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Introducing .CPA,  
a Restricted Domain  
Exclusively for the  
CPA Profession



# Evolution of the Internet & Top Level Domains

Our lives increasingly take place online. Thanks to the connecting power of the Internet, it's possible to perform the majority of activities that make up our day-to-day – banking, communication, entertainment, research, to name just a few – from our computers.

But as the Internet's power and capabilities have multiplied, so too have the bad actors who operate within it. "Today, there's a lack of authentication and growing mistrust of online information," said Erik Asgeirsson, president and CEO of CPA.com, the AICPA's business and technology arm. Cybercrime frequently involves the exploitation of top-level domains, or the string of letters that follow the dot in a URL or email address. A crucial part of the Internet's navigation system, there are currently more than 350 million unique domain names, a significant percentage of which are being used in phishing, malware, and ransomware schemes.

To combat this, new trust and security features are being put in place, notably protected top-level domains. While most top-level domains are open, available to anyone, restricted top-level domains are only accessible to verified users. "This is why many leading companies and communities, such as Amazon, KPMG, and the banking industry are moving to restricted top-level domains," Asgeirsson said. A secure, verified domain allows organizations to validate and oversee access, which restricts bad actors' ability to spoof and otherwise impersonate legitimate addresses and accounts.

Enter .cpa, a new restricted domain exclusively for the accounting profession. Owned by AICPA and managed by CPA.com, the top-level domain name is reserved exclusively for licensed CPA firms and licensed individual CPAs. License verification will take place at the time of purchase as well as when a .cpa domain is renewed, a

process that maintains exclusivity and allows firms to more securely communicate with clients, partners, and prospective hires.

"We're looking forward to bringing this important new capability to the profession. Businesses look to their accountants for advice – they need to have confidence in their communications with a firm. This initiative enables the profession to pull clients along onto the next generation of the Internet."

**Erik Asgeirsson**  
President and CEO of CPA.com

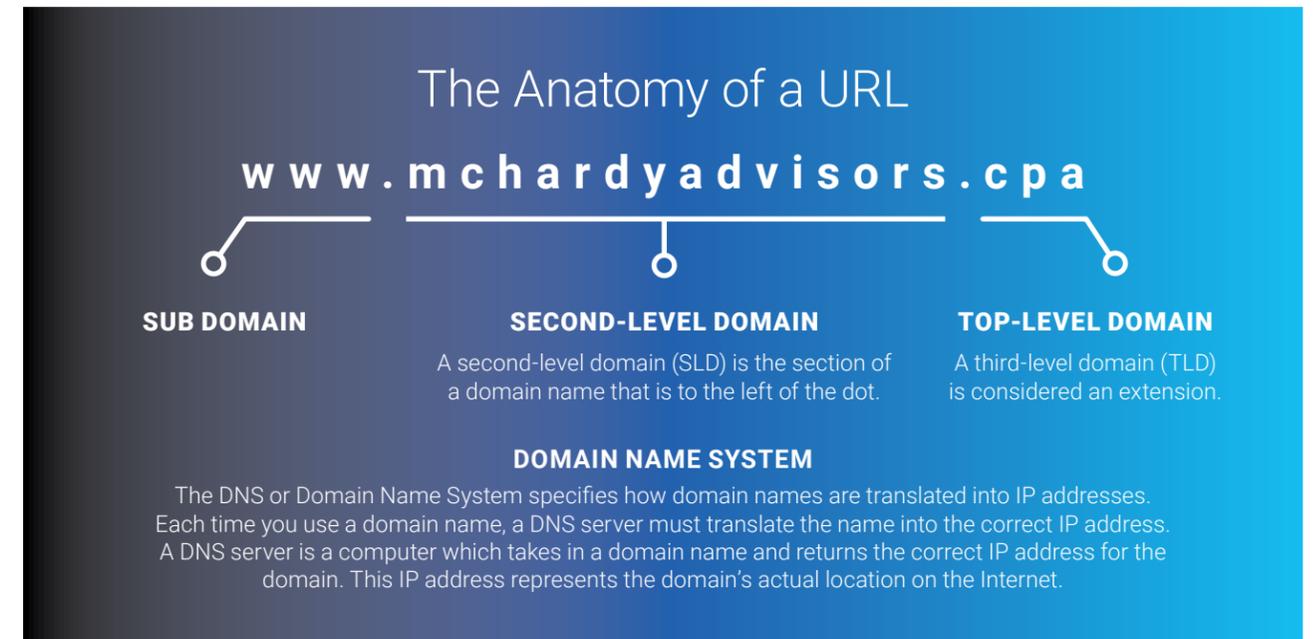
In addition to added security, access to the .cpa top-level domain<sup>1</sup> opens the door for firms to secure a URL that aligns with their desired marketplace branding and positioning, while also signaling a verified connection to the profession.

