6 tips to keep your online identity and information secure

By Gleba & Associates

1: **Never click on a link in an e-mail until you validate the source.**In this day and age, it's easier than ever for hackers to hide their identity. The onus is on us to protect ourselves. In the past month alone, I've received four e-mails from someone claiming to be my mother. The e-mails are all the same: A quick, generic opening line like "I thought you'd like this" and then a link. Upon investigating the actual e-mail address that sent this spam, it was easy to identify that the person sending this e-mail was not my sweet, well-intentioned mother, but instead some random person who was probably trying to give my computer a virus.

After the first e-mail, this became easy to debunk, but it made me think: How often do we just click on a link without truly investigating the source? My only tip-off was that the e-mail opened with "Hi Mike" and my mom has never called me "Mike" in her life. Had that e-mail opened with "Hi Michael", there is a good chance I would have clicked the link and I would have to write this article at a library while my laptop is being de-bugged. So one more time for the people in the back:**Always validate the source of the e-mail**.

2. **Never enter personal information in an email or text message.** The Orwellian adage "big brother is watching" was originally in reference to an overreaching and intrusive government, but the fact of the matter is that phrase needs to be updated to "everybody is watching all the time, and they all want your info." In this modern time, we do so many things online that require us to enter personal information on the web. Whether it's online banking, checking your credit score, or bidding for that Sound of Music dinner plate on Ebay, you likely have to enter personal information about yourself. While your bank,

CreditKarma, and Ebay are probably very good at keeping your personal information secure, there is no reason they, or anybody else, would require you to send personal information through an e-mail or text.

3. **Use antivirus software and keep it up to date.** Just as going to the doctor for regular checkups is vital to keeping your body healthy and running at optimum conditions, having antivirus software is critical for the health of your computer. Hackers and scammers are constantly trying to create new ways to infiltrate your computer. The older your computer is, the more important it is to have antivirus software and update it as frequently as possible. The longer that you allow your computer to run with outdated antivirus software, the more susceptible it is to be compromised.

4. **Limit web usage in the office to core, business-related sites**. Any sites that you use for business-related matters are almost certainly going to be secure. Personal sites, however, are far less likely to be safe and could give hackers the access they need to pull valuable information not just about you, but your company as well. As fun as cat videos are, they can probably wait until you get home.

5. **Create strong passwords, and change them frequently**. Most sites requiring a login do a pretty good job of making sure you create a unique password with special characters. It can seem annoying at the time, but all of those upper case letters, numbers, and special characters are there for your protection. The more complicated your password is, the more difficult it will be for people to decipher and gain access to your information.

Also, it is important to change your passwords on a regular basis. Experts suggest doing so every 2-3 months to keep your information secure. Just like regularly updating your antivirus software keeps your computer secure, regularly changing your passwords keeps your information secure. If you are worried about forgetting your password, keep a journal near your computer at home and write down the passwords that you use for different websites, and write down the date when those passwords were created. This will help you remember the passwords and remember to change them consistently.

6. **Be prudent in what you share about yourself and your job via social media.** The information age makes it easier than ever to keep in touch with people and let them know what is going on in your life. However, the things that you share with your family and friends may be used against you if the wrong person sees it. Sure, it is fun to "check-in" at the airport as you get ready to leave for Hawaii; who wouldn't want to brag to their friends about going on a weeklong vacation? Unfortunately, you've just let the whole world know (or at least, your friends list) that your house is going to be empty for the next seven days. If your privacy settings aren't maximized, any stranger who searches for your name on Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn might find a prime opportunity to pay an unwelcome visit to your house.