An Introduction to Least Privilege
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Summary

This paper introduces the principle of least privilege, the benefits of following this practice and the barriers to implementation. It then goes on to suggest approaches to adopting a least privilege approach. Finally it gives a brief overview of Privilege Guard, a solution that enables privileges to be assigned to individual applications, providing a practical implementation of least privilege for corporate environments.
The Principle of Least Privilege

Definition of Least Privilege

The principle of least privilege requires that a user should be given no more privileges than is required to perform their job function.

The Department of Defense Trusted Computer System Evaluation Criteria, (DOD-5200.28-STD), also known as the Orange Book, defines least privilege as a principle that “requires that each subject in a system be granted the most restrictive set of privileges (or lowest clearance) needed for the performance of authorized tasks. The application of this principle limits the damage that can result from accident, error, or unauthorized use.” [1]

The principle of least privilege was first put forward as a design principle by Jerry Saltzer and Mike Schroeder over 30 years ago. According to Saltzer and Schroeder, “Every program and every user of the system should operate using the least set of privileges necessary to complete the job. Primarily, this principle limits the damage that can result from an accident or error. It also reduces the number of potential interactions among privileged programs to the minimum for correct operation, so that unintentional, unwanted, or improper uses of privilege are less likely to occur. Thus, if a question arises related to misuse of a privilege, the number of programs that must be audited is minimized. Put another way, if a mechanism can provide ‘firewalls’, the principle of least privilege provides a rationale for where to install the firewalls. The military security rule of ‘need-to-know’ is an example of this principle.”[2]

The precise definition of least privilege, not only deals with users running with minimal privileges, but also processes. In that, a process should only have the rights necessary to perform its function, and that an access right or privilege should only be held while it is required. In practice, most operating systems tend not to have the granularity of control that is required to implement least privilege precisely, but this should not deter organizations from adopting a more practical implementation.

Benefits of Least Privilege

The benefits of least privilege can’t be ignored and yet one of the most common problems in organizations is the proliferation of administrator rights on systems. Although the threat associated with this practice is clearly understood, there is an assumption that it will be too difficult to remove administrator rights from users.

Users who logon to their systems with administrator rights are at much greater risk from malware. Malicious software is more effective when its payload runs with administrator rights, as it does not need to find a security flaw to gain privileged access to the system. An administrator has full control over the system, so malware can use these privileges to install drivers, intercept logon passwords, create user accounts, install root kits, replace system files and disable security software. In fact many viruses fail to infect a computer when a user has standard rights, and there is strong evidence that running users with minimal rights greatly reduces the risk of virus infection.
Malicious software is not the only reason to adopt the principle of least privilege. A user with excessive privileges can either deliberately or accidentally cause system configuration problems, resulting in downtime and increased desktop support. Users with administrator rights are also free to install software, which leads to unlicensed software installed on corporate systems and system stability problems.

Most corporate environments strive to deploy a standard desktop, which is locked down in such a way that the user can still perform their job function. This effort becomes futile if users run with administrator rights, as they have the privileges necessary to alter the desktop configuration. If an organization is to succeed in an initiative to deploy locked down desktops then they must remove users from the administrators group.

Although least privilege is not limited to removing administrator rights from users, this is a crucial first step, and one that has the biggest security benefit to the majority of organizations. Following least privilege to a greater degree can increase system security further. For instance, data access can be restricted at the application level, and not just at the user level. Although this may not provide the obvious benefits of removing a user from the administrator group, every step that can be taken to restrict access to resources, can only decrease the threat of a security incident. Although in practice, very few operating systems are capable of restricting access at the application level, with access rights typically being assigned to the user at logon and all applications inheriting these rights.

**Barriers to Implementing Least Privilege**

Given the increase in security associated with removing administrator rights, it could be asked why so many organizations run a large proportion of their user base with administrator rights. It all comes down to practicality, in that there is an assumption that it will to be too difficult and that users will become less efficient due to the restrictions of running with minimal privileges.

If the user needs administrator rights to run even a single application then they need to be made a member of the local administrators group, and in reality it is often more than one application that requires these rights. The increase in laptop deployments has added to this problem, because users are more likely to carry out basic administration tasks, such as changing network settings, adding printers and installing authorized software.

The inability of most operating systems to provide the granular control necessary to restrict administrator rights to particular applications is the fundamental barrier to most organizations adopting a least privilege approach, as a user must be granted the rights necessary to perform all of their tasks.
Although Windows XP has the ‘Run As’ capability and Windows Vista and Windows 7 have User Account Control (UAC), both of these features still require the user to have access to an administrator account to perform administrative tasks. Although a welcome addition, this limitation tends to make these built-in features more appropriate for home users or real system administrators, as it enables them to logon as a standard user and only use the administrator account when they need to perform administrative tasks. The benefits and limitations of these operating system capabilities will be covered in more detail later in this paper.
Implementing Least Privilege

Removing Administrator Rights

Removing administrator rights for standard users is the first step to adopting the principle of least privilege. This is often referred to as the least-privileged user account (LUA) approach and can be applied to both standard users and administrators.

