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## A creepy tale of workplace theft

How well-dressed thief  
made \$1 million a year  
stealing laptops from offices

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**F**or nearly two decades, James dressed the part, worked hard and put in his time at the office.

He generated an estimated \$1 million in revenue during his peak years, but more often than not he was overlooked.

And for James, working unnoticed led to success. In fact, being overlooked kept him out of jail.

James — which is not his real name — is a reformed “office creeper.” His work often put him in a suit and tie, or sometimes a building engineer’s overalls. He would sneak into offices and steal laptop computers while employees were out to lunch, in a meeting or just away from their desks.

His home is Atlanta, but he would fly first class to New York, New Orleans, Boston and other cities. He stayed in luxury hotels. And he stole from some of the best companies.

Although the name is a pseudonym, James’ record is real. He’s served nearly nine years of his life in jail, on and off, as the result of four convictions. James asked that his name not be used because he has photographed criminals scouting buildings and relayed information about their habits to police.

Over the past few months, James has worked with AlliedBarton Security Services to help the firm better understand one of the most overlooked workplace crimes.

More than 600,000 laptop thefts occurred in 2004 according to an estimate from Safeware Insurance, which provides coverage for laptop damage and theft. The insurance company said the thefts resulted



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**No longer a creeper: “James,” now 53, teaches AlliedBarton Security Services and its clients how to stop workplace crimes.**

in an estimated loss of \$720 million in property and an estimated \$5.4 billion loss of proprietary information.

AlliedBarton believes most laptop thefts are considered a singular occurrence, not part of a preventable pattern.

Understanding the habits of “creepers” can help property managers, corporate users and employees avoid falling victim. To

help educate its clients, AlliedBarton scheduled an invitation-only seminar titled “Inside the Mind of a Creeper.”

Information collected from James was used to prepare the lecture.

At 53, James said it’s time to clean up his act. He believes one more conviction would lead to a life sentence.

“I’ve been through this thing and I’m

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settling myself down,” he said. “I’m trying to help myself. I’m just giving them some ideas on how to stop crime and what’s going down now, what I’ve gone through.”

Although James never made it past eighth grade, he’s well-educated in street smarts. Much of what he learned about crime, he says, came from “old guys in the penitentiary.”

They were the ones who taught him to look for Dells and Apples.

Now he’s passing on his knowledge to AlliedBarton, which also is working with the Atlanta Police Department.

James said “creeping” is surprisingly easy.

“If you just dress well and smile all the time, [employees] don’t go ask a person what they’re doing,” James said, describing the secret of his success.

James said he’s smiled his way into some of Atlanta’s tallest high-rises and smallest businesses. Some buildings he hit multiple times. Some he visited only once.

But when entering each of them, he used the same approach: Look like you belong.

His only target, once inside, was always laptops. Never cell phones, never gadgets.

He’d spend about 45 minutes inside and leave with two or three computers.

Sometimes he would put them in a box topped with copier paper, other times he’d walk out with the laptop’s original carrying case.

Laptops sell for an average of \$1,000 on the black market. The information on

## **Laptop theft prevention tips:**

- Lock your office during off-hours.
- Take your laptop with you, when possible.
- Don’t load passwords onto your laptop.
- Never leave your laptop unattended in public places.
- Use a laptop lock or security cable.
- Install tracking and monitoring software, such as CompuTrace.

the hard drive is often more valuable than the hardware.

“Think about what’s on your laptop,” said Otis Ogburn, district manager with AlliedBarton. “If James took your laptop, what would he have? Your life. It probably has your credit card numbers, your passwords.”

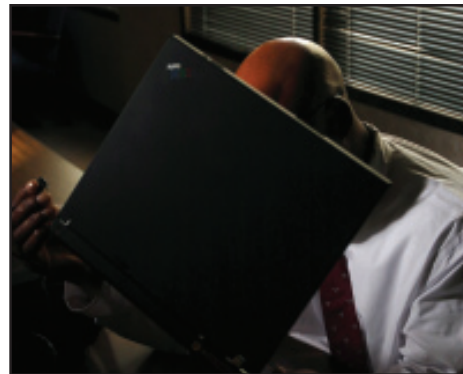
After the personal information is stripped, the computer itself could be used to commit cybercrimes, such as e-mail scams.

Preventing a laptop theft isn’t complicated.

First, question anyone who looks like they don’t belong. A simple conversation is usually a deterrent for most creepers, James said.

Be especially vigilant during lunch hour.

“I’d go in at 12 o’clock. That’s rush hour,” James said. “Everybody would be going in and out. That’s the best time to make a move.”



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**Hard hit: More than 600,000 laptop thefts occurred in 2004 at an estimated loss of \$720 million in property and an estimated \$5.4 billion loss of proprietary information, according to Safeway Insurance.**

Second, protect your own laptop. Leaving a laptop open, running and alone provides an easy target to creepers. Turn the computer off and lock it, when not in use. Locks are sold for as little as \$12. Never “hide” a computer in an unlocked drawer.

“Education is key,” said Bret Almassy, AlliedBarton’s vice president of business development for the Southeast. “You have to be aware of this crime before you can prevent it.”

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