All.Net Analyst Report and Newsletter

Welcome to our Analyst Report and Newsletter

The basis for trust

Trust is being questioned by many folks because of the political situations around the globe. In the field of security, there has long been research in this area, and many results have been published with plenty of statistical and related basis. It has also been studies in sales and marketing, influence operations and deception, psychology, sociology, and elsewhere. I won't cover it all here, but I will cover a starting point.

Organizational trust

Trust by organizations is a bit different from trust by individuals, societies, lovers, parents and their children, family members, etc. This very fact points out that the whole notion of trust is relative to the issue at hand.

Trust for what?

More specifically, I ask the question "Trust for what?".

- I trust most people not to kill me in my sleep. So if I nap off in the park on a bench, I feel confident that I will not wake up dead.

- I trust people on airplanes not to rifle through my luggage when I leave it in the overhead bin and fall asleep in my seat.

- I trust restaurants not to try to poison me, so I eat what they make without that fear, even though I have had bad food from time to time at restaurants.

- I trust my wife with access to our bank accounts, but I don't grant her access to the corporate accounts, not because of a trust issue, but because of a legal requirement.

- I trust some folks who work with me with access to some of my trade secrets, of course taking proper contractual and other precautions per reasonable and prudent policy.

- I trust Google with emails I send and receive, included limited time storage of those emails and tracking of the contact lists associated with them.

- I trust my accountant with read-only access to my bank accounts and my personal financial and related information.

Context has a great deal to do with trust. And that's one of the two key points of this article. Trust should always be relative to a context. Trust for what?

Why should I trust?

Given that I have a business reason to grant people authorities to see and do things, and given that I may be harmed by the things they see and do, I have to trust them to do the right thing with respect to the things they are able to see and do in order for them to do their work.

A reasonable question to ask is the basis for allowing them to do me harm, or in other words, the basis for placing trust in them with regard to things they see and do. Different bases for trust should reasonably be associated with different things they see or do.

From a legal standpoint, and from a rational standpoint based on the research that has been done, the basis for that trust should not be they way they look, the way they talk, the way they walk, their sex, religion, sexual preference, or any of the many other things that form the basis for the irrational elements of human trust. It doesn't matter that I love and trust my wife, she cannot have access to business-owned trade secrets because that would violate legal requirements for asserting and retaining their value as trade secrets, as well as my contractual obligations to others.

A trust model

My approach to forming a basis for trust is to build a trust model for my business (and yours when I work for you to help you do this). The basics of these models are different bases for trusting businesses, people, systems, and content for different purposes at different consequence levels. For example,

- I might reasonably decide to trust businesses in situations of high consequence based on transparency, historical behavior, expertise, systematic background checks, external clearances, contracts, nationality, group membership, investigations, certifications, and size to perform on government contracts.

- I might trust people in situations of low risk based on transitive trust chains (a friend of a friend recommended them) to do Web site design.

A critical component of this sort of trust model is that it should apply uniformly to all businesses, systems, content, and people. So regardless of other issues, I would reasonably have to decide to trust any friend of a friend for low consequence Web site design if recommended. If that isn't good enough, its the model that has to be improved, because as a matter of policy and good governance, if I cannot identify a basis for trusting one entity over another for any particular purpose, I don't have a rational (or sound) basis for trust.

Failing such a basis, I leave my business to make decisions based on personal preferences not codified in policy, or in other words, open to arbitrary and capricious decisions, legal liability, and other bad things, and perhaps more importantly, it leads to bad decisions.

Trust but verify?

Just because I made a trust decision based on a defined basis, doesn't mean I make all good decisions and it doesn't relieve me of the obligation to verify that the trust placed is justified by performance over time. Which is to say, trust but verify. And verify with a level of rigor and frequency based on the consequence of failure to meet the obligations associated with the trust. And if you find that the trust model is not making it, fix the trust model and re-evaluate all of the trust you have placed to date.

Conclusion

Trust businesses, people, systems, and content within limits and for particular purposes. Codify the basis for trust in a trust model that meets legal, regulatory, and business requirements (including the duty to protect), apply it uniformly, and verify it is working. If it's not working, fix the model and revisit the trust you have placed to correct any deficiencies.

In the broader context, this applies to all of life. Identify a basis and purpose for placing trust. Make it harder to trust when consequences are higher. Verify your trusts, and if misplaced, take away the trust you placed, change your trust model, re-evaluate, and adapt other trusts.