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Juice Jacking: Charging your way to Fraud

While it sounds like a new weight loss craze, Juice Jacking is actually a way to steal information straight from your cell phone or mobile device while the device is still in your possession. Criminals don't even have to come into contact with your phone and it's shockingly easy to pull off.

Picture this: you're at an airport and your flight has just been delayed, by 6 hours. You glance at your phone and see the dreaded red line indicating your battery is down to fumes. Worse, you checked your luggage, with the charger inside. But never fear! You have your USB cord and you saw a public charging station while walking down the terminal.

Thinking your luck is looking up, you grab a coffee and plug into the handy-dandy free power charging station. What seems like great luck could actually lead to criminals gaining all of your passwords, credit card numbers, mobile wallet details, photos and other personal info stored on your device.

How does that happen?

This new way to hijack your info starts with criminals tampering with these unsecured charging stations to install a small computer so that when you charge your device using a USB, it syncs with your device and siphons off all your info. This all happens while you sip your coffee waiting for your device to charge.

And of course no fraud today is complete without malware; security researchers have found that many devices are also infected with malware during the charging process. Criminals like to install malware so they can continue pulling your information off the device in the future.

This is not just occurring in airports either. Reports have found this happening at free charging stations nationwide, especially in airports, malls and bus terminals.

Mobile device security

1. If possible, use your charging cord plugged into a wall outlet instead of free charging stations.
2. Reality says we don't always have our charging cord handy, and wall outlets (especially in malls and airports) are few and far between, so consider carrying a

backup battery or personal quick-charger. I picked up a cool personal phone charger at a conference (vendor giveaway) that runs on a single AA battery. It doesn't give me a full charge, but it will get me by for a while in an emergency. I just leave it in my backpack so I always have it with me while traveling. (Don't forget to pack extra batteries!)

For frequent travelers, you may want to invest in charging accessories, like bags you charge that in turn charge your phone every time you slip it in the bag, or another type of higher powered personal mobile device charger.

3. If carrying your own backup is a challenge or you want a less expensive alternative, you might want to invest in a power-only USB cord to use with public charging stations. These cords are missing the wires necessary for data transmission so they literally can only charge the device. I found several on Amazon ranging from $5 - $10. Wherever you shop for supplies, look for USB cords that state "does not support data transfer" or "charging USB with data block."
4. Some phones can't pair or sync while your phone is locked, but that's not true with all flavors of operating systems. I personally recommend locating your pairing / syncing function, most frequently found in the Tools or Settings folder, and disable pairing / syncing without permission. What that means is your phone would alert you and require you to authorize pairing / syncing vs. just doing it. Most phones out-of-box allow pairing and syncing; you have to change this setting yourself.

About the Author

Rayleen is the CEO of RP Payments Risk Consulting Services, based in Orrick, MO. She travels the country presenting at fraud, payments and security conferences on topics ranging from Mobile, fraud, risk management, and information security. Rayleen has been writing and presenting for 9 years. Previously she worked financial crimes investigations for a community bank.