

Google Gmail: The Lawn Darts of the Internet



Lori MacVittie, 2008-29-08

This [blog](#) on the inadvertent sharing of [Google](#) docs led to an intense micro-conversation in the comments regarding the inadvertent sharing of e-mail, sensitive financial data, and a wealth of other private data that remained, well, not so private through that **[cue scary music]** deadly combination that makes security folks race for their torches and pitchforks: [Google Apps](#) and [Gmail](#).

[pause for laughter on my part. I can't say that without a straight face]

Here's part of the "issue" "discovered" by the author:

“Closer examination of the spreadsheets, along with some online digging, indicated that a CNHI employee had most likely intended to share the reports and spreadsheets with an employee named [Deirdre Gallagher](#). Instead, he or she typed in my [Gmail address](#) and handed me the keys to a chunk of CNHI's Web kingdom, including the detailed financial terms for scores of Web advertising deals. [emphasis added]

Many comments indicated deep displeasure with Google's e-mail functionality in terms of how it handles e-mail addresses. Other comments just seemed to gripe about [Google Apps](#) and its integration in general. "Dan" brought sanity to a conversation comprised primarily of technology finger-pointing, much of which blamed Google for people fat-fingering e-mail addresses, when [he said](#): "The misuse of the technology can hardly be the fault of the providers."

Thank you Dan, whoever you are. How insightful. How true. And how sad that most people won't - and don't - see it that way.



Remember [lawn darts](#)? I do. If you're young enough you might not, because the company that manufactured and sold them stopped doing so in 1988 after they were sued when a child was tragically killed playing with them. But the truth is that a child was *throwing the darts over the roof of a house at his playmate*. He was misusing the lawn darts. The product was subsequently banned from sale in the [US and Canada due to safety concerns](#).

Because they were used in a way they were not intended to be used. After all, consider the millions of other children (myself included) who managed to play the game properly without ever earning so much as a scratch. The mosquito bites were more dangerous than the lawn darts when used correctly and with the proper amount of attention paid to what we were doing.

This is not unlike the inadvertent sharing of [Google docs](#). If I mistype an e-mail address, it's not the fault of my e-mail client when confidential launch plans find their way into an unintended recipients' inbox. That's *my* fault for not being more careful and paying attention to detail.

In the aforementioned Google doc sharing escapade, Google's software did exactly what it was supposed to do: it e-mailed a copy of a [Google doc](#) to the e-mail address specified by the sender. Google has no way of knowing you meant to type "a" when you typed "o"; that's the responsibility of the individual and it's ridiculous to hold Google and its developers responsible for the intentional or unintentional mistakes of its users.

Look, there are plenty of reasons to be concerned about storing sensitive corporate data on a remote server and/or in the cloud, Google or others. There are a lot of reasons to be concerned about privacy and information leaks in SaaS (Software as a Service) and Web 2.0 applications.

THIS IS NOT ONE OF THEM.



Those same documents could easily have been e-mailed *to the wrong person*, accidentally or purposefully, from someone's desktop. Mistyping e-mail addresses is not peculiar to [GMail](#), or [Hotmail](#), or [Yahoo](#) mail, or any other cloudware e-mail service. It's peculiar to *people*. [Remember them?](#) [The ultimate security risk?](#)

Rather than claim this is some huge security hole (it is not) or point the finger of blame at Google for sending that e-mail, remember what your mother said about pointing...

When you point one finger at [Google](#) for sending that e-mail, three fingers are pointing back at *you*.



F5 Networks, Inc. | 401 Elliot Avenue West, Seattle, WA 98119 | 888-882-4447 | [f5.com](#)

F5 Networks, Inc.
Corporate Headquarters
info@f5.com

F5 Networks
Asia-Pacific
apacinfo@f5.com

F5 Networks Ltd.
Europe/Middle-East/Africa
emeainfo@f5.com

F5 Networks
Japan K.K.
f5j-info@f5.com