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Indiana Tech's 'Cyber Warriors' are champions at beating hackers at their own game

By Kevin Leininger, kleininger@news-sentinel.com
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The streaks of light flashing across the Indiana Tech computer lab's TV screen are real-time representations of attempts to break into supposedly secure databases. Fort Wayne's Ash Brokerage knows all about that; confidential tax information for more than 400 of its current or former employees was stolen just last month.



Members of Indiana Tech's "Cyber Warriors" team recently won the state Collegiate Cyber Defense Competition for the second straight year. The team works to identify how computer systems might be "hacked" -- and devises means to prevent it. Team members from left include Carson White, Nickolas Simmons, Matt Billeck, Matt Kowal, Captain Ian Springer and Tony Burkhart. The screen gives a real-time image of cyberattacks going on anywhere in the world. (Photo by Kevin Leininger of The News-Sentinel)

But one person's threat is another's opportunity, and the six members of the school's "Cyber Warrior" team are so good at identifying and blocking schemes to "hack" computer systems that they recently won the state's Collegiate Cyber Defense Competition for the second straight year -- and could have careers as vital as tomorrow's headlines.

"Ninety-five percent of corporations don't have a chance (against electronic thieves)," said Adjunct Professor Matt Hansen, the group's adviser who works for a cyber security firm himself. "This is like a sports team. We hold yearly tryouts, and our goal is to find and remediate security flaws."

But to these so-called "penetration testers," this is no game. With unlimited amounts of personal and even government information only as secure as the firewall of the system on which it is stored, the ability of computer users to stay one step ahead of the hackers has never been more important or difficult to guarantee. Just last week FBI Director James Comey said security concerns have led him to place tape over his computer's camera -- a concern Hansen said is justified.

And so, in a real-world version of the video games popular among most of the team members, the Cyber Warriors practice their craft the way a chess master would prepare for a match: Strategies are plotted, moves and counter-moves anticipated. Can entry best be gained by stealing security codes or by "phishing," the use of deceptive emails that apparently breached Ash's firewall? How can each best be counteracted?

"We study papers (about the subject), learn new technologies. We've seen so much hacking, this (problem) is present if you work in IT (information technology). People are paying a lot more attention," said team Captain Ian Springer.

Competition normally pits the Cyber Warriors against a team of would-be hackers. The goal is not only to prevent or correct unauthorized intrusions but to do it with as little disruption to normal operations as possible, since computer "down" time inevitably affects performance, productivity and profit.

Hansen said even new technology can be susceptible to hacking, as demonstrated by the recent news that a third party heled the FBI extract information from the encrypted Apple iPhone used by one of the dead San Bernardino terrorists. Older technology -- which is sometimes not upgraded for financial reasons -- is even more vulnerable. Not everyone wants to know, however, such as the company that reacted angrily when team members uncovered a flaw in its security.ursuing

Although not all team members are pursuing the available degree in cyber security, Hansen said proficiency in the field can command starting salaries of \$50,000 or more, and for good reason: The stakes are high.

That's why Cyber Warriors not only work to improve their skills but do so in a way that stresses the utto use that training in the proper way. "We do think about ethics," Springer said. "There is a line; and we don't want to use any of this for bad."

Others surely will, however, which is why the ability to anticipate and block their nefarious probes will be in demand for a long time to come. But even the best cyer defense is not foolproof, however, which is why Hansen and his team agree that a decidedly low-tech method is still the best way to protect a computer from would-be hackers:

Pull the plug.

This column is the commentary of the writer and does not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of The

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