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Lawyers to Homebound Employees: Turn Off Smart Speakers During Work

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With the country on near-lockdown and companies having employees work from home during the coronavirus pandemic, the problems of surveillance-as-a-feature devices are coming to light. Case in point: Devices such as Google Home and Amazon Echo are designed to always be listening. Employers don't want employees discussing confidential matters in an environment where someone could be listening. The solution: Turn off those devices during work hours if working from home.

In an article published by ZDNet Tuesday under the headline "[Working from home? Switch off Amazon's Alexa \(say lawyers\)](#)," Chris Matyszczyk wrote:

Some professionals may not be so able to deal with life sans their office perks. Lawyers, for example.

Many are used to sitting in their enclosed chambers, closing their doors and holding vital conversations about lawyerly matters. There, they feel secure.

Working in their homes, they worry who may be spying on them. Alexa, for example, and her band of vastly intelligent speakerpersons.

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The report cites a law firm in the UK as telling its employees to mute or even totally disable domestic smart speakers for confidential business calls. That law firm is Mishcon de Reya. And Joe Hancock, the managing partner who heads up cybersecurity for the firm, said, "Perhaps we're being slightly paranoid, but we need to have a lot of trust in these organizations and these devices. We'd rather not take those risks."

Given the nature of "smart devices" such as Amazon's Echo (hint: they are always listening), perhaps Hancock's use of the word "paranoid" is a poor choice. After all, even if you are paranoid, that does not mean you are not being spied on. Because, if you have an always connected, always listening "smart device" in your home, you *are* being spied on. Period. And that is not a new revelation. Consider a [previous article by this writer](#), published May 31, 2018:

Last week, a Portland, Oregon, family was having a private conversation in their Echo-equipped home. Among other things, they discussed hardwood flooring. Later, the man received a call from



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an employee of his who lives in Seattle, more than 170 miles away. The employee told him he had received a message with the audio of the conversation.

As KIRO 7 in Seattle [reported](#), the couple initially did not believe him. The woman — who only went by Danielle in the interview to protect her privacy — said, “At first, my husband was, like, ‘no you didn’t!’ And the (recipient of the message) said ‘You sat there talking about hardwood floors.’ And we said, ‘oh gosh, you really did hear us.’”

As that article states, the family had an Echo in every room of the home — including the bedroom. The wife immediately went around the house unplugging and boxing up each and every one of them. The lesson — while perhaps late — was learned.

Flash forward nearly two years and with employees working from home for the foreseeable future, at least one law firm is cognizant of the fact that confidentiality and devices such as the Echo are mutually exclusive. And while the ZDNet article does not mention the Oregon family and their awakening moment, it does state, “There’s [the recent research that revealed](#) Alexa and her squad accidentally activate and record conversations up to 19 times a day.”

And while the issue bringing all of this to the forefront this time is the confidentiality between lawyers and their clients, ask yourself, “Is my privacy less important than theirs?” Of course not. Admittedly, it is convenient to have Alexa set your thermostat, search for and play your favorite song, or answer your trivial question about which actress played with which actor in which movie. It may even score high in “cool points”! But that said, having the infernal thing erroneously activate and capture your private conversations should be a bridge too far for anyone who understands the value of privacy. Think back through the day: What have you said or done today that would make you uncomfortable if it had been recorded and played back to someone else later? Perhaps there were things that would not merely make you uncomfortable, but would — in fact — make you want to change your name and move away to a place where no one knows you. Just do yourself a favor and don’t ask Alexa, Google Home, or any other “Smart Speaker” for steps on how to do that.

In fact, follow the advice these lawyers are giving to their employees: Turn it off. Then, go a step further and never turn it back on.

Photo of Amazon Echo device: BackyardProduction/iStock Editorial/Getty Images Plus

C. Mitchell Shaw is a freelance writer and content creator who focuses on matters related to the Constitution and liberty. A privacy nerd since before it was cool, he hosts and produces the [Enemy of the \[Surveillance\] State](#) podcast.



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