

## Workers easily tricked into revealing corporate secrets

July 30, 2010 | Dean Takahashi  
1 Comment



Social engineering is the (morally vague) art of tricking someone out of their company's technical secrets just by talking to them. It often involves deceit and relies on the fact that the weakest link in any computer security system is a human.

At the annual Defcon event, held in Las Vegas this week, attendees, mostly professionals in the computer-security business, engage in several contests. A new this one year involves launching social engineering "attacks," where contestants must obtain the answers to questions about a company's security defenses. People working at big companies such as Google and Apple failed to realize they were being social engineered by con artists.

(See our roundup of all Black Hat and Defcon stories).

This year, about 20 Defcon attendees in Las Vegas participated in the contest, which stirred a lot of controversy. The organizers of the conference were three security experts who know how to do social engineering: Chris Hadnagy, (pictured top right) operations manager for Offensive Security; Mati Aharoni (pictured middle), trainer of Offensive Security, and Jim O'Gorman (pictured left) of Continuum Worldwide. They created the site [www.social-engineer.org](http://www.social-engineer.org) for the contest, which occurred for the first time this year at Defcon and runs through Saturday.

The contest has proved so alarming to the targeted corporations that some called on the help of the FBI, which quizzed the organizers on why they were doing the contest.

"We wanted to start a social engineering program because we believe in security through education," Hadnagy said at a press conference at Defcon.

The participants were instructed to engage in passive information gathering to find out some sensitive information, such as where its dumpsters are located. (Dumpster diving is a common practice by hackers who want to find documents with company secrets on them). By looking things up on the Web, the participants tried to track down company details, such as what kind of

Web browser the employees used and what version of Adobe PDFs they were using. (The answers to these questions can be used to launch cyberattacks against the companies.)

Tipped off by the announcement of the contest, the FBI met with the organizers ahead of time, and the organizers enlisted the help of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit civil-liberties advocacy group, to represent them. In that meeting the Justice Department voiced its concerns about whether any laws would be broken in the contest. The EFF offered legal advice about how to structure the contest; for instance, participants were not allowed to impersonate law enforcement officers during phone calls, as that is a crime.

In almost every case, company representatives gave up secrets they should not have. The companies targeted included Microsoft, Cisco, Apple, BP, Shell, Google, Procter & Gamble, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, and Ford. The contestants were given "flag points" as rewards for each answer they pulled from employees.

Contestants cold-called employees to get the information. In three cases, company employees did not give any details over the phone. But the contestants, posing as journalists or customers, still got data from every company. One contestant managed to get an answer out of his target company in just 22 minutes. The contestant used tricks, such as preying upon emotions, by saying that they had to finish the project and get answers that day.

Because of publicity around the case, a number of contestants dropped out. Some said their bosses would fire them if they participated in the Defcon event.

Next Story: Push-notification platform Xtify picks up \$2.8M, ramps up development

Previous Story: Security researcher explains how he hacked ATMs (videos)

Email

Print

Bookmark

Google

Delicious

Facebook

Twitter

Digg

StumbleUpon

Reddit

LinkedIn

More...

Companies: Apple, BP, Google, microsoft, Offensive Security, Procter & Gamble

### You might like:





Paid Distribution



Why Online Learning is Hot Right Now  
[How Life Works](#)

A tale of two conferences: Black Hat and Defcon photo gallery  
[VentureBeat](#)

Y Combinator's Paul Graham: Say goodbye to traditional venture rounds  
[VentureBeat](#)

Angel investor Ron Conway: Every entrepreneur should get funded  
[VentureBeat](#)

Playdom CEO John Pleasants: why "social gaming" will die  
[GamesBeat](#)

- Google
- Microsoft

## Google

<http://www.google.com/>

Watch Company

Get Widget



Google is a public and profitable company focused on search services. Named for the mathematical term "googol" Google operates web sites at many international domains, with the most trafficked being...[More»](#)

### Overview

**LOCATION:** Mountain View, CA, United States

**INDUSTRY:** Consumer Internet

**EMPLOYEES:** 19600

**TAGS:** [AdWords](#), [Google](#), [adsense](#), [gmail](#), [Search](#), [ad network](#), [search engine](#), [ads](#), [advertising](#), [internet](#), [Semantic](#), [knol](#), [hyperlink analysis](#)

