

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

- WSJ.com
- **FAMILY VALUE**
- JULY 23, 2011

PINs That Needle Families
By KELLY GREENE

Taking 15 minutes now to jot down your online passwords could save your family hours of frustration after you are gone.

As we all know, large chunks of our lives, both financial and personal, are lived online—bank statements, stock trades and email archives are all available with a few keystrokes. But when people die, their passwords often go with them, along with access to their digital assets.

Leon LaBrecque, a certified financial planner in Troy, Mich., says he has encountered the problem with a number of clients, including one who also was a friend who died of cancer. Mr. LaBrecque's friend had told him that his financial records were on his computer, but when the planner asked the client's wife for his password, she didn't know it.



Jon Krause

"I looked at the dog sitting in the chair next to the computer, and typed in his name, Pepper. It worked, but I've been in other situations where we've had to hire a computer programmer to get into a hard drive," Mr. LaBrecque says.

He is encouraging clients to fill out a free form that includes user names and passwords to online accounts. The form, technically called a "testamentary letter" or "letter of final instruction," isn't a formal legal document but can help your family navigate your assets—including those on the Internet. You can see it at ljpr.com. (Click on "Services," then "Estate Planning," and "Letter of Instruction Form.")

He recommends including any passwords under the "PIN" section on page four. Be warned: filling out the form will take some time. "I did it in about two hours," Mr. LaBrecque says.

John Romano, co-author of "Your Digital Afterlife," published this year, recommends, at the very least, making an inventory of your essential online assets, including the name of the account, your user name and password, and then specifying some wishes. For example: "I'd like this given to everybody," or "please shut down this account."

Taking 15 minutes to make such a list, including your email address, and how to access your computers, "can prevent weeks of headaches and struggles," he says.

About 20 paid services also provide "digital" estate planning, says Evan Carroll, Mr. Romano's co-author. The key: ensure the service uses a secure connection. Some of the popular ones include DataInherit, Entrustet and Legacy Locker.

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That approach has its skeptics. "If there's more than one person who has access to data, experience has shown us that it can always be crashed in one way or another," says Carol Harrington, a partner with McDermott Will & Emery LLP in Chicago.

So, where should you keep your passwords, if not online? Ms. Harrington says she writes them down on paper and tells her family where to find them. It doesn't make sense to stow them in a bank safe-deposit box, she adds, because passwords need to be updated frequently.

Some financial planners are starting to collect their clients' online-account information, even for assets they don't manage, to help their clients' families at death. Mark Cortazzo, principal of Macro Consulting Group in Parsippany, N.J., has even developed an online "vault" where the firm uploads clients' performance reports, and it encourages clients to upload financial documents .

What if a family member dies before leaving you a list of user names and passwords to online accounts? The rules for getting any sort of access to the content inside of them vary widely, Mr. Carroll says.

For example, Yahoo, which also owns the Flickr photo site, says through a spokeswoman that users who want to make content such as photos and email records accessible to their legal heirs should work with their attorneys as part of their estate-

planning. But it also says people who use Yahoo agree to a "non-transferability clause." If representatives of a deceased user contact Yahoo, it may close the account.

In contrast, Facebook "memorializes" an account when a user passes away, making the account private so that only confirmed friends can see the profile, leaving a space for friends to leave posts in remembrance, and preventing anyone from logging in.

Google sometimes allows an authorized representative of a deceased user to access email. First it requires a death certificate and other information; if it gives the go-ahead, the representative would need to get a court order or submit additional materials. Twitter, for its part, will give an executor an archive of public "tweets."

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