

Establishing Key Control

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For years I've preached the benefits of key control. Correction, for years and years my father, Jim Padjen, has preached the benefits of key control. I've heard him proclaim hundreds, if not thousands of times, "You can spend as much money as you want on a lock system, but if you don't control your keys you are simply throwing your money away." This of course is true. You can spend \$4 on a lock or \$4000, but the truth of the matter is that if you don't know who has the keys to that lock why bother having it in the first place.

So, what exactly is key control? A textbook style definition would read along the lines of: *A system to account for and manage the keys to a locking system.* What does that really mean in practice and who does it apply to?

In the simplest form, key control means knowing where every key ever issued or created for your system is. You may not know, or even need to know, the exact physical location of every key at a given moment, but you should certainly know who has that key. Maintaining good key control means on some level you should be able to account for all the in your system. How complex and how far you take the control is entirely up to you and the demands of your organization.

For example, a small business with 4 employees and one front door lock can probably get by with a simple pad of paper jotting down who was issued keys. A vending or utility company which may have thousands of keys and various lock systems/routes will need to rely on a much more complex system. Regardless of size and scope, all sound methods of key control will:

1. Identify what keys are in the system.
 - a. Keeping in mind that all keys from "birth" to "death" need to be accounted for.
 - b. This is aided greatly by serializing keys. If the manufacturer or supplier of your system is unwilling to do this (besides finding a new supplier) you should engrave or mark the keys yourself.
2. Identify who the key users are
3. Identify what keys the key users have
 - a. Even if a key is not assigned to an individual it still needs to be accounted for and somebody should be responsible for the safekeeping of it.
4. Identify who has access to keys
 - a. Set permissions and policies for who can have keys & how long they can have them
 - b. Create a system for recording key issuances and key returns
 - c. Consider who has the ability to order/make new keys. Does the manufacturer or supplier control this and assist you in restricting access (hint: they should).
5. Establish policies
 - a. Consider what happens when a key is lost or stolen. How is it reported? What are the consequences?

If you were to stop reading right now and implement a system based on the above information you would actually have a pretty decent system in place. Let's not stop there. Certainly a few other issues and thoughts are worth considering.

1. Keep it Simple

Whether your system is in your head, on a pad of paper, or in a fancy electronic key cabinet the system needs to be simple to understand and manage. If it isn't, I can almost guarantee that all of your aspirations of control and security will quickly go out the window. You or somebody within your

organization will certainly have to be an active and willing manager, though a good system should not consume you or pull you away from primary duties. Consider your resources and needs when creating a key control system.

2. Consider the "mechanics" of the system

Will keys be issued long term or will employees check them in and out everyday? Will keys leave your premises? Will employees take them home and if they do what are they doing to ensure their safekeeping? There isn't a one size fits all answer to these questions, but when developing a policy these items need to be considered and addressed.

3. Auditing

A good key control policy will have a system of checks and balances. Such a system should involve both periodic and random audits. This means conducting a physical audit of keys as well an audit of logs and maintenance procedures. Are the keys where they are supposed to be? Has a key gone missing? Does the employee have the keys they were issued? It may make sense for keys to be audited as often as every night or as little as monthly or yearly. Not only does auditing help you maintain a secure system but it sets the tone for your organization. It lets employees know that you are serious about keeping track of the keys you've entrusted to them.

4. Be aware of silent partners

Your keys may say "Do Not Duplicate". You may have a policy that prevents duplication or unauthorized distribution of keys. Let's be honest though, none of those things are going to prevent a key from being duplicated or passed off to an unauthorized person. Some manufacturers offer keys that are restricted and supposedly difficult to duplicate. Some of those do a better job of accomplishing this than others. No matter what key system you choose, do your due diligence and research it properly. Even if duplication or distribution of keys wasn't done for nefarious purposes it can still compromise system integrity. Establish consequences for such actions and make them clear to all key users.

5. Work closely with your supplier

The company that supplies and/or manufacturers your locks and keys should be well versed in key control. Confirm that they have policies and procedures in place to protect you. A few things to ask:

1. Are the codes you are issuing to me unique?
2. Are the codes you are issuing to me registered to me?
3. Who will be able to order additional locks and keys for my system? What methods do you have for confirming keys are issued to the authorized individuals?
4. What prevents my keys from being duplicated or issued to someone other than me?

Use your supplier as a resource. Even if your key system is firmly and you've ignored control to this point, your supplier should be able to go back and look at historical records to help you bring your efforts up to speed.

6. Utilize tools and technology

If your system requires more than a simple scratch pad of paper to keep track of keys, you can use technology to assist you. Perhaps a simple Excel spreadsheet will do the job. If a little more security is required then there are many electronic key cabinets available that automate and record key issuances and returns. Some of these cabinets even limit access based on times of day or other variables inputted by the user. Most of these cabinets will have simple to use software and some come with the feature of being managed remotely over the web. Even further advanced, are lock and key systems that employee full access control to limit when a key can actually be used or even lock a key out after a designated time. Another simple tool to help prevent keys from going missing and to facilitate future audits is locking key rings. These devices secure keys on the ring and only authorized personnel can remove them. Regardless of what your requirements are, there is a technology available to assist you.

Back to our basic definition of key control; *a system to account for and manage the keys to a locking system*. As you can see, accomplishing this task can take on a variety of methods with varying degrees of complexity. As noted at the beginning, a lock and key system is only as good as the control you have over your keys. To put it in other terms, even if you had the most complex computer password consisting of multiple alphabetical and numeric characters, that password would be worthless if it was left lying around all over the internet. The same is true for the keys your organization uses every day, only those keys may access much more than your personal data. They may give a key holder access to buildings, cash, credit card info, personnel records, and so much more

If the topic of key control hasn't come up lately at your company, perhaps its time it does. After all, those keys that have gone missing and you forgot about long ago could just so happen to turn up again.

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