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Consumer Alert

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Commissioner warns legal clients against email and internet scams

Email and internet scams are finding their way into the provision of legal services offered by honest solicitors. The Victorian Legal Services Commissioner, Michael McGarvie, warned both consumers and solicitors alike to protect themselves from trickery and infiltration by thieves and scammers.

The warning follows a news report on 6 January in The Daily Mail Australia, which published news of a cruel hoax involving a conveyancing client of UK solicitor. Scammers had somehow intercepted emails between the clients and their solicitors, and made their move just before a large payment was due to be made. The young couple received an email, apparently from their lawyers, advising them to transfer the deposit for their new home to a different bank account, as "the firm's usual bank account was being audited". The victims lost tens of thousands of pounds by transferring money to thieves, thinking they were entrusting money to their solicitor.

The same email vulnerabilities exist all over the world. In warning against being caught by a legal conveyancing scam similar to the UK example, Mr McGarvie suggested people should follow some basic steps. Useful information about online fraud and security is also published by the ACCC and the UK Government. The basic steps are:

1. Stop and think before you click on any links or attachments from uninvited or unexpected contacts.
2. When someone emails you with last-minute changes to a solicitor's trust account number, seeking payment in, call your solicitor to confirm. Use the contact number you already have for your solicitor - do not call the number on the suspicious email, as it may be part of the scam. Consider transferring a small amount first and call your solicitor to check it arrives safely.
3. Know who you are dealing with for internet transactions by typing in the published address of the business you are intending to pay into your internet browser.
4. Protect your email account against Malware and Phishing activities designed to change your details or transfer funds unlawfully. Do this with safe, strong passwords, firewalls, anti-virus software and anti-spyware programs.
5. Never agree to transfer money for someone else – it may be money-laundering, which is a crime.

ENDS

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