



Rhode Island Department of Revenue Division of Taxation

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ADVISORY FOR TAX PROFESSIONALS
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Dangerous W-2 phishing scam evolving

Targeting schools, restaurants, hospitals, tribal groups, and others

PROVIDENCE, R.I. – The Rhode Island Division of Taxation, the Internal Revenue Service, and others are alerting all employers that the Form W-2 email phishing scam has evolved beyond the corporate world and is spreading to other sectors, including school districts, tribal organizations, and nonprofits.

In a related development, the criminals involved in a W-2 scam are coupling their efforts to steal employee W-2 information with an older scheme on wire transfers that is victimizing some organizations twice.

“This is one of the most dangerous email phishing scams we’ve seen in a long time. It can result in the large-scale theft of sensitive data that criminals can use to commit various crimes, including filing fraudulent tax returns,” said IRS Commissioner John Koskinen. “We need everyone’s help to turn the tide against this scheme,” said Rhode Island Tax Administrator Neena Savage. When employers report W-2 thefts immediately to the IRS, the agency can take steps to help protect employees from tax-related identity theft.

The IRS, state tax agencies, and the tax industry, working together as the Security Summit, have enacted numerous safeguards in 2016 and 2017 to identify fraudulent returns filed through scams like this.



As the Summit partners make progress, cybercriminals need more data to mimic real tax returns.

Here’s how the scam works: Cybercriminals use various spoofing techniques to disguise an email to make it appear as if it is from an organization executive.

The email is sent to an employee in the payroll or human resources departments, requesting a list of all employees and their Forms W-2. This scam is sometimes referred to as business email compromise (BEC) or business email spoofing (BES).

The Security Summit partners urge all employers to be vigilant. The W-2 scam, which first appeared last year, is circulating earlier in the tax season and to a broader cross-section of organizations, including school districts, tribal casinos, chain restaurants, temporary staffing agencies, healthcare, and shipping and freight. Those businesses that received the scam email last year also are reportedly receiving it again this year.

Security Summit



Security Summit partners warned of this scam's reappearance last week, but the partners have seen an upswing in reports in recent days.

New twist to W-2 scam: Companies also being asked to wire money

In the latest twist, the cybercriminal follows up with an "executive" email to the payroll or comptroller and asks that a wire transfer also be made to a certain account. Although not tax related, the wire transfer scam is being coupled with the W-2 scam email, and some companies have lost employees' W-2s as well as thousands of dollars due to wire transfers.

The Rhode Island Division of Taxation, other states' tax agencies, the IRS, and the tax industry urge all employers to share information about this W-2 and wire transfer scam with their payroll, finance and human resources employees. Employers should consider creating an internal policy, if one is lacking, on the distribution of employee W-2 information and conducting wire transfers.

Steps employers can take if they see the W-2 scam

Organizations receiving a W-2 scam email should forward it to the IRS. Use the following email address: phishing@irs.gov and place "W2 Scam" in the subject line. Organizations that receive the scams or fall victim to them should file a complaint with the Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3,) operated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Employees whose Forms W-2 have been stolen should review the recommended actions by the Federal Trade Commission at www.identitytheft.gov or at the IRS: www.irs.gov/identitytheft.

Employees should file a Form 14039, "Identity Theft Affidavit," if the employee's own tax return gets rejected because of a duplicate Social Security number or if instructed to do so by the IRS.

The W-2 scam is just one of several new variations that have appeared in the past year that focus on the large-scale thefts of sensitive tax information from tax preparers, businesses, and payroll companies. Individual taxpayers also can be targets of phishing scams, but cybercriminals seem to have evolved their tactics to focus on mass data thefts.

Be safe online

In addition to avoiding email scams during the tax season, taxpayers and tax preparers should be leery of using search engines to find technical help with taxes or tax software. Selecting the wrong "tech support" link could lead to a loss of data or an infected computer. Also, software "tech support" will not call users randomly. This is a scam.

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Taxpayers searching for a paid tax professional for tax help can use the IRS's "Choosing a Tax Professional" lookup tool: <https://www.irs.gov/tax-professionals/choosing-a-tax-professional>

Rhode Island taxpayers who want to get their returns prepared and e-filed at no charge can find a volunteer tax site: <https://www.irs.gov/individuals/irs-free-tax-return-preparation-programs>

Eligible Rhode Island taxpayers can turn to the "Rhode Island Free File" page on the Division of Taxation's website for programs they can use to prepare and e-file their own federal and Rhode Island returns at no charge: <http://www.tax.ri.gov/misc/efile.php>

Tax professionals

Tax professionals also should beware of ongoing scams related to IRS e-Services. Thieves are trying to use IRS efforts to make e-Services more secure to send emails asking e-Services users to update their accounts. Their objective is to steal e-Services users' credentials to access these important services.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To reach the Rhode Island Division of Taxation, call the Division's main phone line at (401) 574-8829. The Division is normally open to the public from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. business days, and is located at One Capitol Hill in Providence, in the Powers Building, which is diagonally across Smith Street from the State House. For forms, instructions, and other information, see the Division website: www.tax.ri.gov. For a list of phone numbers and email addresses of specific sections within the agency, see: www.tax.ri.gov/contact/