

Protecting Your Valuable Laptop When Traveling Are You a Target?

After working in the insurance and risk management arena for almost thirty years, one type of claim that has become common place, is the theft of laptop computers. In today's portable, on-line society, how can we travel without them? It is the laptop's very portability that makes it an obvious target. "But I'm careful with my computer when I travel," you say. Of course you are, but we would like to share with you some scenarios on how this crime can still happen to you when you least expect it.

The first step is to prepare your computer before you even leave your office. There are many excellent computer cases that protect your valuable equipment as well as allow you to store cables, CDs and other items inside. The problem with most of these is that they scream "I'm a laptop!". Thieves cannot steal your equipment if they don't know that you have it. Your first line of defense is to place your computer in a nondescript case or bag that will still protect it. If your laptop bag has an inner case, you might place the laptop inside it and place it inside a different carry on bag. Another option might be to place it in a large briefcase.

If at any time you must leave your laptop in your car, always place it in the trunk. Never, ever leave it in sight or inside the car. It is very easy to break the window, grab the laptop and take off, car alarm or not. Placing the computer in the trunk will not stop the thief from taking it, but it will not be taken if he doesn't know it is there. If possible, try to put it inside when no one is around to see you do so.

Getting to and from your destination on public transportation will be your first challenge. Most of us get to and from the airport using a park and ride shuttle or an airport or hotel van or limo. Since these are usually multiple passenger vehicles, there may be an area for luggage in either the front or the back. The best advice here is to put your other luggage on the rack or in the rear, but take you laptop with you to your seat. After all, it is a "laptop" isn't it? By placing it on the rack or especially in the rear, you cannot see what is taken from that area by others who are let out of the vehicle before your stop. When you get out, and your laptop is missing, it is much too late for the driver to try to remember who took it - they are long gone.

When your bags are unloaded, keep them with you when you pay the driver. Don't let him place your laptop up on the curb while you pay him at the vehicle. When you turn back to the curb and find your bags gone you will understand why.

Well, you have made it inside the airport safely. Now there is security around, so you don't have to worry so much. Wrong. This is the really lucrative area for laptop thieves. The scenario goes something like this. The thief spots you and your laptop as a target. He has an accomplice and they both get in line at the security check directly in front of you. Everyone is rushed and the luggage is placed on the x-ray conveyor as fast as possible. Suddenly the person in front of you sets off the metal detector and the line is

delayed while he empties his pockets. He sets it off again and removes more items before passing through. Now it's your turn and you march right through. Unfortunately, your laptop has marched right off. His accomplice was in front of him and did not set off the detector. When your laptop came through, he scooped it up with his briefcase and probably has already handed it off to a third accomplice coming out of the gate area (thus not having to pass back through security) who is halfway to his car.

“But how can I do anything about this?” you ask, “I have to go through security.” True, but there are ways to protect your valuable equipment. Here are some suggestions. First, hopefully, you have disguised your laptop, so that you have not even been targeted. Second, you need to be in control of your bags at all times. You could approach the attendant and ask that he or she hold onto the computer until you pass through the metal detector and then put it through the x-ray machine. Some may do this for you, others may not. If they do not, then do not place your luggage on the conveyor until you know that you have a clear path through the detector yourself and that no one is holding up the line in front of you. The attendant may urge you to place your bags on before you are ready. Just politely state that you are waiting just a moment to be sure that you can get through the detector promptly. Chances are that if you can do this, you will be through before your bags are. Obviously, be sure that you do not have anything in your pockets or on your person that will set the detector off and delay your clearance through security.

If you travel outside the country and come through customs, bag inspection is common. If your bags are chosen for inspection, just be sure to stay with them. If for some reason your computer is taken to another area for inspection, try to obtain some sort of written document stating what was taken and by whom including a complete description and the date and time. Make sure that the signature is legible. You may still lose your laptop, but you will also have documentation if you are able to pursue any recourse against the facility.

Also, while you are waiting for your plane or train, leave the computer inside the bag. It does not do any good to disguise that you have a laptop, if you take it out to do work while you are sitting in the waiting area. Now the thief knows just which bag contains your laptop.

Okay, so you have done all these things. Since you can't work on your laptop and you're bored with reading, you and the professionally dressed woman next to you have been chatting. You decide that you have to use the facilities or make that one last phone call and ask, “Could you watch my bags while I ...?” She says, “Of course, I'll be right here.” Well, when you get back, she's gone and so is your luggage and/or laptop computer. It is better to take your bags with you. If you have that much to lug around, you probably should have checked more items. Next time travel lighter or check more bags.

The information on your computer is valuable as well. Hopefully, the programs themselves can be reinstalled on your new laptop, even though that may be time consuming. The data, however, may be difficult to reconstruct if not impossible. Be sure

that you have backups of everything on your system when you travel and leave them in a safe place at home or in the office. It seems that these days, no matter how good the password protection, a cracker can access your system. If the data you have on your system is not needed for this trip, move it to your company LAN or to disks before you leave. Also be aware that thieves love to get hold of your personal information as well. Do not keep documents, spreadsheets, or databases containing personal information such as financial records, investments, budgets, passwords, etc. It is a good idea to not even have your address book on the computer since having names, addresses, phone and fax numbers of your friends, business associates and clients could expose them to theft or fraud. If you must take data with you, move it to disks and place the disks elsewhere in your luggage.

The main issue here is to continually be aware of your surroundings. Thieves come in all shapes and sizes, but if you stay alert to what is happening around you, you and your laptop will both enjoy the trip and come home safely.

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