

Cybersecurity escape room now open to businesses and residents alike



The holiday season is the busiest time of year for many local businesses, but a well-orchestrated cyber-attack can quickly bring sales to a crashing halt ? sometimes for months on end.

That was a harsh reality faced two years ago by local retailer Omar's Shoes who had a hacker get into their system four months before they were shut down and held hostage for \$300,000 USD in bitcoin.

?We realized there was nothing available for companies to be able to find help,? says Mae Khamissa, who owns the Bayview Avenue store with her husband, Raz.

The experience of Khamissa, who also serves as Vice Chair of Aurora's Economic Development Corporation, helped inspire the creation of a new experience in Aurora's downtown core that comes with a very valuable purpose: to help businesses and residents alike learn about the threats of cybersecurity and how to protect yourself ? in a fun Escape Room setting.

The siberX Escape Room, a joint initiative between siberX and the Town of Aurora, formally opened last Thursday afternoon, just north of the Aurora Public Library.

Billed as a free escape room adventure for the community ?designed to take you through a series of thrilling scenarios to boost your cybersecurity skills,? siberX founder Mahdi Raza said he and his company first connected with Aurora through Mayor Tom Mrakas at a cybersecurity conference. Dialogue continued afterward with support from the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Aurora Business Improvement Association, and the Town's Economic Development Team.

?One of the things we have really seen since we launched this is a lot of unique organizations coming through here,? said Raza. ?We have seen folks coming in who live down the street?who just want to know what this is all about, but we have had enterprises, corporations and the public sector coming in and saying, ?Wow.?

?This is the first of its kind in Canada ? there is one in Europe, but not set up in the way we've set up. People come in, spend an hour, go through different phases throughout the rooms from beginner all the way to expert, and the purpose of this is really gamifying education. A lot of times, what happens in an organization is? your team manager will tell you to get off the phone, you'll sit in front of a laptop or computer and you'll go through a series of questions, answer them and you'll go back to work. They're checkmarks, things you're required to do. When we bring this gamification side to it, people are able to hands-on interact with the actual environment. That's what makes this unique: people learn differently.?

In addition to educating local businesses, Raza hopes that come the school year there will be opportunities to have kids and their classes come through, have fun, and learn at the same time.

At last week's opening, Mayor Mrakas hailed the partnership with siberX and looked ahead to future successes.

?They have been a phenomenal partner when it comes to being able to provide this service not only for our residents but for our businesses as well,? said Mayor Mrakas, noting his own caution in opening attachments that come into his inbox. ?I believe the figure is 82 or 87 per cent of attacks happen on businesses of 1,000 or less employees. In Aurora, all of our businesses are less than 1,000. Therefore, they are open to attacks. Being able to provide this service at no cost to our businesses, with the Chamber's help with Emerging Aurora, the BIA, the Economic Development team, and everyone pulling together, we provide a service for the residents and businesses of our community to better prepare them for the future.

?We're in the digital age and more and more attacks are going to happen in the future. If we can be better prepared as a business community, as residents, the better off we will be?. A lot of times this can be very expensive for businesses to educate, to teach their employees on being able to provide for our businesses. [Here], it's all about the employees and having a place where you can come in and do it at no cost is phenomenal.?

The Escape Room experience is in Town-owned space and is programmed by siberX. Funds to make it possible were approved in the Town's Operating Budget.

For more information on the siberX Escape Room and how to book your time, visit www.siberx.org/escape.

By Brock Weir