However, the LUA approach can be difficult and costly to implement, as applications that require administrator rights to run must either be redeveloped or their activity must be captured in order to relax the permissions on resources, allowing the application to run with standard rights. Unfortunately, this tends to be a complex undertaking, and the end result is to create a different set of security concerns due to the weakening of access control lists on resources.

Where users require access to applications that must have administrator rights, such as performing system configuration tasks, then the only solution available with most operating systems is to provide the user with access to an administrator account. The Windows ‘Run As’ and User Account Control features can be used to run individual applications with administrator rights, but the user must provide the credentials for a local administrator with both of these approaches. This obviously creates a number of concerns:

- The user has access to the local administrator account and must therefore be trusted not to abuse these privileges, a situation that is less than ideal in a corporate environment.

- Applications running with administrator rights are now running under a separate user account, which creates its own set of problems. For instance, these applications will not have access to the user’s profile or network shares, which can result in a less than seamless experience for the user.

- The user must remember two passwords, one for their standard account and a second for the administrator account. Encouraging users to be security conscious with a single account is challenging enough, so introducing a second, more privileged account, is very likely to lead to security issues at some point.

However, even with these problems, making use of these features is much better than allowing users to logon with an administrator account to perform all of their tasks, and so we will take a closer look at how each of these features function before exploring the Privilege Guard solution.
Windows XP and ‘Run As’

The Windows XP ‘Run As’ feature allows a user to run applications with a different user account inside the same session. This is commonly used to run applications with the local administrators account, and is an obvious improvement over the user logging off and then logging on as an administrator to run applications that require administrator rights. In practice, ‘Run As’ tends to be used by real system administrators, who are security conscious. They login with a standard user account to perform day to day tasks, such as reading email and browsing the web, and only access the local administrator account when performing administrative tasks.

Although ‘Run As’ could be used to implement a basic least privilege environment, the need for standard users to have access to an administrator account, presents a less than seamless experience to the user and still leaves the user free to use these rights at will.

Windows Vista and Windows 7 User Account Control (UAC)

Microsoft took a much bolder approach in Windows Vista with the introduction of User Account Control (UAC), which carried through to Windows 7. Although UAC was met with a mixed reaction, it has been a welcome addition to the security features within the operating system.

With UAC when a user logs on with administrator rights, in addition to creating an access token corresponding to this privileged account, a filtered token is also created. The filtered token has the administrator rights removed, and is only granted the privileges of a standard user. Processes launched by the user are assigned the filtered token. Applications that require administrator rights can be marked by the developer as requiring elevation, and many of the system configuration applications in Windows Vista and Windows 7 are marked as requiring elevation. When an application requires elevation the user is prompted with a consent dialog. If the user approves the elevation then the application runs with the unfiltered token, which includes their full administrator rights.

UAC also has some rules that it applies to determine whether an application is likely to require elevation, even though it may not be marked as requiring elevation. This is aimed at trying to handle applications that were developed that are not UAC aware. If all else fails the user can run any application with the unfiltered token by using the shell context menu and selecting the ‘Run as administrator’ option.

It should be noted that elevation can only occur when a process starts, so once an application is running with a filtered token it is not possible for the process to ask for elevation during execution. A prime example of this limitation, which is imposed by the operating system, is task manager. By default task manager will run with the filtered token, but if the user clicks the ‘Show processes for all users’ button then task manager will prompt for elevation. Task manager achieves this by spawning a new task manager process, which asks the user for consent to elevate. If the user agrees to the consent dialog then the original task manager will exit with the elevated task manager taking over.
Standard users are treated differently with UAC, in that they only have a single access token when they logon, as they do not have administrator rights. When an application requires elevation the user is prompted, but this time they will be asked to enter the credentials of an administrator account. Assuming they have access to an administrator account then the user can enter the credentials and the application will launch with an access token created with these privileged credentials. The end result is not dissimilar to ‘Run As’ on Windows XP, where the processes running with administrator rights are running under a different account.

Although UAC is a significant step forward it still suffers from the same issue as Windows XP and ‘Run As’. Users must either be a member of the local administrators group or have access to an administrator account in order to run applications that require administrator rights. Once a user has these rights or access to an account with these rights they may freely use these privileges.

