

LAWYERS JOURNAL

Be wary of phishing scams targeting ACBA members

By Brian Knavish

In this day and age, phishing scams and other email schemes are all too common. From emails purporting to be from Amazon asking for your credit card information to messages claiming to be from foreign royalty, offering you millions if you'll just front a smaller portion of money for something first, these scams take on a variety of appearances.

While these tactics are nothing new, they're becoming more sophisticated. In recent months, the number of such schemes specifically targeting Pittsburgh-area attorneys has increased. The scams aimed at Pittsburgh attorneys have taken on numerous appearances; some of the more common attacks include:

- Allegheny County Bar Association (ACBA) members have received bogus emails appearing to be from the ACBA and asking members to open "secure documents" that appear to be attached to or embedded in the message. These emails are not from the ACBA. Many of the fraudulent emails are actually coming from an "aol.com" email address and other emails domains. Only emails from "ACBA.org" are legitimately from the bar association.

- Pittsburgh-area attorneys have received fraudulent emails, purporting to be about a potential referral from the "Allegheny County Bar referral service." These emails often reference "breach of contract/business litigation cases" and/or have a subject line of "New Case...ACBA" or something similar. These are not legitimate emails and should be deleted. Referrals from the ACBA only come through the ACBA Lawyer Referral Service (LRS) and go directly to those panel attorneys who have signed up to participate in the LRS. These referrals come directly from the LRS email address (LRS@acba.org) or via phone.

- Another scheme members have reported involves emails or faxes "from an attorney" – often in another country – claiming that an unknown distant relative of the recipient with the same last name has died. The alleged foreign attorney, or sometimes an alleged insurance representative, now has inheritance money for you, the Pittsburgh attorney. This, too, is a scam that has been targeted to other legal communities throughout the country and is now being targeted at the Pittsburgh Legal Community.

- Some members have reported to receive suspicious emails directly from ACBA personnel, ACBA Executive Director David Blaner or even from various ACBA presidents. These emails often ask the recipient to handle "confidential tasks." Here, too, if you check the actual email address, the message is not from an ACBA.org email address (or from a law firm's email address, in the case of scams purporting to be from the ACBA president).

"These scam artists traditionally have preyed on the elderly and those who are less adept at technology, but there's definitely an increase in the sophistication of the schemes, making it easier than ever to get stumped. These phishing attempts come not only via email, but also through text messages, phone calls and on social media," said Roy Leonard, Chair of the ACBA's Legal Technology and E-Discovery Committee. "We encourage everyone to think before you click."

"When you get requests for money, login credentials, account numbers or other confidential information, verify those requests directly through a different channel than where the request came from. For example, if you get a suspicious email from the ACBA requesting login credentials, verify it with a phone call directly to the ACBA. And, of course, use strong passwords, multifactor authentication and keep your software updated."

To help members be aware of such schemes, and for tips to protect attorneys, at work and at home, and their clients from such scams, the Legal Technology and E-Discovery Committee is offering a "Tech Tip" in the last edition of the month of the *Sidebar* e-newsletter. View recent tips and more information on cyber-attacks and phishing schemes at ACBA.org/scams. ■