### Financials

**LATEST FUNDING:** Series A (1999)

**INVESTORS:** [Sequoia Capital](#), [Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers](#)

### Market

**COMPETITORS:** [Yahoo](#), [Earthmine](#), [Excite](#), [AOL](#), [Ask.com](#), [GrayBoxx](#), [Cuil](#), [Blekkio](#), [ChaCha](#), [Mahalo](#), [Powerset](#), [Hakia](#), [Publicity](#), [Adobe](#), [Hi1](#), [Microsoft](#), [Hopstop](#), [Jack of All Links](#), [Cruel World](#), [AltaVista](#), [Advise.com](#), [adUup](#), [Rowdii](#), [Yandex](#), [TigerLogic Corporation](#), [Info](#), [Hiogi](#), [BuildaSearch](#), [samfind](#), [Placebase](#), [Congoo](#), [YouTech.Tv](#), [Zeadoo](#), [Alefo Interactive](#), [Lat49](#), [Blogonize](#), [pressflip](#), [Duck Duck Go](#), [MyWire](#), [IMified](#), [MSE360](#), [iubo](#), [IDELIX Software](#), [Stumpedia](#), [bloglovin'](#), [InMobi](#), [Retweet.com](#), [dorthy.com](#), [RebelVox](#), [Streamy](#), [Factory](#), [CallSpark!](#), [NativeTung](#), [Dubzer](#), [Sarithi LocalMart](#), [ShareGrove](#), [Pinyadda](#), [Cliqset](#), [Opera Software](#), [Glympse](#), [Barracuda Networks](#), [Smartsheet.com](#), [Mixpanel](#), [IngBoo](#), [DeepDyve](#), [AlertMe](#), [Ribbit](#), [Facebook](#), [Genieo](#), [Flurry](#), [topikality](#), [MobGold](#), [Jolicloud](#), [DeviceVM](#), [Bizo](#), [Zimbra](#), [Plancast](#), [MeetingMix](#), [ZooLoo](#), [Airset](#), [CalendarFly](#), [Everbread](#), [Goober](#), [Clickable](#), [TellApart](#), [friendsta](#), [Adblade](#), [MapQuest](#)

**RELATED COMPANIES:** [Sportgenic](#), [Xoost.com](#), [Hakia](#), [tyBit, Inc.](#), [adUup](#), [Tumri](#), [Yureekah](#), [CarOcean](#), [Adify](#), [BuySellAds.com](#)

### Recent News

SEP 18, 2009

[Canadian Startups to pitch to Google at Vancouver Venture Forum](#)

JUL 22, 2009

[BizClip claims Google, Airlines & SMBs of the world will benefit from SkyClip](#)

MAY 21, 2009

[New Logo Look](#)

MAY 21, 2009

[Netlog integrates with Google Friend Connect](#)

MAY 21, 2009

[Put the pedal to the metal with a faster Google Chrome](#)

**Microsoft**<http://www.microsoft.com/>

Watch Company

Get Widget



Founded in 1975, Microsoft (NASDAQ: MSFT) is the worldwide leader in software, services and solutions that help people and businesses realize their full potential.

**Overview****LOCATION:** Redmond, WA, United States**INDUSTRY:** Software**TAGS:** [word](#), [office](#), [Windows](#), [excel](#), [live](#), [MS](#), [Search](#), [energy management](#), [software](#)**Market**

**COMPETITORS:** [Yahoo](#), [Apple Inc](#), [G.ho.st](#), [Netsuite](#), [Earthmine](#), [Laszlo Systems](#), [Collanos Software](#), [Adobe](#), [Google](#), [DataSynapse](#), [Connectus](#), [Sparus Software](#), [Gliffy](#), [Devshop](#), [Universant](#), [Zui Labs](#), [Datanamic Solutions](#), [Salesforce.com](#), [ALK Solutions](#), [Unity Technologies](#), [FutureIT](#), [Avatier](#), [iStylr](#), [CustomShow](#), [Airtight Games](#), [dorthy.com](#), [NativeTung](#), [Move Networks](#), [Opera Software](#), [Boxee](#), [Sun Microsystems](#), [Gridpoint](#), [EnergyHub](#), [Tibco Software](#), [Critical Path](#), [Take-Two Interactive Software](#), [Plurk](#), [Teneros](#), [MapQuest](#), [Teamly](#), [Blekkio](#)

**RELATED COMPANIES:** [Apparound, Inc.](#), [Redmond Pie](#), [Gig Junkie](#), [Tickex](#), [Hara](#), [TRIRIGA](#), [compete4yourseat.com](#)

**Recent News**

JUL 24, 2009

[Classic Ray-Ban - the Wayfarer and the Aviator](#)

JUL 24, 2009

[Topbuyjewelry.com](#)

JUL 24, 2009

[Topbuygucci.com](#)

JAN 1, 2009

[Rumors suggest Microsoft layoffs next month](#)

SEP 12, 2008

[Video : Microsoft Commercial - Bill Gates/Jerry Seinfeld](#)Microsoft Company Profile powered by [VentureBeat Profiles](#).

