

Digital sleuthing grows on business, home fronts

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When a stolen laptop computer loaded with the personal data of 28,473 patients was recovered last month, Beaumont Home Care called in J. Stott Matthews to determine if patient records had been accessed.

Matthews, of Franklin, determined the records were safe. At the same time, the incident illustrated the growing need for computer sleuths to track digital misconduct, from spouses engaging in online affairs to employees stealing company secrets.

Matthews heads a two-person firm called Spectrum Computer Forensics & Risk Management LLC. Established in September 2004, Spectrum is one of many small firms that have popped up recently to take advantage of the increasing occurrence of computer theft and fraud.

Like many of his competitors, Matthews gets most of his business from legal contacts - including the Beaumont job. But even though computer forensics is increasingly used in police departments and courtrooms - and portrayed in such television shows as "CSI" - many private firms say their services are slow in catching on.

"I wish I had a hundred bucks for every time a lawyer said, 'I wish I had known you a few months ago,'" said Kevin Ripa, director of computer forensics for Mount Clemens-based Advanced Surveillance Group Inc., which has an office in Bingham Farms.

"I think that's the biggest hurdle we face - most people don't realize that there are people like us out there or they don't realize what our capabilities are."

Ripa, whose three-employee department handles about 1,000 cases a year, said the industry is growing, though many of the firms popping up aren't skilled at both the technical and investigative aspects of the job. He said there is no real industry regulation at this point.

"I don't know how many times we've mopped up cases that were messed up in the first place because they went beyond scope of what the small shops could handle," he said.

Ripa's team handles a variety of cases, from stolen trade secrets to child pornography to homeland security. Perhaps the busiest area right now is "domestics" - or a husband or wife who hires the firm to determine if their spouse is cheating on them by checking their deleted e-mails.

Digital data is almost impossible to erase, experts say.

Joe Duke also is seeing his share of domestic and divorce cases, as well as a steady flow of criminal cases. The retired Oakland County sheriff's officer started a computer forensics firm three years ago called Drive Spies LLC. It's still a one-person shop.

"Marketing has been the main problem for me," said Duke, who is based in Waterford. "It's been slow, painful growth."

For Matthews, of Spectrum, much of his workload involves employment-related cases, including stolen client lists and wrongful dismissals.

The biggest mistake companies make, he said, is not freezing the hard drive of an employee or former employee accused of wrongdoing.

Ripa agreed. His company even rolled out a service in which it takes a digital image of the hard drive of every departing employee.

It then keeps the data until it's no longer needed - a service that costs hundreds of dollars instead of the thousands that likely would be spent if the employee later sues.

Andy Henion covers professional services for Oakland Business Review.