

PRODUCT REVIEWS

March 23, 1998 (Vol. 20, Issue 12)

AccessData deftly cracks encrypted file passwords

By Joe Peschel

For IS professionals, finding out that the confidential company files of a former employee are encrypted and that no one has the password can cause a major headache. AccessData's Password Recovery Tool Kit, Version 4.2b, is an excellent package for overcoming these situations, and I highly recommend it. The utility will recover passwords from Word, Excel, Access, WordPerfect, and a dozen or so other programs.

One of the nicest features of this version's new Windows interface is that files can be dragged from Windows 95's Explorer and dropped into the Tool Kit's GUI.

If a document is not encrypted, the utility will ignore the file. Otherwise, it continues

to crack the password of each one.

I tested the utility against Word, Versions 6.0 and 7.0, Excel 7.0, and WordPerfect 5.0 documents first. It cracked the passwords of each document in a few seconds. Some of those protected documents were written in French, Spanish, Italian, and German. The letter frequencies of those languages are about the same as English.

In addition to recovering the "Save as" passwords, the Tool Kit will also recover Word write-reservation passwords and Excel worksheet passwords to Version 7.0 of both programs.

You can find various password crackers for Word and Excel on the Internet (for instance, at <http://members.aol.com/jpeschel>). Occasionally, however, those crackers

fail if the document contains only a few lines of text. Your company may also have a policy that precludes using freeware or shareware. Also, none of those freeware or shareware programs will tackle Office97 application passwords. Office97 applications now use a solid encryption algorithm, Rivest Cipher 4 (RC4) in 40-bit mode and Message Digest 5 (MD5) to handle password-hashing. AccessData is able to attack those passwords in one of two ways: by brute-force or with a dictionary.

In a brute-force attack, every possible password is tried, but this method can take a long time. A dictionary attack usually is more successful. Not only will the Tool Kit use the words in the dictionary, but it will manipulate them by changing their case or by adding numbers

before or after each word.

You can download a 14MB dictionary from AccessData's Web site, and there are other dictionaries on the Internet. If the online dictionaries are not sufficient, you can create your own word list using the Tool Kit.

The Tool Kit lets you enter personal information about the author of the password-protected document. Family names, social security numbers, addresses, and anything else you might want to

add to help create a personalized dictionary.

Unfortunately, the Tool Kit will only recover "Save as" Office passwords. But AccessData does guarantee 100 percent recovery of passwords for Office documents as long as the method of attack is not by brute-force or dictionary. Even if the attack is the latter, AccessData will attempt to recover the file in-house.

In addition to the application password-recovery utilities, Access-Data offers

password utilities for Windows NT and NetWare. The company also offers cryptanalytic consulting.

I highly recommend this product line.

AccessData President Eric Thompson is an unmatched cryptanalyst, and I've used AccessData's expertise in reviewing many encryption software packages for InfoWorld.

If you're scratching your head trying to figure out how to unlock important company documents, this toolkit is for you.

Joe Peschel (jpeschel@aol.com), a free-lance computer journalist in North Sioux City, S.D., covers security programs and other utilities.

THE BOTTOM LINE: VERY GOOD

Password Recovery Tool Kit, Version 4.2b

The guts of this password-cracking utility was designed by Eric Thompson, one of the top cryptanalysts in the country. If you need to crack encrypted files, this is an excellent solution.

Pros: Will let you drag and drop documents into the utility for password recovery; 100-percent guarantee for most modules.

Cons: Some difficulties with Office97 documents.

AccessData, Provo, Utah; (800) 574-5199, (801) 517-5410; fax: (801) 377-5426; info@accessdata.com; <http://www.accessdata.com>.

Price: \$169 for the first module, \$99 for each additional module; Personal Recovery Module: \$59; \$745 for all application modules.

Platforms: Windows 95, Windows NT 4.x and earlier.

Copyright (c) 1998 InfoWorld Media Group Inc.