

Compliance at your core – Don't sleepwalk into security

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Investing in a digital future means that housing providers can streamline costs, improve operational efficiency and concentrate on creating improved tenant experiences. But there is often an elephant in the room when discussing digitisation – cyber security, which comes with any data-driven, digital approach.

Stopping data security spills

Last year saw the personal information of tenants leaked, with thousands more contacted about potential data vulnerabilities within IT systems directly linked to them. Evidently, this is an issue that must be tackled head-on.

Across the housing sector, there are problems with organisations taking a reactive instead of proactive approach to data security. This is a dangerous mistake; by their very nature, housing providers hold vast quantities of confidential information relating to tenants, employees and contractors. With so much data to steal, housing providers can often become political or monetary targets for cyber criminals.

As such, considering the swathes of sensitive information that housing providers hold, the sector must adopt measures to mediate these security risks, with proactivity as the engine for driving meaningful change. To achieve this, it's vital for housing providers to fully understand the security challenges they face.

First up – the cloud conflict. At the moment, most IT investments for housing providers take the form of private clouds, due to the perceived security benefits. However, for the majority of IT managers within these organisations, the end goal is all about leveraging bespoke SaaS applications, for which a public cloud is needed. Here, a hybrid approach can offer the best of both without compromising on security. Pre-existing private clouds can be kept for safely storing particularly sensitive information, while a public cloud can be used to host publicly-available data and share sizable resources.

It's also important to highlight that, across the housing sector, it's a common misconception that cyber criminals only target high-profile, big businesses for hefty financial ransoms. Malicious hackers are often just opportunists who'll go hunting for any unsecured data that will have some value, whether monetary or reputational.

Coming to terms with compliance

Next on the agenda – the various compliance issues that housing providers need to worry about, because compliance is the axle around which good cyber security turns. Just think about how IT systems accrue in the first instance. For most housing providers, instead of purchasing sets of equipment in one fell swoop, their IT environment builds up over time. The result? Legacy systems find themselves sitting on top of each other in an impossible heap.

Also, as networks evolve, siloed security systems throughout the IT estate all come with their own user interface. This creates compliance headaches, rendering it nigh-on impossible to accurately monitor compliance across myriad devices. This distorts the picture of security and makes compliance arduous to achieve, leading to unsecured data being left online that IT managers simply can't see. Again, without compliance, there can be no cyber security.

Thankfully, flexible IT systems are solving this via continual compliance monitoring. By their very nature, networks produce an unfathomable abundance of data, so these types of systems filter out the data noise, ensuring that the parameters are clearly defined to optimise efficiency.

Of course, there's no one-size-fits-all scenario for such IT platforms, but they do address the common concerns of housing providers: secure, compliant and cost-effective protection through real-time monitoring for compliance to multiple standards. These can range from best practice through to PCI-DSS and ISO 27001.

Skilling up smartly

Finally, there are key cultural challenges and considerations to bear in mind. First of all, the cyber-security skills shortage bites as hard in the housing sector as anywhere else. The best way to address this is for housing providers to outsource their cyber-security concerns in order to gain access to dedicated security analysts.

Ultimately, housing providers must ensure they understand the rising threat of cybercrime and have the necessary people, technology and processes to mitigate risks.

Forget sleepwalking into security; with the right team and technology, the safeguarding power of housing providers can be achieved in full. In turn, tenants can rest safe in the knowledge that their personal data is protected while accessing the services they depend on.

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