

Employee Privacy and Data Security Training

A LEGAL REQUIREMENT AND PRUDENT BUSINESS PRACTICE

Many executives may be surprised to learn that one of the most frequent causes of data breaches is employee error, and not just employees in the IT department.

The types of information involved in breaches go beyond payment cards, Social Security numbers and patient medical information, and can include valuable proprietary or trade secret information; privileged or financial data belonging to employees, clients and customers; and sensitive internal email communications. Everyday mishaps like failing to lock a door, using the wrong email address, forgetting a device on a plane, forwarding the wrong attachment or not knowing who is authorized to access data can have catastrophic consequences for a business.

While various safeguards may minimize employee error, employee training is essential in preventing data breaches. In certain industries, training may be required by law, but even if not required by a statute, data security training likely would be considered a reasonable safeguard for businesses required to protect certain data. Additionally, businesses in various industries increasingly are being required by contract, including government contracts, to conduct data security training. Finally, given the vast amounts of readily accessible data, it is a prudent business practice to train employees about the company's policies and best practices concerning information confidentiality, privacy and security.

Is employee error really a problem?

Yes. Having handled hundreds of data incidents and breaches, employee error is easily the most frequent cause. A number of reports and surveys also indicate that employee error is a key reason why companies are experiencing damaging losses of data.

A recent state of the [industry report by Shred-It](#), an information security company, found that 47 percent of business leaders said employee error such as accidental loss of a device or document by an employee had caused a data breach at their organization. Moreover, [CybSafe, a behavioral security platform, analyzed data from the UK Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\) in 2020](#) concluded that human error was the cause of approximately 90 percent of data breaches in prior year. This was up from 61% and 87% in 2018 and 2019. Increased remote work, due to the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this issue.

When people think about data breaches, they tend think more about illegal hacking into computer networks by individuals, criminal enterprises or even nation states, than they do about employee error. This makes sense as hacking and phishing attacks are considerable threats to all organizations. However, those attacks are all too often facilitated by employees who, for example, mistakenly click on a malicious link in a phishing email. The level of focus on hackers is somewhat misplaced. Similarly, management may significantly underestimate the risk of a data breach caused by employee error. An example of employee error mentioned in an [Association of Corporate Counsel \("ACC"\) survey](#) – “accidently sending an email with sensitive information to someone outside the company” – is something most businesses either have heard about or experienced.

Even if that is true, do we have a legal requirement to train employees?

For many businesses, the answer is yes, but it will depend on the kind of business, where it is located and the type of data the business maintains.

Healthcare providers, health plans and business associates

Certain health care providers, health plans and their business associates are subject to the privacy and security regulations under the [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act](#) (“HIPAA”). The HIPAA privacy regulations require that:

covered entities must train all members of its workforce...as necessary and appropriate for the members of the workforce to carry out their functions.¹

The HIPAA security regulations require covered entities to:

[i] Implement a security awareness and training program for all members of its workforce [including management].²

So, all covered healthcare providers, such as hospitals, physician practices, dental offices, nursing homes and home healthcare providers have a regulatory requirement to train their workforce members concerning privacy and data security. These requirements also apply to business associates of these covered entities, including accounting firms, consultants, brokers, law firms, and medical billing companies.

The training requirement also extends to certain employer-sponsored group health plans. Many employers sponsor some form of a self-funded health plan, such as a self-funded plan that meets the minimum value requirements for purposes of the [Affordable Care Act](#) or a health flexible spending arrangement. Employees who handle protected health information in the course of administering these plans must be trained.

Financial institutions

As one of the most heavily regulated industries in the United States and globally, financial services organizations are subject to a wide range of data privacy and security requirements given the critical nature of the data they use, receive, maintain and disclose. These requirements include employee training.

Safeguards Rule

Under the [Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act](#) (“GLBA”) and pursuant to regulations issued by the Federal Trade Commission (“FTC”), certain financial institutions are required to develop administrative, technical, and physical safeguards to protect customer information (known as the “[Safeguards Rule](#)”). Financial institutions generally include organizations such as lenders, financial advisors, loan brokers and servicers, collection agencies, tax preparers, and real estate settlement services that collect and maintain customer information, whether collected from their own customers or received from other financial institutions.

