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Business News Scotland

Welcome to our round up of the latest business news for our clients. Please contact us if you want to talk about how these updates affect your business. We are here to support you!

Cyber Attacks on Retail Giants: What Every Business Should Learn

The recent wave of cyber attacks on UK retailers, including Marks & Spencer, Co-op and Harrods, is a reminder that no organisation is too big - or too prepared - to be targeted. But while the headlines may focus on the big names, there are important lessons here for businesses of all sizes.

The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) is working with the affected businesses. In a recent statement they said they are not yet in a position to say if the attacks are linked. However, they are saying that they have insights and there is a lot they do know.

For instance, while not confirming any details, NCSC have commented and provided advice on press speculation that social engineering was used to target IT helpdesks. By impersonating support staff - or posing as employees locked out of their accounts - a hacker might use social engineering tactics to trick people into handing over login credentials and security codes.

It's a disturbingly simple method, but one that works.

The takeaway? People, not just passwords, are your first line of defence.

In its latest guidance, the NCSC urges organisations to review their password reset processes - especially for senior employees who have access to sensitive parts of your network. That means thinking carefully about how identity is verified when someone calls the IT help desk. Is there a secondary check? Would a fraudster be spotted?

Some in the cyber community are even suggesting codewords to help authenticate real users. But that only works if it's part of a broader culture of awareness, where staff are trained to question the unexpected, even if it sounds routine.

Small businesses aren't immune

While the recent attacks have hit household names, the tactics used don't discriminate by size. If anything, smaller businesses - often without dedicated cyber security teams - can be seen as easier targets. That's why it's essential for you to act now:

- Review how password resets are handled internally. Who has access? What verification steps are in place?

- Use multi-factor authentication wherever possible. A password alone is no longer enough.
- Monitor for unusual logins. Logins from unexpected locations or at odd times should trigger a red flag.
- Recognise social engineering. You and your staff need to know how to recognise potential threats. Making updates regular and having short refresher sessions can go a long way.

Organised or opportunistic?

The advice from NCSC seems to indicate that these recent incidents are not about high-tech hacking. It's about gaining trust and then gaining access. This makes it vital to see cyber security not as an IT issue, but a business-wide responsibility.

NCSC have warned that online criminal activity is rampant and attacks like the ones experienced by high profile retailers are becoming more and more common. Businesses of all sizes need to be prepared. The best defence for most organisations starts internally - with stronger processes, clearer communication, and a healthy dose of scepticism.

Now is the time to ask: could this happen to us?

See: <https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/blog-post/incidents-impacting-retailers>

UK-India Trade Deal Set to Unlock Major Export Opportunities for UK Businesses

The UK and India signed a new trade agreement last week that will reduce tariffs and open up one of the world's fastest-growing markets to British businesses. The deal – described by the government as the most significant bilateral trade agreement since Brexit – is expected to boost trade by £25.5 billion a year by 2040.

For UK exporters, key benefits include lower tariffs on whisky, gin, aerospace, electricals and medical devices, cosmetics, and food products like lamb, salmon, chocolate and biscuits. Tariffs on whisky, for example, will be halved from 150% to 75%, with further reductions planned.

Indian exports will also benefit, with cuts to UK tariffs on clothing, footwear, jewellery and certain foodstuffs. Businesses are likely to benefit from lower costs for these goods once the deal comes into force – potentially within a year.

The agreement also includes improved access for UK firms in services and public procurement, as well as a three-year exemption from double social security payments for Indian nationals on short-term work visas in the UK.

Rain Newton-Smith, who is chief executive of business lobby group, the CBI, said that the deal provided a “beacon of hope amidst the spectre of protectionism”.

India is expected to become the world's third-largest economy in the coming years, and this deal could help more UK firms tap into that growth. Businesses looking to grow their export footprint or diversify into new markets may find fresh opportunities in the Indian market.

Exporting, whether of goods or services, can be an excellent way to grow your business. If you would like to explore the value of exporting to your business, such as by considering a cost-benefit analysis, or simply want advice on dealing with Customs, please give us a call. We would be happy to help you.

See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y6y90e5vzo>

What the New Planning Reforms Could Mean for Your Business

The government has published its Impact Assessment on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which indicates benefits to the economy of potentially up to £7.5 billion over the next decade.

It's worth noting that this was the Impact Assessment's higher estimate for how much money the Bill could add to the economy over 10 years. Its central estimate was £3.2 billion and the lower estimate was £1.3 billion.

The reforms contained in the Bill are intended to reduce red tape and speed up decision-making, with the goal of delivering 1.5 million new homes and a range of major infrastructure projects. These include new roads, railways and renewable energy developments – all areas that have traditionally been slowed down by lengthy planning processes.

What does this mean for small businesses?

While big numbers like £7.5 billion grab headlines, the real interest for smaller businesses lies in the potential knock-on effects of increased building work. Here are a few things to watch:

- Opportunities for local contractors and trades: More housing and infrastructure means more work across the construction supply chain – from groundwork to plumbing, electrical, joinery and more.
- Increased demand for construction-related services: Planning consultancies, architects, legal advisers and environmental surveyors may all see increased demand.
- Growth for suppliers: Builders' merchants, plant hire businesses, and local suppliers could benefit from larger volumes and faster project turnover.
- Boost to regional economies: With major developments potentially reaching approval faster, towns and cities could see regeneration projects coming to life sooner – good news for hospitality, retail, and service-based businesses in those areas.

What's next?

