

Everything we knew about Passwords...is wrong

By Mark Kowitz

As you know, your "stuff" is only as safe as what is protecting it. As far as your digital property (documents, bank access, etc.) is concerned that would be your passwords.

Believe it or not, there are actual Government guidelines at the US National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). Even though the NIST only regulates federal agencies, corporate security teams are taking advantage of their guidelines. Companies use the NIST standards as a baseline and work toward their suggestions. The NIST, in turn, recognizes the importance of private-sector security by making their guidelines widely applicable.

These guidelines were first introduced in 2003, written by Bill Burr, who now regrets his original advice. We have learned a lot about computer security since then. The rules have recently been updated, in June of this year.

Previously a good password needed to be composed of upper- and lower-case letters, numbers, and symbols. An example of this would be C&\$-t3ch, but many people would still use something like Password123!.

Updated rules include:

- **The longer the better:** minimum 16, and, if allowed, up to 64 characters in length. Squash together un-related words that you will remember, e.g. mooncomputerbulbwatmelon
- **Don't use already cracked passwords** – there are lists being created online, where you can verify your potential password has not been compromised or commonly used. In the link below, some of the passwords may be offensive: <https://www.symantec.com/connect/blogs/top-500-worst-passwords-all-time>

Other changes mentioned:

- **Password expiration is obsolete:** Only if the user requests such or there is evidence of compromise.
- **Hints and knowledge-based authentication are out:** Such as a website attempting to verify you are you, by asking your mother's maiden name, or your first pet's name.
- **All printable characters are fair game:** including UNICODE. (these are characters that can be generated by a computer, encompassing all languages' characters and symbols, etc.)
- **Two-factor authentication is better:** if SMS phone messaging is left out. (SMS is when your phone gets a text message attempting to verify that you are you. NIST says "it's too easy for anyone to obtain a phone so there is no way to verify whether the person who receives the code is even the correct recipient")

Because of current computer speeds and the effectiveness of password cracking programs, studies have shown that passwords created to the old standards can be brute-force cracked in a relatively short time (hours or days). But longer, less complex passwords can take more than 100 years to crack.

Remember: just because these new guidelines have been released doesn't mean the services that require passwords are going to start following them. Don't ignore the NIST guidelines, use them to your advantage. If you need any further recommendations please call any of our technical staff and we'll be ready to help!

"Relax...we're on IT"



Contact Information

Information	Info@ccstech.net
Tech Support	Support@ccstech.net
Sales	Sales@ccstech.net
Greg Slater	Gslater@ccstech.net
Ellen Slater	Eslater@ccstech.net
Drew Rowe	Drowe@ccstech.net
Jeff Verry	Jverry@ccstech.net
Joe Halstead	Jhalstead@ccstech.net
Jorge Arias	Jarias@ccstech.net
Karen Strickland	Kstrickland@ccstech.net
Mark Kowitz	Mkowitz@ccstech.net
Ryan McMillen	Rmcmillen@ccstech.net
Eric Ruzek	Eruzek@ccstech.net
Tammy Sanders	Tsanders@ccstech.net

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