Safe Out-Of-The-Office Messages

It's time for that long awaited vacation… you've got your tickets, packed the sunscreen and you're off to the beach house. Just one last task…set your Outlook Out-of-Office Auto-Reply message so clients or coworkers know how to contact you while you're away or who to contact in your absence.

Just remember that Out-of-Office auto-replies can be a security risk if you reveal too much information to anyone who sends you email in your absence.

For example, you set the following auto-reply to go out to everyone who emails you: "I'll be at the beach house in Florida from June 24-28. If you need assistance with billing issues, please contact my supervisor, Betty Somebody at 555-xxxx, or you can reach me on my cell at 555-xxxx. Signed Joe Invoice, Ops Manager, ABC Company, Kalamazoo, MI, 555-xxxx."

Tactful and pleasant, but in a few short sentences, you just gave a potential attacker some very revealing information.

- *Where you are and where you aren't*. Odds are you live in the area you work and you just told everyone who gets your auto-reply you would be out of state. Great heads up to potential robbers. Or this provides an opportunity for someone to finagle their way into your office with a comment like "Before he left for Florida, Joe asked me to pick up a report – he said I could just grab it off his desk."
- *Contact information.* This well-intentioned auto-reply might help scammers piece together information for identity theft including your email address, work and cell numbers, and your supervisor's contact info.
- *E-mail address confirmation.* If your auto-reply goes back to everyone who sends email to you in your absence, spammers just got confirmation that they hit a working email address.
- *Employer, title, and chain of command.* Your name, title and contact numbers are usually in your email signature block. By including your supervisor and their contact details, you've just revealed reporting structure within your organization. Social engineers could use this information to impersonate your boss. For instance, they could contact the HR department and say "Joe is on vacation and I need his ID and Soc # to correct company forms."

So, how to create a safer out-of-office auto-reply message?

A Safer Out-Of-The-Office Message

1. *Be intentionally vague*. By indicating only that you are unavailable, you keep the bad guys from knowing where you really are and aren't…whether at the beach house or attending extended training at the office.

2. *Limit who your auto-reply goes to.* If your email setup allows, restrict the reply to only members of your email domain and your contact list.

3. *If you can't restrict auto-replies, leave out all personal information and remove your signature block*. Your auto-reply may be seen by complete strangers, scammers and spammers. If you wouldn't normally give personal information such as your cell number and email address to a stranger, don't include it in your auto-reply.

Here's a nice, professional but safe auto-reply:

"I will be unavailable from June 24-28 but will be monitoring my email. Or you may call our main phone number 555-xxxx and your call will be routed to someone who can assist you."

Now you're ready for that vacation at the beach house!