"By overseeing the .cpa domain, the AICPA can help promote CPAs' visibility and protect their professional standing online," said Barry Melancon, president and CEO of the AICPA. "We also want the public to have confidence that someone using a .cpa domain address for email or a website is affiliated with the CPA profession."



A brief introduction to  
top-level domains.

Top-level domains are issued and managed by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers



(ICANN), a nonprofit that serves as the Internet's governing body. The most popular top-level domain, of course, is .com, although .net, .edu, and .gov are also frequently used. Second-level domains represent all the sites included under a top-level domain's umbrella. For example, google.com, nytimes.com, and facebook.com are all second-level domains within the .com top-level domain.

About a decade ago, ICANN began allowing organizations and other entities to apply for new top-level domain names. Since then, the organization has rolled out a select number of specialized domain extensions, including, Amazon's .aws, Google's .app, KPMG's .kpmg and, in 2019, the AICPA's .cpa.

Domains, or the URL by which people can reach your site, are an important component of any business. Despite the recent addition of new options, .com remains the levathan in the space, accounting for 40% of all registered internet address domains. That said, alternatives are growing in popularity. According to one analysis<sup>2</sup>, a third of all start-ups used domains other than .com in 2018, a 100% increase from four years earlier.



An issue of security.

The Internet, in its ability to connect people and democratize information, is an amazing resource. But as its capabilities have grown, allowing us to perform a wide range of actions online, it's become increasingly dangerous.

"Bad actors are better funded and more sophisticated than they once were, and the attacks are growing more numerous."

**Randy Johnston**  
CEO & Founder of Network Management Group

Network Management Group provides management, maintenance, and troubleshooting for accounting clients' IT assets. As part of his job, Johnston regularly works with CPA firms who have been taken offline due to a cyberattack. "I see this at least daily," he said. "It happens dozens of times a month."

In many ways, “we’ve lost control of the original idea of the Internet,” said Jennie-Marie Larsen, a veteran domain expert who is serving as an advisor to CPA.com.

The FBI recently released its 2019 Internal Crime Report<sup>3</sup>, which included information from more than 467,000 complaints of suspected Internet crime representing losses of over \$3.5 billion, up from \$1.3 billion in 2016<sup>4</sup>.

One of the top forms of online crime? Phishing, in which scammers impersonate emails from reputable companies in order to get individuals to reveal personal information, such as usernames, passwords, and credit card details. A common strategy is to use combinations of numbers, letters, and foreign characters (such as from the Cyrillic script) to mimic existing domains to deceive end users.

“Everything in the message can look exactly like it’s supposed to, but the included link will actually take you to an alternate site,” Johnston said, who regularly receives these types of emails in his inbox. Once the receiver clicks on the email and arrives at the imitation site, they are asked to log in, allowing bad actors to capture their usernames and passwords.

Between October 2017 and January 2018, the cybersecurity firm Farsight Security identified<sup>5</sup> more than 116,000 imitator domains for a group of 125 high-profile websites, a list that included social media platforms like Facebook, banking institutions like Wells Fargo, and luxury brands such as Gucci.

Replica sites can be virtually indistinguishable from the real thing. A good illustration of this: In 2017, the credit card reporting agency Equifax mistakenly linked to an imitation website in a series of posts on Twitter<sup>6</sup>. In this case, the website in question was created by a software engineer with the intention of illustrating how easy it was to impersonate Equifax’s domain. By linking to the site, Equifax inadvertently underscored his point: imitation

sites are easy to make and can trick users into handing out important personal information, such as surnames and social security numbers.

