

A PREDICTIVE METHOD FOR MULTI-PARTY STRENGTHENING OF AUTHENTICATION CREDENTIALS WITH NON-REAL TIME SYNCHRONIZATION

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention is directed to system security, and more specifically to strengthening authentication credentials for accessing any number of applications across multiple access interfaces and across multiple remote access sites. The applications can be accessed by a set of authorized users by using multiple instances of a predictive scheme for generating and synchronizing the authentication credentials and by leveraging existing infrastructure associated with the applications.

BACKGROUND

One approach to enhancing security in enterprise systems and other computer systems is to add several layers of security to the system. For example, authentication of a user may be required not only when logging into the system but also when accessing each application in the system. A separate authentication is required for accessing each application.

However, even if authentication mechanisms are in place to restrict access to applications, such mechanisms often involve weak credentials. An example of weak credentials is a password that is easy to crack. Strong authentication is often required to satisfy regulation and/or to mitigate risk.

One approach is to implement password policies to enforce password strength and change frequency. However, users often forget strong passwords, and find frequent password changes inconvenient. Further, users often compromise security by writing down their passwords.

In another approach, password management systems can be implemented to generate and update random passwords automatically. However, if a user logs in from an access point where

the password management system has not been implemented, then the user is locked out from accessing the desired application. Another problem with such random password management systems is that the user must obtain the latest random password. A user may not be able to obtain a synchronized password if the user is offline or if the user is otherwise unable to contact the required servers that manage the passwords. Further, such password management systems are incompatible with standalone hardware password generators because such hardware password generators are unable to discover or synchronize with the latest random passwords managed by the password management system.

In yet another approach, one-time password (OTP) generators may be used to secure access to applications. OTP generators obviate the need for users to remember the password or change the password. However, if a user is not in possession of the OTP generator, the user faces a lock out. Moreover, application servers are not typically equipped to authenticate OTP generated passwords. The application server needs to redirect the authentication procedure to a separate OTP server for authentication of the OTP generated password. However, not all applications support redirection. Further, multiple applications share the same authentication directory. To enforce OTP on the directory will require all the applications using the directory to be modified to support OTP in the front end. In addition, OTP solutions do not easily support offline login. In contrast, most applications support offline login. Offline login is a requirement for most users. Most applications support offline verification of credentials when the server is not contactable. OTP requires redirection, and therefore requires network connectivity. Thus, OTP solutions are unable to run offline.

In view of the foregoing, there is a need for a method and system for strengthening authentication credentials adapted for accommodating multi-party, multi-access points across a plurality of applications while leveraging pre-existing authentication mechanisms that are already associated with the applications.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a flow chart that illustrates some aspects of certain embodiments.

FIG. 2 is a block diagram that illustrates the efficacy of instantiating the defined and agreed upon predictive function for predicting credentials in multiple components of the system.

FIG. 3 is a block diagram that illustrates non-real time updating of user password stores in the secure system.

FIG. 4 is a block diagram that illustrates a secure system that includes a predictive credential verifier for verifying passwords in real-time.

FIG. 5 is a block diagram that illustrates aspects of a predictive function, according to certain embodiments.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

According to one aspect of certain embodiments, authentication credentials for accessing applications can be strengthened by having multiple components that are capable of managing the authentication credentials needed to access a given application. Such components are herein referred to as credential mechanisms. According to one aspect of an embodiment, credential mechanisms can predict sequences of authentication credentials based on a pre-defined predictive method. The multiple credential mechanisms use the same pre-defined predictive method. In other words, an instance of the pre-defined predictive method is instantiated on each of the credential mechanisms. Changes in the predictive method are propagated to all credential mechanisms so that all credential mechanisms are synchronized.

Further, according to another aspect, some of the credentials mechanisms are further adapted for updating authentication directories that are used by the applications to authenticate credentials received from users who are attempting to access a given application. Such credential mechanisms are also referred to as predictive credential updaters. Optionally, some of the credentials mechanisms are further adapted for dynamically verifying the sequence of credentials received from users. Such credential mechanisms are also referred to as predictive credential verifiers. According to certain embodiments, a credential mechanism may be capable of being both a credential updater and a credential verifier depending on the needs of the secure system.

According to yet another aspect of certain embodiments, the pre-defined predictive method can be instantiated on pre-existing authentication mechanisms used in a given secure network or used to protect a given set of applications in a network. Thus, pre-existing secure systems can be modified to implement embodiments of the invention, if so desired. Alternatively, embodiments of the invention can be implemented at inception of a new system.

