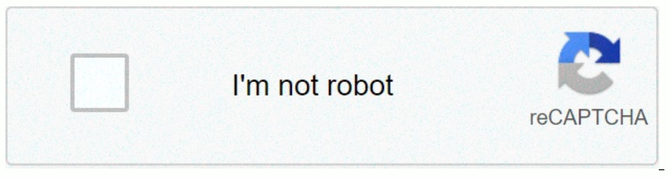

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If there's one thing people associate with modern technology, it's passwords. They're everywhere, and most of us use them for dozens of things every day. However, most people are shockingly regardless of their password security. Most of us probably know someone who uses the same password for everything from their computer and email to their Facebook and banking accounts – and that password might be something as obvious as their birthday or street name if they grew up. And we also probably know someone who has a sticky touch on the side of their monitor labeled Passwords (in red, double-stressed) with a list of everything from Twitter to Netflix just sitting outdoors for anyone to read. These practices might sound like something from our grandparents generation, but that's not strictly true: Last week I watched a full-fletched member of Generation D trying to move from a Samsung Galaxy S (er, Fascina) to an HTC Refounding through his notebook computer. move all their passwords? He had a piece of paper in his wallet with all the passwords - and through it all he meant three. One for email and social networking, one for aunt's big email (I check for her), and another for everything else. Looking over your shoulder, all three were everyday words: mophandle, mumbler, and Lillian. Guess who was his aunt's? Fortunately, there are simple ways to make passwords both hard to guess and easy to remember. Unfortunately, the technology industry sometimes gets into the way to use them. Here's a list of common password weaknesses and some ways to improve your passwords and online security. Obscurity versus complexity A common truism about passwords is that they should not be easy to guess. Most tech-savvy people agree no one should use details about themselves as a password: That includes birthdays, addresses, and names of friends and family (including parents, siblings, husbands, children, and even pets). Similarly, the password makes a particularly weak password — just like all other frequently used throwing passwords. This evergreen advice often gets interpreted to mean that passwords should be obscure, or a term no one would ever believe you would choose if they had a million years. Yes, obscure can work- and it's a darn view better than choosing an obvious password. However, an obscure password only protects you from people who know something about you. Chances are most people who try to break your passwords don't know you. Most password-cracking does not happen the way it is portrayed in movies, where the hero (or Villain) sits on a keyboard, tries a phrase or two, rubs his chin, then spies a childhood photo on his desk. Aha! Type the word magic and presto, security circumvented. In the real world, the vast majority of password cracking is automated, with computers literally thrown away word in the dictionary (and then some) to a system hoping to stumble over the correct term. This approach can work because computers can try passwords much faster than people can type them and can run 24 hours a day, seven days a week, without bathroom breaks. Password machines don't know anything about the users they're trying to compromise: it's a hard-working approach. So it turns out a key to a strong password is not its obscurity, but its complexity - things that make it less likely to be guessed by an automatic password cracker. However, making a good complex password means knowing a little about breaking passwords. Breaking passwords In very general terms, password biscuits usually have two approaches. One is to literally try a pre-compiled list of possible passwords. They usually start from very common passwords (such as password or qwerty) and work their way down to less common terms, and eventually use a list of words compiled from an online dictionary and other sources. This approach is more likely to find passwords that are valid words or variants on them, even if they are obscure. Another approach to cracking the password is to try valid sequences of letters, numbers and symbols, regardless of their meaning. A password cracker using this approach could start with aa for an eight-character password, then try aaab then aaaaac and so on up the alphabet, through mixtures of uppercase and lowercase, and throwing in numbers and symbols. This approach is more likely to find passwords that are machine-friendly or randomly generated. An access code like 4De78Hf1 is no more difficult to find this way than the teenager would. So what are the chances of a password being guessed? Most systems these days allow users to create passwords using letters (uppercase and lowercase), numbers, and a selection of symbols. Allowed symbols often vary between systems (some allow almost anything, others allow only one hand), but for our purposes suppose that each character in a password can be one of about 80 values - two alphabets at 26 letters each, ten digits, and 18 symbols. (In theory, at least 127 values should be available for each character, but in practice it is a smaller number.) Using a purely crude force approach, that means it would take a maximum of 80 assumptions to randomly figure out a password of a character. A four-character password could take over 40 million guesses (80 × 80 × 80 × 80 = 40,960,000) and an eight-character password could take 1.6 quadrilles (1,677,721,600,000,000). If a password cracker were able to make 1000 one second, it would take about a month to run all the combinations