More than 114,000 individuals reported being a victim of a phishing scam in 2019, according to the FBI Internet Crime Report, totaling nearly \$60 million in losses. Even experienced professionals can fall prey to email phishing schemes.

Shark Tank judge Barbara Corcoran, for example, nearly lost \$388,700 in a targeted phishing scam<sup>7</sup> when her bookkeeper was tricked into wiring the money after receiving an email from an account designed to look like that of Corcoran’s assistant. (The money was saved only because Corcoran’s bank froze the transfer on suspicion of fraud; had the transaction gone through, it would have been irretrievable.)

Small businesses are especially at risk: In a survey by the Ponemon Institute, 57% of small businesses reported being the target of a phishing or social engineering scam<sup>8</sup> in the previous 12 months. For accounting firms, which handle large amounts of personal data on behalf of their clients, the consequences of a data breach are enormous.



**Open, unrestricted domain extensions, such as .com and .net, are easy to spoof for two main reasons: they don’t require verification and they are purchased in mass volumes to mimic existing domains.**

## Tactics of Spoofed & Phishing Emails



### Key Elements:

1. Urgent subject line or headline
2. Incorrect or missing recipient and/or sender email addresses
3. Threatening language with high pressure calls-to-action
4. Poor grammar, spelling errors, and typos
5. Requests for account or personal information, links to unfamiliar URLs, or attachments to files you did not request
6. Contradicting or inaccurate instructions

The .cpa top-level domain works to solve both issues. Unlike open domain extensions, only licensed firms and individual accountants will be allowed to register and use a .cpa domain. License verification will take place at the time of purchase, and at other random periodic times.

The setup should effectively limit the proliferation of spam in the .cpa space – a preferred delivery tool for ransomware, malware, and phishing – based on CPA.com’s policy to not post domain owners names and registration information on publicly listed registry records. (Spammers are therefore unable to collect .cpa domain holder addresses in order to send out email blasts.)

Additionally, spammers will not be able to purchase mimic domains to carry out large-scale spam and phishing operations. Taken together, it’s unlikely scammers will target the space “because it’s expensive and they will eventually get caught,” Larsen said.

The restricted top-level domain approach is already being adopted by other industries in which security is a top concern, most notably banking institutions. More than 500 banks have switched from .com to .bank, according to a report in the ABA Banking Journal<sup>9</sup>.

## .cpa Strengthen Your Brand.

As the internet has grown, so has competition for domains. Today, it’s incredibly difficult for most companies to secure a .com domain that directly aligns with their desired branding and positioning – most have long been taken. Amplifying this competition: over the past few decades, a thriving cybersquatting cottage industry has emerged, in which speculators purchase a large

number of domains with the intention of selling them for a profit.

As a result, many accounting firms have had to settle for longer, less relevant .com domains, often tacking on 'co', or 'llc', which complicates and detracts from the strength and memorability of their URL.

The rollout of .cpa will effectively clear the slate. Starting later this September, firms can apply for shorter, more relevant domains that better represent and position their value proposition, while signaling their connection to the CPA profession. As it stands, all .cpa domains are available, enabling firms to bring fresh thinking to how they want to brand their services in the marketplace. This is important, as a firm's domain name is a key component to standing out and creating a competitive advantage for both a professional and digital brand.

In addition to the branding advantage, .cpa should enable firms in terms of search engine optimization (SEO). "You have better SEO performance when you use a domain name that is associated with the content of your site," Larsen said. (Google itself has paid hundreds of millions of dollars to register for a number of top-level domains, including .app, .channel, and .dev.)

Technological advancements are changing our world, and business, faster than ever. It is important that firms evolve with these changes and establish internal strategies to leverage these advancements as well as establish security protocols. The .cpa top level domain availability is a single pillar that supports that effort, and in turn, helps improve client communication by building on the foundational trust between firm and client. The AICPA and CPA.com will be following developments across the domain category and will help keep firms at the forefront of the technological innovations occurring.