Section 314.4 of the Safeguards Rule requires financial institutions to assess and address the risks to customer information in all areas of their operations, including employee management and training. FTC guidance for compliance with the Safeguards Rule lists a number of steps financial institutions should take, including “[t]raining employees to take basic steps to maintain the security, confidentiality, and integrity of customer information.”

¹ HIPAA Privacy Rule § 164.530(b).

² HIPAA Security Rule § 164.308(a)(5).

Red Flags Rule

The [Fair and Accurate Credit Transactions Act](#) requires certain federal agencies to direct financial institutions and creditors to do more to detect, prevent and mitigate identity theft. These rules apply to a broad list of businesses – “financial institutions” and “creditors” with “covered accounts.” For example, a “creditor” is defined non-exhaustively to include “lenders such as banks, finance companies, automobile dealers, mortgage brokers, utility companies and telecommunications companies.” And, covered accounts include any account for which there is a foreseeable risk of identity theft.

The set of rules that followed became known as the “[Red Flags](#)” rule, which requires these covered entities to adopt programs designed to detect, prevent and mitigate identity theft. To administer the program in compliance with the regulation, the organization must “[t]rain staff, as necessary, to effectively implement the Program.”³

FDIC Guidelines

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (“FDIC”) applies the [Interagency Guidelines Establishing Information Security Standards](#) (“Guidelines”) that provide standards for developing and implementing administrative, technical and physical safeguards to protect the security, confidentiality and integrity of customer information. The Guidelines apply to depository institutions insured by the FDIC, such as banks, state savings associations, insured state branches of foreign banks, and any subsidiaries of such entities (other than brokers, dealers, persons providing insurance, investment companies, and investment advisers). Under these Guidelines under III.C.2, each institution shall “[t]rain staff to implement the bank’s information security program.”

Regulation S-P

GLBA also directed the Securities and Exchange Commission to establish appropriate standards to protect customer information. These rules, known as “[Regulation S-P](#),” apply to investment advisers registered with the Commission, brokers, dealers, and investment companies subject to the Commission’s jurisdiction. Under these rules, these entities:

must adopt policies and procedures that address administrative, technical, and physical safeguards for the protection of customer records and information...reasonably designed to:

- a. *Ensure the security and confidentiality of customer records and information;*
- b. *Protect against any anticipated threats or hazards to the security or integrity of customer records and information; and*
- c. *Protect against unauthorized access to or use of customer records or information that could result in substantial harm or inconvenience to any customer.*

In [Notice 05-49](#), the National Association of Securities Dealers (now known as the “Financial Industry Regulatory Authority,”) reminded its members about the need to comply with Regulation S-P. It stated, in part, that although there is no “one-size-fits-all” policy or procedure to which members must comply, members’ policies and procedures should “at a minimum” include: “providing adequate training to employees regarding the use of available technology and the steps employees should take to ensure that customer records and information are kept confidential.”

Federal contractors

Under the [Federal Information Security Management Act](#), certain federal agencies are required to develop, document and implement an agency-wide program to provide information security for the information and information systems that support the operations and assets of the agency, including those provided or managed by another agency, contractor or other source.

³ See, e.g., 16 CFR § 681.2(e)(3).

*Each agency shall develop, document, and implement an agency-wide information security program...to provide information security for the information and information systems that support the operations and assets of the agency, including those provided or managed by another agency, contractor, or other source, that includes...**security awareness training to inform personnel, including contractors and other users of information systems that support the operations and assets of the agency.***⁴

One such agency, the U.S. General Services Administration (“GSA”), for example, [requires](#) all employees and contractors to complete privacy and security awareness training upon employment and each year thereafter. Importantly, it requires all “GSA account holders [to] complete this training in order to maintain access to the agency’s IT systems and resources such as email, Google Drive and other IT resources.

