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A good idea could lead to identity theft

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If someone wants to steal your identity, the thief usually needs only four pieces of information.

Your full name. Your address. Your date of birth. And your Social Security number.

Who is the biggest collector of this information?

Why, the government, of course.

And sometimes, unintentionally, the government is also an unsitting accomplice for those who want to pull off a successful identity heist.

Case in point: The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Highly confidential information submitted to the office by inventors is available on the Internet, including income tax returns, medical records, credit reports and bank statements.

Here's how it works: If you are an inventor wishing to file for a patent on your invention, you are required to pay several thousand dollars to register the idea as your own. Your patent is good for 20 years.

But on the fourth, eighth and 12th year of your patent, the federal government requires you to pay maintenance fees to keep your patent active. Miss a payment and you risk losing your invention. It goes into the public domain, where anyone can use it.

The only way to save your patent after missing a fee deadline is to file an obscure government document with a ridiculously wordy name -- Petition to Accept Unavoidably Delayed Payment of Maintenance Fee in an Expired Patent.

If you claim you missed the deadline because of a medical condition, you must submit medical records. If your problem is financial, you must hand over your financial records.

What some inventors don't know is that in many cases their personal information is available on the Internet to anyone who wants to buy access to it on the Patent Office Web site. The information is also available to anyone who wants to visit the Patent Office in Alexandria, Va., and view the documents. They can even be copied for 10 cents a page.

David Brown, an inventor from Sun City Center, Fla., has worked to expose what he believes to be this unnecessary disclosure of personal information.

"On a visit, I copied everything I needed to get into these people's personal lives -- Social Security numbers, addresses, phone numbers, bank account numbers, credit card numbers, death certificates, Internal Revenue Service forms, an amazing amount of data," he told Watchdog.

Why did he copy it?

He wanted to show how easy it is, he said.

To prove his assertion, Brown sent the *Star-Telegram* a stack of private records from folks around the nation, including a number from Texas inventors.

One inventor wrote to the government: "During the last part of 1989, I became severely clinically depressed as a result of a recurring illness. On January 26, 1990, I took leave of my senses and fired a bullet into my head."

Another letter from the files detailed the travails of a lawyer who could not file maintenance fees in time for a client. The reason? The lawyer, who was named in the file, was attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings: "He meets with his sponsor," a letter explained. "He is now talking about his feelings and worries with his wife, which is a big change for him."

So much for the anonymous part of AA.

I called several of the inventors whose personal information was disclosed in the documents.

A California woman was nearly speechless when I told her that I was in possession of the names and Social Security numbers of six of her employees.

"Obviously, I'm not happy about it," said the woman, who asked me not to disclose her name because she fears repercussions from the Patent Office on pending patents for her inventions.

"I'm sure my employees wouldn't be very happy about it. If one of my employees has their identity stolen through something I did, I would feel terrible about that."

An inventor from Brea, Calif., was just as surprised when I read to him his full name, address, date of birth, Social Security number and other details, including account numbers, off his Equifax credit card report.

"Oh lord," he said. "That's all public? It certainly proves they don't keep it private. It really is pathetic. It's bad enough they give away your credit. But when they give away your Social Security number, that's all you need to know" to steal an identity.

Patent Office officials say they were just as surprised.

"I'll be frank with you. I didn't know that," said Brigid Quinn, the office's press secretary.

"Maybe there is a legitimate reason. Maybe there isn't. Maybe it was an anomaly with that particular file he found."

Whatever the case, she said she would bring the situation to the attention of other Patent Office officials.

The records are no anomaly, though. And it's not one particular file, but hundreds, if not thousands.

Joe Rolla, deputy commissioner for patent examination policy, said inventors are allowed to request that their personal records stay sealed and eventually get returned to them.

But for that to happen, Rolla acknowledged, inventors must take the initiative and ask for privacy exemptions. Many don't know they can do this. Patent documents don't inform inventors about this privacy exemption.

"But our plan is to do something about that and also make sure that our Help Desk is made aware of this," Patent Office Director of Public Affairs Richard Maulsby told The Watchdog.

The Patent Office Help Desk number is (800) 786-9199.

Maulsby added, "Obviously, this whole issue of identity theft is something we've become more sensitive to."

Brown, the Florida inventor who revealed this gaping hole in Patent Office records protection, says he wants North Texas inventors to know about flaws in the system.

"You do have identity theft in your area, and you do have inventors," he said worriedly.

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