This Old Enterprise: A Guide to Data-Centric Remodeling

Let's face it. It's time for some good old fashioned remodeling of the home we call the enterprise. The security controls that were once the rage are, well ... so nineties. But as anyone who has remodeled their house knows, it's not for the reckless or faint of heart. One needs to go about this strategically. We can't just raze the house and start over. Though we'll likely give up some comforts for a while, the house needs to be livable while changes are made. At a minimum we'll need some functioning plumbing and intact walls to keep critters at bay while we sleep. And we don't rip out the old and replace them with the same old features. The goal after all is to make improvements. And lest we think this all occurs without oversight, we should heed Rodney Dangerfield's caution in *Back to School:* "*if you plan on using any cement in this building, I'm sure the teamsters would like to have a little chat with you ... I don't know if you're familiar with who runs that business but I assure you it's not the Boy Scouts."* Building codes, permits and inspections take the form of standards, requirements, policies, and audits. We must bear all these in mind as we undertake our enterprise remodel.

So there's a lot to think about. How then should we go about this data-centric remodel, evolving to security controls that are close to, and persist with the data? Here are some **Do's** and **Don'ts** to help along the way.

DO adopt a data-centric view of your organization (and help others to do the same)

Whether white-boarding the 5-year security vision for your organization, or sitting in a security design review for some about-to-be-deployed application, train yourself to automatically ask questions such as, "how exactly would this approach help protect my valued information assets? How can I configure it to maximize data protection? Is there another approach that I could use to better protect this data?" To the last question, the answer may sometimes be "no" today, but this quick mental assessment will enable you to consistently evolve your control set to more accurately reflect the intent of the data owner.

Once you're comfortable with this view for your organization, actively promote it. The shift in thinking may be difficult, or even seem threatening or heretical to some groups. My neighbor recently spent a fortune upgrading his house to a level befitting *Better Homes and Gardens* only to have my Home Owners Association object because his hi-tech, perennially green artificial grass, which by the way looks much better than the gravel and weed infested yard next door, was too novel and foreign. Experience suggests that, as with my neighbor, the sources of the strongest resistance to the data-centric model are close to home: the Information Technology and Security groups. In the interest of avoiding a nasty squabble at the monthly association meeting, be sure to reach out to these groups first. Nevertheless, experience has also shown that many will welcome this new thinking with open arms, as they have been struggling for years, with little success, to secure their digital assets.

DO accept that instant changes only happen on TV and in movies

Ty Pennington and Bob Vila-types are busy guys, and likely not coming to your neighborhood anytime this millennium. Our world, both at home and in IT, is one of scarce resources, typically accompanied by a relentless pressure to do more with less, year over year. As such, it's the norm to start with the areas that demand most attention like the dingy old bathroom. The inability to solve all problems simultaneously is not justification for failing to tackle the most pressing issues. Unless you are blessed with the resources to do everything at once (a rare and enviable case), be okay with evaluating and implementing data-centric technology in specific scenarios, for example, e-mail or sensitive document libraries, acknowledging that you'll have to get to those line of business applications later.

DON'T rely on a static set of controls to protect you forever

Attackers are wily, creative, adaptive, and fast, and if you have something worth stealing, they're already after it (if you don't have anything worth stealing, get to work!)

DO understand and keep pace with developments in the market

I never cease to be amazed by the pace of innovations in everyday tools I thought couldn't be improved – as my son went through his "I-wonder-what-happens-when-I-flush-*this*-down-the-toilet" phase, the advent of the re-useable rubber toilet flange, replacing the venerable and seemingly insuperable wax ring, was a celestial gift. For much more recently-born tools in the rapidly emerging space of data-centric protection, the pace is even more dizzying. Actively seek out, subscribe to, or speak with sources likely to have current information about data-centric security technologies.

DON'T wait for "somebody else" to start addressing these problems

It's our data at stake, so it's our problem to solve. Just as it would be unreasonable to depend on the sudden unannounced visit from the Extreme Makeover crew to take care of that shag carpet and harvest gold-colored refrigerator, it is irrational to sit back and expect that a vendor, another enterprise or partner, or anyone else, is going to magically protect all of our data without our involvement.

DON'T give in to nay-sayers

We may be criticized for "looking too far ahead." People may try to convince us that there's nothing new we can do today. They might even try to doom our efforts by saying there's no point in thinking about data-centric protection, since the technologies are just so far in the future. However, it's exactly this sort of faulty logic that prevents us from reaching that future. We know better. Viable commercial solutions are available today, and new players are entering the market even as the existing offerings become more robust and mature. Remember when it was crazy futuristic drivel to think that somebody would want their own computer in their office?

DO vote with your dollar

Imagine that you were looking for something in which to store your valuables at home, such as jewelry, pictures, or legal documents. Before you made a purchase, you would likely go through the mental exercise of envisioning the right solution - perhaps a fireproof safe, in this case. Armed with this notion, you'd head to the store, look over the shelves, and if you found something that matched your ideas closely enough (cost included), you'd buy it. Imagine, however, if you didn't find it, and the clerk instead led you to the masonry section of the store, and suggested you erect a massive medieval-style brick wall around your house. You'd be appalled, and tell the clerk, "but that's not at all what I'm looking for!" unless, of course, you'd been buying from this clerk for the last 10 years, and you always just automatically bought what he suggested. In the latter case, you'd go ahead with that brick wall without looking back, which would further solidify the clerk's notion that everybody wanted brick walls.
Every security technology purchase you make validates the approach of that vendor, and, in the aggregate, determines the overall state and emphasis of the industry. Security vendors typically are not in business to achieve some higher, altruistic notion of a safer humanity, though that may be an incidental outcome of their efforts. If a palpable shift is observed towards data-centric controls in the market, this will justify the heavy investment many vendors are already poised to make in these technologies, to quickly evolve them into enterprise-grade, ubiquitous, standardized solutions.

DON'T gut the place

We can't regress our security posture along the way. Barring cataclysmic events such as natural disasters, even the most cavalier of home remodeling experts does not commence a project by flattening the entire house and carting off the rubble. As unlikely as a complete teardown is for a home remodel, it is a practical impossibility in the enterprise. For better or worse, the "house" will remain occupied while changes are made.

We hold the blueprint for a fantastic enterprise that offers better protection to our digital assets using data-centric technologies that weren't available when it was originally built. We have sufficient tools, and though we may not have our dream house immediately, it's time to start the remodel.