

ST. JOSEPH



Photos by Joe Rondone / HP staff

Charlie Olszewski leads a class Tuesday titled "Big Data and You" about maintaining a secure computer profile and protecting yourself from identity theft. The seminar was at the St. Joseph library.

## Staying a step ahead in cyberspace

Computer expert offers tools for beating online cons

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ST. JOSEPH — Every con needs elements of credibility to succeed, and the world of cyberspace is no different.

That's why it's important to be savvy about what you do online.

That's the verdict from Charles Olszewski, Lake Michigan College's department chairman of computer information systems. He offered his expertise at Tuesday's "Big Data And You" seminar at Maud Preston Palenske Memorial Library.

One common feature of cyberscams is "the bad guys love to make it easy for us," Olszewski said.

For example, you might get a fake message from PayPal, one of many online e-commerce vendors, that claims it's time to change your password — so all you need to do is click on an accompanying link, he said.



Barbara Pellegrini of Benton Harbor looks over her computer during the "Big Data and You" class.

"I wouldn't click that link," Olszewski said. "Just ignore that message, close your browser down, and go back to that (vendor's original) website."

Otherwise, by clicking on the phony message, you may be directed to a look-alike site that's designed to collect your credit card number, birthdate and other personal information,

which might be compromised, Olszewski said.

About 20 people sat at laptops in the library's lower level as Olszewski walked them through the basics of how personal data is collected, and how you can go about protecting it.

Ironically, the recent National Security Agency data collection scandal has

caused computers users to forget that many entities are actively doing the same thing — such as your Internet service provider, Olszewski said.

"Google collects more data (on its users) than the federal government does," he said.

Other examples include

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local police agencies' use of "license plate readers" to collect, identify and store data about drivers, which then stays in that agency's database for a period, he said.

Every time you interact in some way online – whether it's commenting about an issue, hunting for a bargain or posting family photos on Facebook – adds to that mountain of data being collected about you, Olszewski said.

And, once you've put that data out there, then there's no way it's going to disappear, he said.

"Google collects all sorts of information, and they keep that on their server. You can't go to their server and collect that stuff," he said.

That's why Olszewski recommends not staying connected online "24/7" – though it's a popular cultural norm, particularly

among young people – and think about what you post on social media pages, like Facebook.

As an example, Olszewski offered his own Facebook page – where his profile picture is a caricature, instead of an actual photo of himself, he said.

Similarly, when you're trying to safeguard bank, credit card and other personal accounts, you want to pick a strong password – typically, one that's at least 10 characters, with a combination of letters and numbers, Olszewski said.

For additional protection, Olszewski offered a twist on how you should fill in answers to security questions – which are designed to prevent identity thieves and cyberscammers from getting your personal information.

The key thing to remember about security questions, Olszewski said, is that the answers don't need to be true – just ones that only you, as the account holder, would know.

For example, if the security question requires filling in your mother's maiden name, fill in a nonsense term – such as "Benton Harbor," Olszewski said.

"What are the chances of somebody coming up with that (answer)?" he said.

Olszewski's presentation got a rousing thumbs-up from those who attended, including Hagar Township resident Barbara Pellegrini, and the club's program chair, Sue Betz of St. Joseph.

"It was an eye-opener to how naive we all are. We trust the computer so much, but we're maybe naive about how that information is being used, and how to protect ourselves," she said.

Betz supported those sentiments, saying, "I thought it was good to learn ways to check on things, and spend an hour and a half (being) focused on this topic."

The Berrien County Democratic Women's Club sponsored Olszewski's visit.