

# RHODE ISLAND Lawyers Weekly

## Law firm takes action in tackling TikTok security threat

By: Pat Murphy July 23, 2020

Law firms should take heed of Ropes & Gray's recent decision to ban the popular social media app TikTok from mobile devices used by associates to access work email accounts, cybersecurity experts say.

The legal website Above the Law reported on July 15 that the Boston-based firm had issued its directive on TikTok in response to a request by at least one client.

"This is a real threat," says Brian J. Lamoureux, a cyber law attorney at Pannone, Lopes, Devereaux & O'Gara in Johnston. "Clients and law firms alike are very aware and cognizant of [cybersecurity] risks. Law firms have been held as victims of ransomware themselves."

Ropes & Gray declined a request for comment on the report. However, a firm spokesperson confirmed that the basic facts reported by Above the Law are accurate.

According to the report, Ropes & Gray associates recently received an email from firm management entitled, "Please remove TikTok from your mobile devices." The message noted it had recently been revealed "that the TikTok app has the ability to view data in a mobile device's clipboard. Out of an abundance of caution, we are asking you to uninstall it from any device that receives firm email."

Although the email only mentions associates, Lawyers Weekly has learned that the directive applies to all lawyers at the firm as well as staff.



LAMOUREUX  
Lawyer: 'This is a real threat'

Lamoureux says law firms cannot afford to ignore the vulnerability of clipboard data on a mobile device. The recent revelation that TikTok and many other apps can access clipboard data is a serious concern from a cybersecurity perspective, he says.

"The clipboard function on a device can hold and preserve any type of data, whether it's a client's negotiating position that someone cut and pasted from their iPhone into their text message or a cut-and-pasted password allowing access to a firm's computer system," Lamoureux explains. "Basically, anything you type on the phone can be preserved on the clipboard."

TikTok is a Chinese video-sharing social networking service. The app allows users to make and post online short-form videos of themselves or others engaged in dancing, lip-syncing, comedy and the like. Launched in 2016 by the Beijing-based internet service company ByteDance, TikTok quickly became an internet sensation and today reportedly has more than 800 million users worldwide.

Security concerns over TikTok have been exacerbated by worsening relations between the U.S. and China, according to Gavin Reid, chief security officer at Recorded Future, a cybersecurity company.

"China is well known for compelling organizations to assist with [government] investigations in ways that may not be quite the same as in Europe or the U.S.," Reid says. "While under its terms of service data-sharing with TikTok may not be too different from Google and Facebook, the potential risk of that data falling into the hands of a potentially adversarial government is not one I feel great about."

Though issued in the form of a request, Lamoureux thinks few associates would dare ignore Ropes & Gray's TikTok missive.

"In this environment, associates never want to be in a situation where they put the firm at risk because of some compromise [of security], especially after they've been warned about it," Lamoureux says.

According to Reid, the security risk posed by TikTok is underscored by the fact that active-duty members of the U.S. military have been ordered to remove the app.

"Social media and privacy are like oil and water," Reid says. "It gets down to this: If you have sensitive data on a device, that data should be inaccessible to apps that are known to collect and process it."

The only foolproof solution may be a return to the days when lawyers had one mobile device for firm business and a separate device for personal use.

"The risk to clipboard data is not just a TikTok thing," Lamoureux says. "It's also posed by many of what I call 'blue chip' apps, like those for news services. I would seriously consider getting a second device. But in my experience, it is unlikely that people are going to do that."



REID  
Expert: privacy, social media like 'oil and water'

Issue: JULY 27 2020 ISSUE

#### YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE



Tuition refund suits proliferate, target collegiate online learning  
🕒 July 23, 2020



Negligence case vs. police officer time-barred  
🕒 July 23, 2020



Restrictive covenant halts construction of solar array  
🕒 July 23, 2020

Copyright © 2020 Rhode Island Lawyers Weekly

40 Court Street, 5th Floor,

Boston, MA 02108

(617) 451-7300