REPORT ON 'ERRORS AT WORK' STUDY

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BRIEF SUMMARY

This report firstly comments on the robustness of the research, and then focuses on three key areas of: risk, hybrid working, and resilience. Finally, a bibliography of resources consulted alongside the data provided to prepare this report is included.

ROBUSTNESS OF THE RESEARCH

This study collates data from thousands of respondents across multiple countries to present an impressive account of the current situation regarding the types of errors employees are routinely making at work. The analysis disaggregates data by gender, age, and country to highlight similarities and differences across countries and continents producing compelling findings.

Findings reported here echo similar research and insight into current trends; for example, a report by Verizon Business Data Breach Investigations Report found that 22% of all security breaches were the result of human error, such as sending information to personal email accounts. Research by Entrust found a discrepancy between employers and employees accounts of receiving training on data management and security. This highlights the validity of this research and confirms the robustness of the methodology.

RISK

Predicting who will take risks is almost impossible to do with certainty - risk taking is a complex phenomenon influenced by individual differences (age, gender, personality), situational factors (work, finances, relationships), emotional factors (stress, anxiety, happiness), and social factors (culture, education), which all come together in different ways to impact choice and behaviours.

In the high-paced world that we live in, greater risks are being taken in attempts to maximise efficiency. As risk taking increases, so does the likelihood of errors which can have far reaching consequences.

In sectors with increased expectations to deliver high quality services alongside decreasing resources to support effective delivery, risk taking can become normalised to ensure service delivery. Individuals can rationalise cutting corners and not taking safety precautions in order to provide services others rely on.

Processes to mitigate against risky behaviour include awareness raising, training, and protocols and systems to quickly respond to negative outcomes. The greater the stability and resilience of systems to protect against errors the less negative outcomes are likely to occur as a result of individual risk taking behaviour.

Perception of risk

Risk is subjective; it can feel like we are being a proactive and efficient employee if we work on projects in our personal time. Many people forward information to a personal email to continue working on projects outside the work space. The motivation behind this varies, it may be an individual sense of mitigating against the risk of falling behind on projects, or reducing the risk of being viewed as less productive than colleagues.

Our perception of risk can be very different to the actual risk of a situation. We often display an optimism bias when it comes to risk perception even when we are aware risks exist. e.g. knowing we should not use the same password across multiple platforms, we just don't think anything bad will happen to us personally. We convince ourselves we are safe from risk. This leads to underestimating risk and overestimating the precautions we are taking to protect against risk.

Individuals are more likely to underestimate risk for everyday, seemingly mundane, activities whilst these may be the very ones that pose immediate danger from phishing and data theft.

Often people identify risky behaviours as those that might invite more negative judgment from our peers, so watching adult material on a work computer would be viewed as more risky than watching regular entertainment.

Age

As we get older, risk taking declines. It has been suggested young people take more risks because they have fewer social responsibilities and roles such as mortgages and families; but equally young people may feel they need to take risks to prove their abilities against more experienced colleagues in a competitive work arena.

Young people are more likely than older people to feel embarrassed if they make a mistake in public largely because as we age, we accrue experience that tells us people rarely remember our mistakes - however personally mortifying they might have felt at the time.

Same Passwords

We are creatures of habit and like familiarity because it offers us a sense of security. This is one of the reasons people use the same password across multiple platforms – the familiarity is reassuring to us - if it has been used safely on one (or more) sites, we convince ourselves the password is safe to use across more.

Most people are aware of risks associated with using the same password, but with so many things to remember on a daily basis, having one less thing to have to worry about forgetting offers reassurance. It is this sense of reassurance and ease of access that also encourages people to remain logged in to sites.

In this research, fewer older respondents compared to younger said they use the same password across different websites – what we don't know is how many password based websites people are accessing – it may be young people engage with a greater number of websites and therefore remembering multiple passwords could be more inconvenient than for those who have fewer websites they engage with.

THE NEED FOR INCREASED DATA SECURITY WITH HYBRID AND AGILE WORKING

New hybrid working patterns present an urgency in how data is managed and handled by all parties. As information is accessed by employees distributed across multiple spaces the securitisation of information management processes is a priority to avoid mishaps.

Large numbers of employees want flexible work patterns introduced as part of Covid measures to continue, and businesses are exploring how spaces can be better designed and utilised to support hybrid working.

If employees are unaware of the risks their actions may inadvertently be creating for themselves and the data they are working with, the behaviours are likely to continue. Training which covers data management and security in hybrid spaces is essential. The most effective training involves interaction, engagement, and reflection. The least effective are trainings such as online click-through exercises that individuals complete on their own. These offer no opportunity for meaningful learning to take place.

Working from home has the potential to bring greater work/life balance for many but it brings with it increased risks which the average employee and many employers are ill informed about. There is mounting evidence that without the traditional boundaries of work and home to moderate stress, there are greater risks for burnout and exhaustion. Employers will need to consider what steps they can take to reduce stress for staff.

RESILIENCE IN DATA MANAGEMENT LEADS TO GREATER RESILIENCE AND DECREASED STRESS IN STAFF

Intense workloads, pressure, and uncertainty are significant causes of work related stress and are costly not just to individuals personally but to businesses. To increase resilience in staff and reduce work related stress, organisations need to have effective work practices and policies in place.

High productivity is masking soaring levels of burnout and exhaustion in the workforce, which have accelerated in the last eighteen months. Higher digital workloads and the absence of social cues that are relied on with in-person contact have increased levels of fatigue and burnout. As fatigue accrues, motivation and engagement decline, which in turn heighten the risk of making mistakes. This can lead to a vicious cycle where stress compounds the likelihood of making mistakes, and mistakes amplify stress and anxiety.

Stress and anxiety account for the highest number of working days lost in the UK, with a 40% increase in the last year alone. Gender differences show women are more likely than men to experience stress and worry at work. The Iron Mountain research findings support this trend with women reporting feeling more stressed, worried, panicked, and scared than male respondents if they felt they had made a critical error at work.

Having processes in place to reduce anxiety in the workplace can improve wellbeing for all employees. Systems enable people to create psychological safety and reduce worry. This provides a layer of protection from anxiety in the workplace.

Resilient systems can lead to greater resilience in staff which will result in happier and more confident workforce. This will then translate into greater productivity and profitability.

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