

Over the Back Fence
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Security codes
By Alva Wood

Village administrator Henry Hill is a security freak.

He keeps his staff behind locked doors, so that unauthorized citizens can't get at any confidential information.

He contracted with a security firm working out of a telephone centre in New Brunswick to make sure that no one breaks into the village offices and surreptitiously moves a renovation permit through the approval process faster than it should go.

The trial of Momen Khawaja, the first Canadian charged under Canada's anti-terrorism laws since they were passed seven years ago, reminded Henry that he hadn't updated his security arrangements in a couple of years.

"Why bother?" asks Mayor Jake Bowers.

"Because we are vulnerable to attack or infiltration," says Henry.

"We just installed a new filtration system," says Freddie Fallis, overhearing only part of the conversation. "Our water's fine," he says. "As long as you boil it for ten minutes," he adds.

Henry ignores him. "Terrorists think symbolically, not strategically," he explains. "They want a target that will demonstrate how ineffective Canadian security measures are. We fit that description perfectly."

So last Friday Henry calls the security firm. He presses 1 for English, 4 for other, and 0 to speak to a security operative. He waits through 17 assurances that "your call is very important to us."

He finally gets someone named Francine on the line. He dutifully provides his name, his security code, his personal ID, his password, his mother's maiden name, and his birth date.

"You have an four-digit code now," says Francine.

"Yes," says Henry. "It's the year we were incorporated as a village."

"Too easy to guess," Francine tells him. "You need a randomly generated six-digit code."

"Good," says Henry.

"We will input your request into our computer system," Francine says, "and we'll e-mail your new security code later today."

As he packs his briefcase with papers to take home for the weekend, Henry feels he's actually accomplished something.

He brings those papers back on Monday morning, goes to the front door, and punches in the usual security code. It doesn't work.

That's when he realizes that the new security code is probably waiting for him on his computer, upstairs in his office, which he can't get to.

He calls New Brunswick on the pay phone in the lobby. The charges pile up on his credit card as he waits. And waits.

"My name is Hussein," says a voice at the other end, eventually. "How may I help you?"

"I need to talk to Francine," says Henry.

Hussein puts Henry on hold while he checks with his supervisor to see if anyone named Francine works there.

"Apparently Francine has gone on two weeks holiday," he tells Henry.

Henry explains his problem.

"Certainly, sir," says Hussein. "I can send you your new security code by e-mail."

"You don't understand," Henry protests. "I can't get into the office to receive my e-mail."

"You are not calling from the telephone number listed on your information file," Hussein accuses him.

"I can't call from that number," says Henry. "It's the phone in my office."

"I can't release confidential information to just anyone," retorts Hussein. "For all I know, you could be Osama Bin Laden planning to blow up some municipal offices somewhere."

Henry hangs up in disgust.

By now, a dozen other staff are also standing around waiting to get in. Henry thinks he hears something moving on the other side. He pounds on the door.

Freddie Fallis opens it.

“What are you doing out here?” asks Freddie.

“What are you doing in there?” replies Henry. “How did you get in without the new security codes?”

“Never use them,” shrugs Freddie. “I can’t remember all those digits. I just leave the back door unlocked and come in that way.”