



Sensitive info in whose hands?

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Human Resources division , Department of Justice

So, what do they know about us and what can they do with that information? Until recently that kind of question was what the extremely paranoid would ask about government, or those given to conspiracy theories.

It turns out, the more advanced data handling becomes, the more likely the personal information of private citizens can inadvertently go astray. And then, who is accountable and what assurances do we have that we'll be protected?

The federal government is looking increasingly incompetent in this regard. A recent loss of information of more than 5,000 Canadians in regard to Canada Pension Plan disability benefits had been thought to involve only Human Resources and Development Canada.

Now, as a letter from the privacy complaints commissioner's office to complainants reveals, the breach also brushes up against the Department of Justice. The incident involves the loss of a USB device on Nov. 16, two days after it was loaded with unencrypted information on 5,045 people – social insurance numbers, medical conditions, level of education and jobs.

That followed the misplacement, days earlier at another Human Resources division, of a hard drive with student loan information on 583,000 Canadians.

And why is the Justice Department looking at the disability claims of Canadians? As they say, the plot thickens.

At a time when the possibility of identity theft has become a very real and frightening threat, to think that government ineptitude raises the odds is disturbing.

In the aftermath, Human Resources has banned the use of portable hard drives and unapproved USB sticks, and introduced improved data loss protection software.

That's a little bit of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. Had they not thought of the risks?

Canadians have little choice but hand over such information if they want to participate in these programs. But we need bureaucracies that are a step ahead of the techno-curve when it comes to handling it.