of a four-character password, and over 53,000 years to run all combinations of an 8-character password. Sounds pretty safe, doesn't it? Well, not really. Purely statistically a cracker has a 50/50 chance of finding the password in half that time. More worryingly, those who make password crackers have other ways to improve their odds. Remember your password was one of the worst passwords to use? Guess what is also a very bad password? Passw0rd, replacing a zero number with the letter O. While password crackers are running their common words from a dictionary, they are also trying common variants on these words, replacing zeros for O's, @ signs and 4 for A's, 3 for E, 1 and ! It's for I, 7 for T's 5 for S, and so on. Similarly, 0qww294e is a terrible password - that's just the password moved a row on a standard English keyboard. These techniques are based on users' preference for easy-to-remember passwords. Unfortunately, by replacing (or capitalizing) a character or two in an easy-to-remember term people are mostly making their passwords more obscure, but not much more secure. In fact, typical passwords selected by the user with eight characters, in lowercase letters, numbers and symbols, usually have only about 30 bits of entropy or just over a billion possible combinations. Why is that? Because the list of terms on which people base their passwords is much smaller than the total possible combinations of letters, numbers, and symbols. How fast can passwords be broken? Trying 1,000 passwords per second might seem impossible – after all, most services tend to block us from our own accounts if we mistype a password three or four times, often reset the password and that asks us to answer security questions to make a new one. These gateway techniques do not improve account security, and incidentally, they are also a great blinding easy way to annoy people. (I can't tell you how many times I've been blocked from my iTunes account by password attacks, but it's probably over a hundred.) However, attackers who plan to break passwords do not knock on the front door of a service and try (literally) millions of times to connect to the same account. They either use less public authentication methods that are not subject to blocking (such as a private API for partners or applications), spreading their attacks across a wide range of accounts to avoid blocking periods, or (at best scenario) by applying password-cracking techniques to stolen password data. Most systems encrypt the password data they store, but those encrypted files are as secure as the system itself. If attackers can get their hands on the encrypted password file (through a security hole, compromised machine, or social engineering, for starters), they can attack it very quickly once it's on its own systems. therefore, stories about attackers obtaining account information (such as Stratfor, Epsilon, Sony, and Zappos) are worrying. Once encrypted data has been lost, attackers can apply much more tools to open it. In the real world, that means the figure of 1,000 passwords per second is extremely conservative. Typical desktop computing hardware these days can test millions of passwords per second against common encryption technologies. Similarly, there are now password cracking tools that use graphics processors, and penal botnet operators are also in the password-cracking business. They can spread the workload on thousands of computers. Combines this raw power with sophisticated heuristics (such as trying numbers and letters variants on common words) and it's not uncommon to break a typical eight-character user password in less than half an hour. Shooting ourselves in the foot I noticed above how an eight-character password can, in capital letters, lowercase, numbers, and symbols, have well over a quadrillion possible combinations, but most eight-character passwords in use today fall into a pool of only about a billion combinations. That's because people aren't cars. If a computer is content to use either turtle or Y&4nS0 \2 as a password, guess which one is easier for a man to remember? Now, guess which one is safer. Some systems implement password requirements to ensure that users don't use easy-to-crack passwords. A common approach is to require user passwords to have at least one capital letter, a number, a symbol and have at least eight characters. (Some systems do not impose requirements, but provide a password strength indicator as a measure of the effectiveness they consider to be a password.) Some systems also require users to change their passwords from time to time (say, every 30 or 45 days) and prevent them from reusing their passwords. These types of requirements increase password security, but make passwords much more difficult for people to remember. That means that a significant portion of users will immediately come up with ways to undermine system security for their convenience. Sure, some people can cope with passwords would be 9.3nDs (# but plenty of other people are going to respond with password-loaded sticky-notes on the sides of monitors, notes in their wallets, or a Microsoft Word document on their desktop usefully labeled Passwords so they can copy-and-paste when needed. Password building requirements also tend to hurt productivity and increase support costs (for both employees and customers), as more people will forget their passwords or be blocked outside their accounts, requiring manual intervention. Making complex passwords the Holy Grail of passwords would then appear to be a password