## The backstory on top-level domains.

When the World Wide Web made its public debut in 1990, there were five original top-level domains<sup>10</sup>: .com, .edu, .gov, .mil, and .org (with .net arriving soon after).

As the internet hurtled towards mainstream adoption, competition for existing domain names grew increasingly fierce. By the mid-90s, there was a growing belief that more top-level domains were needed.

In 1998, the U.S. government oversaw the creation of ICANN<sup>11</sup>, a nonprofit tasked with, among other things, managing domains. Over the next few years, ICANN rolled out a host of new top-level domains, including .biz and .info. It also began overseeing country domains, such as .mx for Mexico, .us for the United States, .ai for Anguilla (more on this later).

Since then, the pool of functioning top-level domains has grown from 22<sup>12</sup> (plus country domains) to more than 1,200<sup>13</sup>. Some of these top-level domains refer to geographic locations (.berlin and .paris, for example), professions (.pharmacy and, yes, .cpa), hobbies and products (.bike and .app), or characters (such as domain extensions in Japanese). Many are unrestricted, available to anyone through popular domain registrar services such as GoDaddy and Network Solutions; others, such as .cpa and .bank, are reserved for verified professional organizations.



## The value of restricted top-level domains.

In April 2019, KPMG launched a corporate website under its own branded top-level domain, kpmg, moving its homepage from home.kpmg.com to home.kpmg. "The

move enhances the KPMG brand through a strong, simplified name, and provides end users with a level of assurance that any site that ends with .kpmg is owned and operated by KPMG," the Big Four firm announced in a press release<sup>14</sup>. "Since the top-level domain can only be used by KPMG, visitors to sites that use the new top level domain can easily confirm its authenticity and be assured that the information they contain is reliable and secure."

Protected top-level domain names for professions carry the same benefits, which is why many banks choose to use .bank domains and a growing number of pharmacies choose .pharmacy. As with .kpmg, these restricted domains provides security protections while conveying a level of immediate verification to consumers.



## In Summary:

Due to the onslaught of malicious activity on the Internet, individuals are understandably distrustful of much of the information found on the web. By controlling who is – and isn't – granted access to .cpa, the profession will be able to provide an immediate level of assurance<sup>15</sup> to clients while better protecting itself against cyber threats.

Restricted top-level domains are part of the next, more secure, generation of the Internet. The rollout of the .cpa domain represents "a web 2.0 specifically dedicated to the accounting profession," Asgeirsson said. "It's part of a global movement aimed at improving security online." For firms and individual CPAs, this is what the digitization of your space is going to look like. This will be the new Internet.

Starting on September 1st, registration for a .cpa domain will be available to licensed CPA firms and individual licensed CPAs. To learn more, visit: [domains.cpa](https://domains.cpa).

"cpa is a big win for our profession. It has both security and branding benefits. Today, trust is paramount, the fact the domain can be restricted to individual CPAs and licensed CPA firms is extremely valuable. It can also help firms cut through all the noise and clutter online."

**Jim Bourke, CPA.CITP, CFF, CGMA**  
Partner at Withum



# Getting Started with a .cpa Domain

Once you have purchased a .cpa domain you will want to start benefiting from it right away. But you probably have a lot of questions. What do I do with my existing domain? How do I change my email address or website address to .cpa? These questions can make it feel like adopting .cpa TLD is difficult, however it does not need to be.

Let's walk through what the process of adopting .cpa looks like as it applies to firm's three biggest decisions: managing your domain, adding it to your email system, and applying it to your website.



## Setting up DNS Records

One of the first actions for using any domain is setting DNS (Domain Name System). DNS is the backbone of the internet and how it's names are mapped to IP addresses so that computers can find and communicate with one another. It is used every time you visit a website or send an email, and quite frankly – without it, your domain just doesn't work.

During the setup process of adopting .cpa, you will be asked which DNS name servers you want to use for your firm's domain. The options are to use your own, a third party, or Encirca's (the .cpa registrar). Larger firms will likely use a third party or their own DNS servers whereas smaller firms will use the DNS offered by the Registrar. IT Administrators are intimately familiar with DNS and can assist with creating DNS records and setup. Since larger firms will have IT staff to take care of this for them, let's focus on how to use the DNS provided by the .cpa registrar, Encirca.

