

Stress of the scam: Small business owners reveal mental health impact of cyber crime

Cyber Wardens study reveals rising stress, anxiety levels

One in three people in small businesses targeted by cyber attacks have reported a significant impact on their mental health.

The devastating toll is revealed in a new [CyberWardens](#) survey, which found the threat of online crime is worsening the stress levels of small business owners and their staff amid economic headwinds.

The research by Cyber Wardens – an initiative of the Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA) – found owners are feeling angry, frustrated and overwhelmed as cyber crime surges. Some are even changing their business behaviours, such as not answering the phone from potential clients and customers due to fears the caller could be a scammer.

Key findings of the *Cyber Threats and Mental Load 2024* survey include:

- More than one in three small business owners and their employees who have experienced an attack said it was negatively affecting their mental health
- Seventy-seven per cent report that keeping their business safe from cyber threats is adding to their mental load
- Two in three (63 per cent) have experienced feelings of stress and anxiety thinking about how cyber threats and scams could impact their small business
- Three in four (74 per cent) had received a suspicious text, email, call, invoice or online request that they suspected was a scam
- Emails are the most common scam method they reported, followed by calls and text messages

Cyber Wardens is a free eLearning program aimed at boosting the cyber skills of the nation's 2.5 million small businesses, supported by the Australian government and backed by an industry alliance led by Telstra, CommBank and the Australian Cyber Security Centre.

Dr Andrew Charlton MP, Special Envoy for Cyber Security and Digital Resilience, said:

"Cyber attacks don't just cripple businesses financially—they take an emotional toll. I know business owners who are afraid to trust new tech, worried they'll face another breach.



“The good news is, there are simple, low-cost steps every small business can take to protect themselves—like strong passwords, multi-factor authentication, and keeping software up to date. This government is committed to not only protecting small businesses but also safeguarding the well-being of their owners, offering vital resources to ensure they feel secure and supported.”

COSBOA CEO Luke Acthterstraat said the rising threat of cyber crime exacerbated the challenges being endured by small businesses amid uncertain economic times.

“Small businesses stand to lose an average of \$46,000 in an attack, which is enormously stressful for an operator who is just starting out or struggling to stay afloat,” he said.

Beyond Blue’s Chief Engagement Officer, Greg Jennings, said the challenges small business owners face at work often can often seep into their personal life.

“As rewarding as it is, running a small business can be really stressful and small business owners often prioritise their business health over their own wellbeing,” he said.

It can be exhausting, isolating, stressful, and left unchecked, their mental health can really suffer. We know the small business sector is doing it tough right now given the current economic climate. The vigilance needed to be on top of cyber security and the constant threat of cyber crime is an added pressure that will naturally take its toll.”

Getting support

Beyond Blue’s NewAccess for Small Business Owners can provide free and effective mental health coaching to deal with the stressors of small business life. There are a range of measures small business owners can take to ease the mental burden of a cyber attack:

- Reach out early for support, before problems snowball.
- Focus on what you can control and tackle each task separately to avoid feeling overwhelmed.
- Set clear boundaries and maintain a healthy work-life balance, including time to genuinely disconnect from work.
- Make sure you’re taking time for connection both personally (e.g. with family and friends) and professionally.

To access Beyond Blue’s free, national mental health coaching program for small business owners, visit: www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/newaccess-mental-health-coaching/small-business-owners or call 1300 945 301.

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