The Digital ID World Newsletter - March 30, 2006 Issue

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The Network Perspective

"Only when a person has constructed a conceptual framework do the facts begin to acquire meaning."
- John William Burgess

"The facts of your personal experience must be supplemented by the facts of other people's experiences in order to acquire true value and meaning."
- Michael R. LeGault

This is the final installment of what has turned out to be a five part series on putting the many simultaneous changes occurring in the identity marketplace into perspective. The quotes above indicate why what I call the identity conversation is so important, and also why as the community of people involved in that conversation enlarges, the evolution of both the technology and its marketplace starts to ramp much faster than before. The second quote emphasizes the place of our Digital ID World conferences in the overall picture, and why I focus so intently on having the unusually high number of deployment experiences in our sessions that we do.

This series began with my post-RSA observation that far more security folks are now recognizing that there is no security without identity, and that technology was beginning to reflect this. It has moved on to explore how the marketplace is changing significantly as the result of the much larger number of people who are seeing the importance of identity in solving the problems they face, and how the understanding of identity is changing as a result. I've explored these significant changes from several perspectives, including that of the enterprise customer, the developer, the end user, the vendor, and the smaller business potential customer base. This week I will return to the security folks' outlook and examine this change from the perspective of those who focus on the "innards" of the network such as IP addresses, routers, network access technology, etc. to provide security to networks.

Throughout this series I have focused on how very few people really "get" the impact and meaning of identity in networked computing until it touches them or their job functions personally in some way. Then an "aha" moment opens the way to construct a conceptual framework that lets the true meaning of digital identity become apparent. In the past I've used the appearance of the web browser as an example of this human understanding process, since that was the most widely shared technology "aha" moment in computing history - launching the internet infrastructure build out as a result of the way it let large numbers of people construct a conceptual framework to understand the potential of "the web" as it related to their personal lives and interests.

In IT departments around the world, there exists a large number of people who spend the bulk of each work day examining the alerts, logs, and reports produced by such security devices as firewalls, network access devices (wireless and wired), VPNs, and various intrusion detection systems. Their task is to assure that these systems are configured correctly, to detect any inappropriate activity taking place, and to divine from these arcane inputs what is really happening to the resources they are charged with protecting and who might be responsible.

The data they get is very network-centric. It refers to IP addresses, MAC addresses, and other sub-portions of the network that most users try very hard not to know much about. Security log analysis is thus a pretty specialized activity. It takes a lot of work to paint the picture of what is really happening and who it might be that is doing what when there are questions about whether activity is legitimate or represents a security breach. As is often the case, people presume that the way things *are* is mostly the way they *have to be* and continue to burn effort tracing dynamically assigned IP addresses through various logs based on the time of an event to discover an authentication event in some authentication log somewhere that will indicate who produced the activity in question.
This is a classic example of a manual identity system. As I have often said, everyone has an identity management system - the question is only how much of it is manual and how much of it is documented. When you see teams of highly trained personnel sitting at tables with printouts manually correlating data to find out what they really wanted to know, you are looking at the modern equivalent of the 1950's room full of calculators - people with adding machines who did a company's calculating tasks. This is a situation begging for computers to automate it and return these talented peoples' energy to more productive tasks.

In the past several months, companies and products are starting to appear that are focusing on this part of the identity problem set. Two that come to mind are A10 Networks and Identity Engines. While each of these companies sees the network/identity problem from a slightly different starting point, they have both designed identity appliances that bridge this network level gap that until recently has not been recognized as being part of the identity management realm.

These appliances are focused on solving the problems of integrating enterprise identity resources such as Active Directory or LDAP interfaced identity stores with the world of network devices that use Radius authentication or are part of the Cisco focused NAC consortium authentication universe. This universe has had many problems in scaling in any economical way, and integration with other identity sources has previously been largely unconsidered. By combining identity virtualization technology with a variety of identity management technologies these appliances are creating a bridge between the network itself and the higher level identity layers enterprises have been constructing for several years.

ROI is rapid with these devices, but what I find most interesting is the way that their existence impacts the outlook of those who have only seen the network from a deeply technical vantage point. When those people see some simple result of the integration of identity with their technical world, it is an immediate mind expanding experience. Simply seeing the identity of a user integrated into their security log reports, for example, opens their eyes to what network security is really all about - identity. Hours of work disappear, and a world of new possibilities opens up.

We are early in the development and deployment of this type of identity appliance (both of the companies mentioned only began shipping last Fall), but already it is clear that this is the next area of identity technology to reveal the power of integrating identity into the world view of those involved.

"Only when a person has constructed a conceptual framework do the facts begin to acquire meaning." And for most people it takes personal experience of some change in *their* world for that conceptual framework to really take shape. This is why the identity conversation is expanding on so many fronts right now, as identity suddenly spreads to many new areas where it will affect far more peoples' interests directly.

Identity was first seen (incorrectly) as security. Now that security is being seen to derive from identity things are coming full circle. The impact will be much larger than most suspect.

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**Digital Identity News**

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**Security of Medicare info questioned**

I bring you this USA Today article as a way of noting that once Electronic Health Records reach a certain momentum, we can expect to begin seeing this type of article a lot. If identity isn't well integrated with electronic health records (and today it's pretty spotty) then we can expect to see health identity data spills.

And if that starts to happen, the reaction will make the one we've seen to phishing look like nothing.

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Two new Web sites let users find and report phishing

Speaking of Phishing, this article illustrates that we haven't made much *real* progress on it either. Since the failure of the Sender-ID effort, attempts at finding an internet scale email identity technology have slowed to a crawl. Without identity we are left with no good options. The one we gravitate to is one of the "Top 10 stupid security tricks" - listing the bad. Since there will always be more bad things tomorrow, "listing the bad" is a doomed effort.

Thus the larger the efforts to "list the bad" the more obvious it is that we don't really know how to fix the problem in any general way. Without identity we are stuck.

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The hidden challenges of federated identity

Federated identity may be the hottest arena in enterprise identity management today. But we are still on the frontier with it, and most deployments run into issues that the technology is the small part of.

This article by Phil Windley (Whose O'Reilly book titled "Digital Identity" is a terrific overview of the field) has written this article which gives good insight into the current state of federated identity, as well as what the real issues are that must be considered and how they need to be approached for success.

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nCipher delivers enhanced Provisor identity management solution

Last Fall nCipher acquired Chicago based Abridean, maker of the Provisor provisioning system. Now they have announced the first update of that software since the acquisition - Provisor 5.3. Provisor had already been focused on rapid deployment and ROI, but nCipher claims that this release broadens the arena where that is now true.

What is likely more significant, however, is the addition of tools that are focused on compliance, something no provisioning software can long prosper without.

The Identity Conversation continues...

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