UAC also suffers from another problem, which is why it has received mixed reactions in corporate environments. Although the consent dialogs are there for good reason, to ensure that a user does not inadvertently launch an application with elevated privileges, these dialogs can become intrusive. For standard users, who do not have access to an administrator account, they can also be confusing.

As with ‘Run As’ the most appropriate use of UAC is for real administrators. The major differences are that ‘Run As’ was optional to administrators, whereas UAC forces administrators to run with standard rights, which has to be a positive stance on security. With UAC an administrator does not require two accounts, so although the experience may be slightly intrusive, the applications run under the same user context, albeit with a different access token.

Where both Windows XP and Windows Vista fall short is in the handling of standard users in corporate environments. Giving standard users access to an administrator account is not secure and the experience is not seamless to the user. The user has to manage both accounts, with applications running under the context of two distinct user accounts, which can also lead to operational issues.
A Policy Based Solution - Privilege Guard

The corporate environment requires a solution that can elevate individual applications based on policies defined by the IT department, and not determined by the user or the operating system. A solution that allows users to logon with standard accounts, and one that does not require users to have access to an administrator account. Avecto Privilege Guard was designed with these goals in mind.

Privilege Guard allows organizations to adopt the principle of least privilege by enabling users to run with standard rights and elevate individual applications based on policy settings. The experience is totally seamless to the end user, and all applications run under the context of a single user account.

When a standard user logs on, Privilege Guard will create an elevated token for that user, which will be assigned to applications that have been deemed to require administrator rights. These applications are defined in the Privilege Guard policy, which ensures that all decisions to run applications with elevated rights are under the complete control of the IT department.

Importantly, users do not have to belong to the administrators group or have access to an administrator account. The Privilege Guard client does not require access to an administrator account either, as the elevated token is based on the user’s own token, which ensures that all applications are running under a single user account, avoiding the operational issues that can arise from dual accounts.

Application rules are extremely flexible, with Privilege Guard providing support beyond executable images. Application polices may be defined for the following types of file:

- Executable images (.exe)
- Control panel applets (.cpl)
- Management consoles (.msc)
- Windows installer packages (.msi)
- Windows scripting host scripts (.vbs, .js)
- PowerShell scripts (.ps1)
- Batch files (.bat, .cmd)
- Registry settings (.reg)
- ActiveX controls (installation)

A variety of application identification rules are also available to ensure the correct applications are elevated. Applications may be matched on any combination of file path, command line, hash (SHA-1) and trusted publisher.

Shell integration provides the ability for more advanced users to launch elevated applications “on demand” via a shell context menu option. This menu option can be restricted, in that it can be limited to a set of applications, as opposed to being available for all applications.
Optional end user messaging may be configured to warn users before running privileged applications, which includes the ability to force a user to re-authenticate and provide a reason for running the application.

Where an application doesn’t require full administrator rights, a custom access token may be defined, making it possible to only give an application the privileges it actually requires to run correctly.

An important aspect of all security products is auditing, and Privilege Guard can audit all or selective application elevations, giving details of how the application was invoked and the policy that was applied.

To help in the creation of suitable policies, Privilege Guard can be configured to passively monitor the behavior of applications and identify those applications that require elevated privileges to run. In addition to identifying the applications, Privilege Guard can also capture the detailed activity, highlighting those operations that would fail to complete under a standard user account.

In addition to controlling application privileges, Privilege Guard is capable of preventing applications from running, and may be used to implement an application white listing solution, in order to eliminate unauthorized applications.

The implementation of the Privilege Guard solution provides security, operational and compliance benefits on both desktops and servers.
Conclusion

This paper has introduced the principle of least privilege and the benefits of implementing this approach in a corporate environment. The most important step for most organizations is to remove administrator rights for standard users. Although developments in the Windows operating system have made it possible for users to run with minimal rights, the need to logon with administrator credentials to run applications that require administrator rights, introduces its own set of security challenges.

Avecto Privilege Guard was designed to meet the requirements of implementing least privilege in corporate environments on both desktops and servers. By enabling users to run with minimal rights and elevating individual applications, without giving users access to an administrator account, Privilege Guard provides a practical solution to the issues that prevent most organizations from adopting the least privilege approach.
About Avecto

Avecto is a pioneer in least privilege management, helping organizations to deploy secure and compliant desktops and servers. With its innovative Privilege Guard technology, organizations can now empower all Windows based desktop and server users with the privileges they require to perform their roles, without compromising the integrity and security of their systems.

Customers of all sizes rely on Avecto to reduce operating expenses and strengthen security across their Windows based environments. Our mission is to enable our customers to lower operating costs and improve system security by implementing least privilege. Avecto is building a worldwide channel of partners and system integrators and is headquartered in Manchester, UK. For more information, visit www.avecto.com.
References