Educational agencies and institutions

In general, educational agencies and institutions receiving funding from the federal Department of Education must comply with the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act](#) (“FERPA”). The law and its implementing regulations address the rights parents and students have to students’ files at covered agencies and institutions. Questions concerning the right to access, modify or disclose student records can be challenging. Thus, training is a critical component for any privacy and security compliance program in this sector to ensure that a school’s administrators, faculty and staff members are complying with FERPA.

State law Mandates

Although there is not yet a universally applicable federal data security statute in the United States, more than half of states have required businesses and other entities operating in the state or maintaining personal information about state residents to have safeguards in place to protect that information. In some cases, training is an express requirement, in other states, it is expected as a “reasonable safeguard.”

California

California’s Civil Code requires all businesses that collect personal information on California residents use “reasonable security procedures and practices appropriate to the nature of the information, to protect the personal information from unauthorized access, destruction, use, modification or disclosure.” Many wondered: what are those “reasonable security procedures and practices”? [A report from 2016 by California’s former Attorney General](#) is one source for understanding this standard. In the report, Attorney General Kamala Harris states that the failure to comply with the 20 controls set forth in the Center for Internet Security’s Critical Security Controls “constitutes a lack of reasonable security.” One of those 20 controls is to provide security training to employees and vendors with access to systems containing personal information. Additionally, California recently passed the [Consumer Privacy Rights Act](#) which amended the [California Consumer Privacy Act](#) to add an express obligation on covered businesses to maintain “reasonable security”.⁵

Massachusetts

Under comprehensive data security regulations that apply to businesses that maintain personal information of Massachusetts residents, businesses must maintain a written information security program (“WISP”). **A WISP must include: “[e]ducation and training of employees on the proper use of the computer security system and the importance of personal information security.”**⁶

⁴ 44 U.S.C. § 3544(b)(4).

⁵ California Civil Code § 1798.100(e).

⁶ Data Security Reg. 201 CMR § 17.04(8).

New York

In 2020, the [Stop Hacks and Improve Electronic Data Security Act \(SHIELD Act\)](#) went into effect in the Empire State, requiring all businesses to maintain safeguards that, among other things, “trains and manages employees in the security program practices” adopted by the business.

Oregon

The state of Oregon also requires certain businesses to maintain a WISP. The WISP must include administrative safeguards under which the business: “[t]rains and manages employees in the security program practices and procedures.”⁷

Texas

In Texas, certain entities that engage in the practice of assembling, collecting, analyzing, using, evaluating, storing or transmitting protected health information are subject to a set of HIPAA-like rules to protect that protected health information. Under that law, “[e]ach covered entity shall provide training to employees...necessary and appropriate for the employees to carry out the employees’ duties for the covered entity.”⁸

General Safeguard Requirements

Like California, several other states impose general requirements on businesses to safeguard the personal information they maintain. In general, those states require businesses to maintain “reasonable safeguards” to protect personal information of state residents. These states include, without limitation, Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maryland and Rhode Island. Based on the express statutory requirements and other data security standards discussed above, any set of reasonable safeguards should include data security training for employees.

Payment card industry data security standards

Businesses that accept credit or debit cards as payment for goods and services will have certain obligations under [Payment Card Industry Data Security \(PCI DSS\) Standards](#). The major card brands (e.g., Visa, MasterCard, American Express and Discover) maintain these standards, which are administered by the Payment Card Industry Security Standards Council. In October 2014, the Council published “Best Practices for Implementing a Security Awareness Program Concerning PCI DSS Requirement 12.6,” which states:

[A] formal security awareness program must be in place.... Security awareness should be conducted as an on-going program to ensure that training and knowledge is not just delivered as an annual activity, rather it is used to maintain a high level of security awareness on a daily basis.

Our company does not maintain personal information, and our employee data is secure in our HR Department, so training does not seem necessary in our business.

There are at least two things wrong with this statement.

First, personal information is not the only information that a business might want to protect. Many companies maintain proprietary and confidential business information that, if shared outside the organization (or with the wrong people inside the organization), could cause it substantial harm. A company’s business partners and customers might obligate it to maintain safeguards to protect the information the business partner or customer shares with the company. Training might be expected to be included in these safeguards, it may even be expressly stated in the services agreement.