The Bill is still making its way through Parliament, so we may still be some way from the reforms becoming reality. However, the government's intentions are clear. The aim is to make 150 major infrastructure decisions during this Parliament, 17 of which have already been made.

Keep it in perspective

While this all sounds positive, the true impact will depend on how effectively the changes are implemented and how quickly they feed through into actual projects on the ground. For now, businesses in construction, energy, transport and related services may want to keep a close eye on opportunities in their region – especially those tied to new developments or local authority plans.

As always, if you'd like help understanding how government policy might affect your business directly – or you're looking to prepare for upcoming changes – we're here to support you.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/reforms-to-get-britain-building-will-boost-economy-by-billions>

Consultation on US tariffs Concludes

The UK government has concluded its four-week consultation with businesses and other stakeholders on potential retaliatory action to the tariffs imposed by the US government on a range of products. Over 200 responses were submitted during the process.

The government will now analyse the feedback to try and understand the potential impact of introducing UK tariffs in response. While no decisions have yet been made, officials have confirmed that all options remain on the table.

At the same time, the UK is continuing negotiations with the US on a broader economic prosperity deal which is aimed at removing current and future tariffs altogether.

For now, businesses affected by the US tariffs – or concerned about future changes – should stay informed. The outcome of both the consultation and the ongoing US talks will influence future trade costs or opportunities.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/business-review-on-us-tariffs-has-concluded>

Helping Employees Save on Childcare: What Employers Need to Know

With many families finding out where their child will be starting school this September, now is a good time for working parents to start planning childcare. The government's Tax-Free Childcare scheme can save them up to £2,000 a year per child – and this could be good news for employers as well as employees.

Why this matters for employers

Childcare is one of the biggest financial pressures for working families. By signposting Tax-Free Childcare, employers can support staff wellbeing, reduce financial stress, and make it easier for parents to return to or stay in work.

For every £8 a parent pays into a Tax-Free Childcare account, the government adds £2 – up to £500 every three months per child (or £1,000 if the child is disabled). The scheme can be used for a wide range of approved childcare, including:

- Childminders
- After-school clubs
- Holiday and other wraparound care

This support applies to children aged 11 or under (or up to 16 if the child is disabled).

What employees need to know

To be eligible, the parent and their partner (if they have one) must:

- Be earning at least the National Minimum Wage or Living Wage for 16 hours per week on average
- Each earn less than £100,000 per year
- Not be receiving Universal Credit or childcare vouchers

Each eligible child needs their own account, and parents must reconfirm their details every three months to continue receiving the top-up.

A useful tool for returning parents

This scheme can be particularly helpful for parents returning to work after parental leave, or those increasing their hours. As many employees will be finalising childcare for September, now is a good time to raise awareness.

What employers can do

- Share the GOV.UK link with staff: <https://www.gov.uk/tax-free-childcare>
- Include information about Tax-Free Childcare in any parental leave packs or policies you provide employees with.
- Encourage managers and HR teams to raise awareness, especially among new parents

By promoting Tax-Free Childcare, you can show support for working families and may be able to reduce a barrier that helps you keep a valued employee.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/save-up-to-2000-a-year-on-childcare-for-your-new-school-starter>

Celebrating Excellence: 197 Firms Honoured with The King's Awards for Enterprise

Nearly 200 businesses from across the UK have received The King's Awards for Enterprise – the UK's most prestigious recognition for outstanding business achievement.

This year, 197 firms were honoured for their success in international trade, innovation, sustainable development, and promoting opportunity through social mobility.

Out of the 197 winners, 176 are small or medium-sized businesses (SMEs), and 27 are micro-businesses with 10 employees or fewer. This reflects the vital role that smaller firms play in driving UK growth. It is estimated that just a 1% increase in SME productivity each year for the next 5 years would add £94 billion to the UK economy.

Minister for Services, Small Businesses and Exports, Gareth Thomas said the awards celebrate “the very best of British business talent,” and praised winners for helping to boost the UK economy.

Examples of winners include:

- Sonardyne International – recognised for both International Trade and Sustainable Development in the engineering and manufacturing of their underwater equipment.
- Delta Fire – awarded for Innovation and Sustainability in its manufacture of specialist front-line firefighting products.
- Mixergy, based in Oxford – recognised for their energy-efficient smart hot water tanks.

Now in its 59th year, the awards (formerly The Queen's Awards) will be presented locally by His Majesty's Lord Lieutenants, with representatives from winners also invited to a Royal reception later in the year.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-businesses-celebrated-in-third-year-of-the-kings-awards-for-enterprise>

Scottish Women Invited to Join First All-Female Trade Mission

Scottish women in business are being invited to join the UK's first all-female Brand Scotland trade mission.

The initiative, led by Scotland Office Minister Kirsty McNeill, aims to help women-led firms break into new markets by giving them direct access to the UK's global trade network. The Scotland Office hosted a roundtable in Edinburgh on 1 May, where female business leaders shared the export challenges they face – from accessing finance to navigating market barriers.

Ideas and suggestions from the meeting will be used on the Scotland Office's all-women trade mission to Madrid in June. Female entrepreneurs interested in joining the Madrid mission are encouraged to get involved.

Part of the wider *Brand Scotland* programme, the mission will promote Scottish goods and services abroad, with the goal of unlocking jobs and investment at home.

Minister McNeill said: "We're already seeing positive results from championing Brand Scotland internationally and I'm committed to unlocking more global opportunities for Scottish women in business."

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/brand-scotland-backing-for-female-entrepreneurs>