threats.

Speaking about the announcement the Director of CREST, Professor Paul Taylor, said: "We continue to be impressed by the outstanding quality of responses to our call. The successful applicants promise to deliver theoretical innovation that will make a real difference to the work of the security and intelligence agencies. I am looking forward to working with them."

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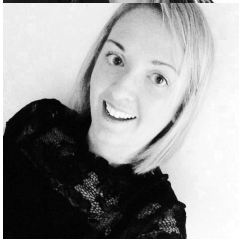


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