### Showing 1 comments

Sort by

Subscribe by email

Subscribe by RSS



**Raquel Howell** 5 days ago

I hate to say it but I could see myself falling for this. I guess we have to remain vigilant.

### Add New Comment

Required: Please login below to comment.

### Reactions



**srbijadanas** 5 days ago

From Twitter via BackType

Workers easily tricked into revealing corporate secrets | VentureBeat -<http://ow.ly/2jjO7>



**djapollo2k** 5 days ago

From Twitter via BackType

Reading: "Defcon contest shows corporate workers can be tricked into revealing company secrets" (<http://twitthis.com/hc26x2>)



**kxynos** 5 days ago

From Twitter via BackType

4 more retweets from Jruys JimStevenson sabhasin Show all

RT @VentureBeat: Defcon contest shows corporate workers can be tricked into revealing company secrets <http://bit.ly/aMtF0i> by @deantak



**AnuragKhurana** 5 days ago

From Twitter via BackType

Defcon contest shows corporate workers can be tricked into revealing company secrets <http://bit.ly/aMtF0i> by @deantak (via @VentureBeat)



**jorisevers** 5 days ago

From Twitter via BackType

RT @DaveMarcus: Defcon contest shows corporate workers can be tricked into revealing company secrets <http://bit.ly/bbWeib> #socialengineeringrocks



**FaresF** 5 days ago

From Twitter via BackType

Reading > Workers easily tricked into revealing corporate secrets <http://bit.ly/bwnk5C> via @VentureBeat



Trackback URL <http://disqus.com/forum>

blog comments powered by DISQUS

## MobileBeat

Hacker shows how he can intercept cell phone calls with \$1,500 device (video)

Push-notification platform Xtify picks up \$2.8M, ramps up development

PlacePop joins mobile loyalty program frenzy, gets funding boost

## GreenBeat

Electric vehicles incentives guide: Country by country

Tesla founder Eberhard leading VW efforts in Silicon Valley

LS9 may have just solved biofuels' scaling problem

## GamesBeat

For classic video game nostalgia fans, Halo debuts on the Atari 2600

Live demos show how the Nintendo DS and the Wii can be hacked to spread malware (videos)

Social game maker Zynga hires a new CFO; are more acquisitions coming?

## SocialBeat

How to stop worrying and love Facebook Credits

New Twitter feature suggests who you might want to follow

Can real-time search make a buck? OneRiot restructures



Entrepreneurs: Unlearn your MBA!

[venturebeat.com/.../defcon-contest-sho...](http://venturebeat.com/.../defcon-contest-sho...)

8/5/2010

Workers easily tricked into revealing cor...

How to use social media to unlock true fan marketing

How to keep your business acumen alive for the ages

## MediaBeat

How to stop worrying and love Facebook Credits

Shmoop to bring its sassy textbook approach to Bio.com

Redbox's \$1.50 Blu-ray rentals in 13,000-plus kiosks now, across the US by fall

## DEMOBeat

Top 5 reasons to attend DEMO Fall 2010 in Silicon Valley

DEMO deadline today: Will you be part of Silicon Valley "craziness"?

A mobile payments breakout is still a few years away for the U.S.

## Deals & More

Dave McClure raises fund, says traditional VCs should 'die already'

Cleantech IPOs still fail to impress as Molycorp misses its goal

IBM acquires real-time data compression company Storwize

## In The News

## Companies

GoogleAppleFacebookTwitterFoursquaremicrosoftTesla MotorsZyngaGeneral

MotorsYouTubeamazonSonyIntelActivision BlizzardKleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers

## People

Steve JobsMark ZuckerbergPhil McKinneyalex st. johnJohn HeringRon ConwayErick TsengCurt CarlsonPaul

Graham Vinod KhoslaDennis CrowleyJeremy LewisBarnaby JackVince ZampellaOmar Khan

## Topics

MobileBeatAndroidmobilebeat2010MobileBeat 2010iPhoneiPhone 4advanced transportationlocationelectric vehiclesantennagateSmart Gridlocation based servicesVenture CapitalSolarDefcon

## VentureBeat

### Partners

Dedicated Hosting by **ServerBeach**

Home

About

Contact

Advertise

Events

© 2010 VentureBeat