During the domain setup process you will receive email instructions on how to access the DNS system. Simply follow those instructions to login to the DNS panel. Once you are there you can create any DNS records that are needed. Whether setting up your email or configuring your website, refer to the instructions from that service provider for which DNS records are required. Creating DNS records is fairly straight forward, however if you have questions you can always reach out to Encirca for assistance.



## Connecting your Email

Now that you have control of your DNS, you will want to start sending and receiving email via your new .cpa domain. If you already use Microsoft Office 365 or Google's G-Suite, the process is very simple. You simply access the management website for the email platform and add your .cpa domain. During this process you are verifying with the email provider that you are the owner of that domain (they normally ask you to create a DNS TXT record to accomplish that) and will be given several additional DNS records to create that enable the transmission of email within the email platform. Once this is done, your platform is ready to send and receive email and all that remains is to add the .cpa email address to new or existing email mailboxes.

If you do not already have an email platform, then you will need to first acquire one and then follow the instructions of the email provider on how to setup and configure mail flow.



## Firm Website

Lastly, you will want to use your .cpa domain with your website. There are two ways to do this: setup a forward, or change your website address. If you have an existing website we recommend that you first set up a forward to allow you to introduce your firm's new .cpa domain to clients and service providers before switching over to it fully.

What is a web forward? It is simply a website address that redirects requests to another website. For example, if you purchased mchardyadvisors.cpa but have an existing website mchardyadvisors.com – then a forward will send requests for mchardyadvisors.cpa to mchardyadvisors.com. It is very simple to setup and also a free service from the .cpa registrar, Encirca. As you can see, a web forward is a powerful tool as it lets you begin using your .cpa domain in marketing collateral before making any changes to your existing website.

Once you have used a web forward for a period of time, and you are ready to make the switch to having your .cpa domain as your only website address, you will need to refer to your website provider for instructions on how to make that configuration change. Each website hosting platform is different and as such, the steps involved will be unique for each firm.

If you do not have an existing website, then you will need to procure one, and follow the setup instructions from that provider.

Adopting and using your .cpa domain does not need to be a difficult or time consuming process. Using a phased approach in conjunction with your existing domain, and converting it to your primary domain over time is a smart way to start benefiting from this new asset quickly.

## What Firms are Saying...

"Digital has become an increasingly strategic part of our practice. When I heard about the .cpa domain becoming available through the AICPA and CPA.com, I was immediately drawn to its value as an extra layer of security in protecting our digital assets. The branding opportunity has great benefit to us, too, since our firm has greatly expanded our social media presence."

**Jeff Porter, CPA, MST, LL.M. Taxation**  
Founder & Owner of Porter & Associates

"We are a progressive and digital-first firm and a .cpa domain clearly helps position us this way in the marketplace."

**Teresa Mason, CPA, MS, CGMA**  
Managing Partner at Collins, Mason & Company

"Information security continues to be one of the utmost concerns within accounting firms. Transitioning the firm's domain to .cpa will provide the opportunity for another layer of protection, helping firms strengthen their cyber defenses while at the same time highlighting their CPA brand."

**Roman Kepczyk, CPA.CITP**  
Director of Firm Technology Strategy at Right Networks



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## Footnotes

- 1 <https://www.cpa.com/dotcpa>
- 2 <https://brex.com/blog/domain-ai>
- 3 <https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/fbi-releases-the-internet-crime-complaint-center-2019-internet-crime-report>
- 4 <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/ic3-releases-2016-internet-crime-report>
- 5 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/hackers-are-flooding-the-internet-with-more-fake-domain-names-heres-how-you-can-protect-yourself>
- 6 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/business/equifax-fake-website.html>
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- 15 <https://www.cpa.com/dotcpa#overview>
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- 17 <https://qz.com/165238/the-biggest-land-rush-in-the-history-of-the-internet-begins-on-february-4>



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