⁷ ORS § 646A.622(d)(A)(iv).

⁸ Texas Health and Safety Code § 181.101.

Second, certain employee information is considered personal information and may be subject to some of the requirements outlined above. For example, the Massachusetts data security regulations apply to customer and employee personal information, and the California Attorney General's report suggests a similar interpretation in that state. Also, the CCPA includes a private right of action for persons, including employees, whose personal information was involved in a data breach caused by the failure to maintain reasonable safeguards, such as training. Under that provision, plaintiffs do not need to show actual harm from the breach to recover. With the growing number of data breaches affecting employees and increasing concerns about privacy, federal and state agencies regulating employment practices seem to be moving in a direction of requiring greater security over employee data, which includes training. Consider the following statement from interpretive guidance included in earlier [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission regulations](#) under the Americans with Disabilities Act concerning wellness programs:

*Employers and wellness program providers must take steps to protect the confidentiality of employee medical information provided as part of an employee health program. Some of the following steps may be required by law; others may be best practices. **Proper training of individuals who handle medical information in the requirements of the HIPAA Rules, the ADA, and any other applicable privacy laws is critical.***

What should a privacy and data security training program look like?

There are a myriad of ways to design a training program to create awareness and build a culture of privacy and security in an organization. Key issues organizations should consider when designing a training program include:

Who should design and implement the program?

If the organization has a privacy officer, this might be a good choice, but certainly not the only one. However, there should be an individual or department responsible for maintaining the program.

Who should be trained?

In general, this should include workforce members with access to the information the organization desires to safeguard. Interns, volunteers and other non-traditional categories of workers should not be excluded. However, even unauthorized employees may get access to that information, inadvertently perhaps, and may need to be made aware of certain company protocols, such as how to report a data breach.

Who should conduct the training?

Organizations may conduct training in-house, outsource it, or a combination of both. When performed in-house, the person selected to deliver the training might depend on the information or safeguards being covered. For example, if the safeguards at issue relate to information obtained by call center representatives, the call center manager might be a good choice to deliver the training. It is not necessary, however, that a member of the IT, HR or legal departments deliver the training, or that it be a person with technical IT knowledge. But, the ability to convey specific information about company requirements, legal mandates, and use of technology to maximize security is certainly helpful.

What should the training cover?

Again, the substance of the training will depend on the organization, the data at issue, the audience and other factors. In general, training should cover basics, such as what is confidential or personal information or what is a data breach. It also should communicate the organization's own policies and procedures, not just general best practices. It also is helpful when training is role-based which can make the training more interesting for those being trained. Also, training programs can be significantly enhanced when they use real situations that participants in the program can relate to and apply in their jobs.

When and how often?

Basic privacy and security training should be provided before an individual obtains access to confidential or personal information. At a minimum, the principles should be conveyed at least annually thereafter. Training also may be needed after changes in policies; following increases in levels of access or sensitivity of information; to react to changes in technology; and following a security incident and other situations, such as a merger or acquisition.

How should training be delivered?

There are many ways to deliver a consistent message about data security throughout an organization. These include policies, notices, newsletters, intranet dashboard, in-person sessions, online courses, videos, testing, tabletop exercises, employee resource groups or a combination of these. The ability for participants to interact and ask questions can be critically important to their understanding their responsibilities as they relate to the particular business.

Should training be documented?

Yes. In some cases, such as under HIPAA, documentation is required. However, an organization will be in a much better position to defend its data privacy and security practices if it can show that it maintains a comprehensive training program. This generally means that the organization tracks the materials covered in the training and those who attended or received the information.

We did training, and employees still send the emails to wrong addresses and make other mistakes!

No system of safeguards is perfect, and that includes privacy and data security safeguards. Compliance is an ongoing process, and periodic data security training is an essential component of any organization's data security compliance efforts. Through periodic training, organizations reinforce awareness regarding data privacy and take steps to manage risk, avoid litigation and mitigate business exposure.

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