that is the complex that it is impossible to break using automated techniques, but quite easy to remember that users do not compromise security by storing or managing them safely. Here are some tips for making complex, easy-to-remember passwords: remember: long passwords. If an eight-character password can have 1.6 quadrilillion possible combinations, imagine how many a 16-character password can it have? (About 2.8 nonillion, or 2,830.) However, perhaps more importantly, the set of values for a 16-character password using common terms and variations is just under 1.2 quintillion, where it was just over a billion with an eight-character password. Using longer passwords is the easiest way to make passwords more complex and secure. Use combined words. Make long passwords easy to remember? A common technique is to use a series of three to five simple, unrelated terms. These are generally as easy to remember as PIN numbers; people tend to remember whole words as unique units. However, these passwords can be very complex, at least in terms of cracking the password. And these passwords are easy to make just by looking around or flipping a book to a random page. Looking out the window I see a toy frog, a car and someone's kitchenette window. New password: FrogHubcapCupboard — that is, 18 characters, but only three words to remember. Looking right: RunnerCameraGlueString - four short words, 22 characters. I only used capital letters to help break words. Adding more characters or substitutions can increase complexity – just don't get so complex as to fall prey to the weaknesses of harsh passwords. Use phrases or lyrics. Another way to make long passwords is to use parts of phrases or lyrics. For lyrics, relatively common songs are probably better than those especially important to you: again, you don't want people who know you well to be able to guess passwords just because you're a big fan of Michael Bolton (or not). Examples of passwords made from phases or lyrics could be You'reNoJackKennedy (19 characters), iShotaManinReno (15 characters), impepinandimcreepin (20 characters). Use mnemonics. The disadvantage of long passwords is that they can be difficult to type, especially on a mobile device. Another trick some people find useful for generating complex shorter passwords is using the first character of each word in a phrase or lyric. How many roads a man has to go down could become HmrmamwD-only eight characters, but relatively complex from the point of view of a password-cracking program. Similarly, shake, shake as a polaroid image could become SiSiLapp - maybe not great, but better than the turtle. This trick can also help generate good passwords for systems that still have a limit on how much passwords can be. These instructions will generally help you come up with passwords easy to remember. Of course, when dealing with password systems with composition requirements (meaning, they expect mixed-case, numbers, or symbols), you will still have to come up with funky twists on passwords to meet Requirements. Just remember that with longer passwords, you can make substitutions and changes in obvious places - usually these long passwords are easier to remember, even with requirements than short, nonsense passwords. Some other suggestions Other things to think about when choosing passwords: use separate passwords for separate services. Do not use your social network password for online banking. If one password is compromised on one service, the others should be safe. Choose important passwords carefully. Unique connection systems might be extremely convenient, but it also creates a single point of failure for multiple services. Examples such as passwords for accounts from Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft services, where a single broken password could give someone access to email, documents, images, social networks, blogs, photo libraries, contact lists, agendas, and more. Similarly, with so many sites (even Digital Trends) accepting Facebook and Twitter logins, a compromised password of social networks can have repercussions from afar. Change your passwords. It is tempting to think that if one of the passwords gets broken, you'll know immediately: the email will disappear, the blog will become a set of lulz graphics, The Amazon gift list could be filled with embarrassing options, PayPal account could be removed. However, this is not always the case: If someone breaks the password, there may be no obvious sign, at least not immediately. By changing your password regularly, you make sure that even if someone enters, the window of opportunity to exploit you is limited. How often you should change passwords varies depending on how you use online services. For anything involving real money, I generally recommend users change their passwords every 30 to 90 days – more money, more often. No password is safe Maybe the most important thing to remember about passwords is that any password can be hacked: It's just a question of how much time and effort someone is willing to put in it. Tips here will help reduce the odds passwords will be rooted by random attackers and even friends and family, but no password is completely secure. If secure access to a service is very important to you, consider searching for different forms of multi-factor authentication to further reduce your chances of unauthorized access. Image credit: Shutterstock / jamdesign / Tatiana Popova / Pedro Miguel Sousa Editors' Recommendations

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