

Forwarding – Should I or Shouldn't I?

One of the most common things I get asked about in my technician's travels is email forwarding. In particular, forwarding jokes to and from friends. Unfortunately this is often a discussion following my presentation of a bill for virus removal. ☺

There are 2 separate and distinct issues relating to email forwarding:

- 1- Internet security and viruses
- 2- Email etiquette

Let's begin with the easy one first, email etiquette. It is simply poor etiquette to share someone else's private information with which you have been entrusted. When you forward someone else's email address you are exposing their personal information. Therefore when an email is forwarded with a long list of recipients, a breach of etiquette is occurring. This usually does not apply, if for example, the curling club treasurer forwards the club's financial report to all members as this is already a group that knows each other. It's not the act of forwarding that is the problem per se, it is the act of sharing people's information who are unknown to each other that is the issue. So, if you must forward emails (and my next paragraph will attempt to convince you not to), be considerate and delete the list of names that came attached with the email.

Now to address the more challenging issue – accidentally infecting your friends. When you see FW: or FWD: in the subject line, you know an email has been forwarded. What you don't know is how many computers it has been forwarded through – 1000? 100,000? 1 million? What is the chance that none of those machines are infected – 0%. You are potentially exposed to all of the baggage that is forwarded from computer to computer until it gets to you. So inadvertently and unknowingly a virus may be being spread. Remember, that just because your little old grandmother may be a very trustworthy person, it does not reflect on the trustworthiness of her computer.

The analogy I use is this: 100 years ago, if I was a fine gentleman and was travelling across the country I would put on my 3 piece suit and bowtie and head down to the train station. When I arrived at the station, I would be sure to spit in the large silver bowl where all the other fine gentlemen's spit was collecting. Today we look back at the notion of a spittoon and think humankind must have been crazy to partake in such unhealthy activity. I believe we will look back at the habit of forwarding each other viruses the same way in 10 or 20 years. So why does it get done? Because we don't know any better. Remember, the internet is only 15 years old, less for many new users, and we are still learning how to use the internet and in what way it's safe to use.

So can one deal with this? You have two choices: 1) Not to receive these types of emails - tell the friend not to send you these or 2) ban all emails from that person's email address.

In all cases, the friends forwarding the email are only trying to connect, stay in contact or share a laugh. In no way do they intend for anything malicious to come of their email. Your friend may be offended when you tell them not to send you those kind of emails any more. You can tell your friend that you appreciate their attempt to connect, but in the future you would like uniquely composed emails, not forwards. For example: *Dear friend, Hi how are you? I am fine etc.* This, however requires some minimum effort from the sender; it's a bit more work than simply hitting forward.

It is critical that all computer users run an antivirus program. However, no antivirus is 100%. Ultimately it is your habits that are your best protection. In this day and age, online financial fraud and identity theft are real threats. Proactively protecting oneself only makes common sense. In my experience, for those that send and receive forwarded emails there is only one inevitable outcome and it involves the technician taking your computer for a few days to remove the viruses and return it to you with a bill for services. On occasion this also includes one's identity/financial security being compromised. No one wants this! Although I make my living (among other computer services) billing customers for virus removal, I believe my customers are better off with increased awareness, improved habits and, ultimately, better security. I have seen the devastating effects to people whose priceless data gets deleted, whose internet connection has been used for downloading child pornography or whose credit card information gets stolen.

For all the pros and cons, the equation is pretty one sided. It's simply not worth the risk to expose yourself to the baggage of thousands of unknown computers. Any email that tells you to pass it on to friends, says 'you gotta check it out' or that the sky will fall if you don't forward it are certainly throwing up red flags. So the next time a friend says that you absolutely have to see this joke he got in his inbox, say **no thanks!**