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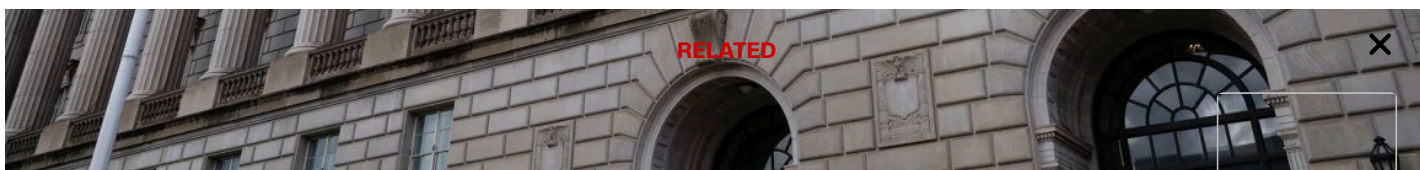
DOGE's request for IRS data systems access may pose risks to tax filers

By [Jeanne Sahadi](#), CNN

🕒 5 minute read · Published 9:28 AM EST, Tue February 18, 2025

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A view of the Internal Revenue Service building in Washington, DC, on February 16, 2025. Annabelle Gordon/Reuters

(CNN) — The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) — the special entity created by President

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The IRS, of course, has extensive and complex data systems containing highly sensitive personal and financial information on more than 100 million individual tax filers and businesses. Those systems are often interconnected, and making changes in one can have a knock-on effect on others, according to Terry Milholland, who served as IRS chief technology officer from 2008 to 2016.

The mere fact that DOGE is seeking such quick access has been alarming to many people for a number of reasons — including the potential that DOGE team members may access some types of tax data illegally, even if inadvertently — or illegally expose that data to third parties. Additionally, neither lawmakers nor the public have been given any clear sense as to what DOGE's plans are for using the data it does access.



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On top of those serious concerns, DOGE most immediately may pose risks to Americans who are preparing to file their taxes now, as the group presses the IRS for access to its systems, noted John Koskinen, who served as IRS commissioner from late December 2013 to mid-November 2017.

“They run the risk of inadvertently triggering errors and having the (tax-filing) system shut down,” Koskinen said. He noted that even the IRS typically doesn't tinker with its systems during the filing season because everyone's priority at the agency is to ensure a smooth experience. “I don't see the urgency or the rush. The systems aren't going anywhere.”

And, he added, “I would think anyone with knowledge of IT and an understanding of the complexity of the tax filing season would stay away” — at least until early summer, when the bulk of the more than 140 million returns the IRS is expecting will have been filed.

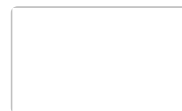
Potential problems that could hurt tax filers

With DOGE at the IRS, what might make it more difficult for a filer to get their refund in a timely way, look up their tax data online, upload a document or even file their return?

Distractions: The mere presence of DOGE at the agency in the middle of tax-filing season is taking up the

time and energy of IRS employees who otherwise should be fully focused on the smooth functioning of the systems for tax season, Koskinen said.

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Lack of sufficient training to use the systems: Whichever systems DOGE team members are hoping to navigate, it takes a fair amount of training to do so capably, said Mark Mazur, a former director at the IRS Office of Research, Analysis and Statistics and a former assistant secretary for tax policy at the US Treasury. “You’d need some IRS employees to help you, (especially) not to screw something up.”

Misinterpretations and misguided orders: To the extent DOGE wants to root out what it assumes is waste, fraud and abuse, there’s a high risk that DOGE members may misinterpret the data they are viewing. Unless you have experience working with the data and understand the complexities of, say, a particular tax measure, it’s easy to misunderstand what the data you’re looking at represents, Mazur said.

And, whether a DOGE team member manually tinkers with a given system or simply orders an IRS employee to stop a given function, there’s potential for system interruption.

For instance, Mazur said, “Someone from DOGE might say this group getting a refund needs to be looked at more.” Or, he noted, someone might see a certain tax credit is being paid to a group of filers who don’t have Social Security numbers, and they may wrongly assume that’s fraud, even though there are circumstances in which the IRS assigns different IDs to filers who are eligible to claim a given benefit.

Put simply: “They’re going to think they know what they’re doing and they won’t,” Mazur said.

Navigating intricate systems

Milholland said he is not comfortable with the idea of an outside group like DOGE possibly making changes to systems they have no experience with.

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“You have to have deep knowledge of how the pieces fit together. It’s a well-honed machine designed years ago,” he said. “If DOGE wants to go in and make changes, God help us. If they want read-only access for political purposes — fine. But don’t give them write access.”



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In fact, Milholland noted, the IRS career employees who understand the systems best — and, in particular, the older programming languages still used to keep the data systems operating smoothly — are nearing retirement. If they decide they've had enough and leave early — or are pushed out prematurely through DOGE-ordered layoffs, "you don't have people who can change this stuff," he said.

That worry also speaks to Mazur's biggest concern with DOGE's rushed push to get into the IRS systems.

"One thing that sort of sums up my concerns is the Silicon Valley tech bro ethos of 'move fast and break things.' I am worried about the potential large-scale consequences if they break things like the IRS data systems or the federal government payment systems because these could affect large numbers of regular Americans," he said.

Particular to this tax-filing season, Koskinen notes that any mid-stream changes to data systems or potential IRS layoffs that materially may affect taxpayers' filing experience will be noticed. "It runs the risk of making life very difficult for tax filers and tax preparers. Filers aren't just Democrats. They're Republicans and Independents. It makes absolutely no sense," he said.

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