Further, according to another aspect of certain embodiments, the pre-defined predictive method may be based on any function that is difficult to invert, such as a one-way hash, for example. According to certain embodiments, such a function has pre-defined parameters that are known to all the credential mechanisms in the system.

FIG. 1 is a flow chart that illustrates some aspects of certain embodiments. FIG. 1 is described with reference to FIG. 2, FIG. 3 and FIG. 4. FIG. 2, FIG. 3 and FIG. 4 are block diagrams that illustrate how different components work in a system in which an embodiment is implemented.

At block 102 of FIG. 1, a function for predicting credentials to be used for authenticating users who wish to access applications on the system is selected. The function for predicting credentials can be based on the user's identity, the application that the user wishes to access and the agreed-upon periodic event, such as time of day. The function for predicting credentials is described in greater detail herein with reference to FIG. 5.

At block 104, once the predictive function of block 102 is defined, multiple instances of the predictive function are instantiated in several components in the system. As illustrative and non-limiting examples, the defined predictive can be instantiated on a user's PDA (PDA 214 of FIG. 2), on the user's personal computer (PC 204 and software 216 of FIG. 2), on a server-based credentials updater (credentials updater 310 of FIG. 3), on a web-based credentials generator (credentials generator 210 of FIG. 2), on a credentials verifier (credentials verifier 420 of FIG. 4).

At block 106 of FIG. 1, at least one instantiation of the predictive function (updater 216 of FIG. 2 and updater 310 of FIG. 3) is used for updating the credentials store in the system, such as an application user store or directory (store or directory 208 of FIG. 2). Credential updaters are described in greater detail herein with reference to FIG. 2 and FIG. 3.

At block 108, at least one instantiation of the predictive function is used as a credentials verifier (verifier 420 of FIG. 4) in cases where on-demand verification is desired. On-demand verification is described in greater detail herein with reference to FIG. 4.

FIG. 2 is a block diagram that illustrates the efficacy of instantiating the defined and agreed upon predictive function of block 102 of FIG. 1 in multiple components of the system. One or more of such components are optional. FIG. 2 shows a user 202, user's computer 204, a software implemented credentials generator 216, an application server 206, an application user store or directory 208, a web-based credentials generator 210, a cellular phone 212, and a hardware credentials generator such as a PDA or custom token 214. In FIG. 2, user 202 does not need to memorize the password (credentials) needed to gain access to a given application a1 on the system. User 202 can use the password generated by PDA 214 since the predictive function is instantiated on PDA 214. User 202 would login to his hardware credentials generator (PDA generator or custom token 214) by entering the user's PIN. The user's PIN would reveal the user's identity to the hardware credentials generator. User 202 may indicate to the hardware credentials generator, the desired application (a1) into which he wishes to login. The hardware credentials generator can be adapted to pick up the time of day. Thus, the hardware credentials generator has the parameters for predicting the password using the predictive function that is previously instantiated in the hardware credentials generator. User 202 then manually inputs the password generated by PDA 214 in an authentication interface for accessing application a1. The input password is then sent to application server 206. The input password received at application server 206 is authenticated against the corresponding password in user password directory 208. User password directory 208 has been updated with the latest passwords in a non-real time manner by a credentials updater, as described in greater detail herein with reference with FIG. 3.

Alternatively, user 202 may use a web browser on computer 204 to communicate with web-based credentials generator 210. For example, user 202 may tell web-based credentials generator 210 to generate the password needed for accessing application a1. In response, web-

based credentials generator 210 can generate the password much in the same manner as the hardware credentials generator 214 and send the password to user 202 via the user's browser or by SMS delivery via cellular phone 212, for example. User 202 then manually inputs the password generated by web-based credentials generator 210 in an authentication interface for accessing application a1.

Optionally, user 202 may rely on software implemented credentials generator 216 installed on computer 204 to generate the password required to access application a1. The software implemented credentials generator 216 can generate the password based on the user's identity, the identity of the application that the user wishes to access and the value of the agreed-upon periodic event. In certain embodiments, the software implemented credentials generator 216 may be adapted to auto-detect the application that the user is attempting to access. In other embodiments, the software implemented credentials generator 216 may be adapted to auto-detect the user's identity in addition to auto-detecting the application that the user is attempting to access.

Based on the prior knowledge of a given user's identity, the identity of the application that the user wishes to access and the value of the agreed-upon periodic event, the multiple credential generators can remain in sync without real-time synchronization. Thus, multiple predictive credential generators may be deployed easily without the need for real time synchronization. User 202 can thereby avail himself of login assistance provided by any of the plurality of credential generators for accessing a given application.

FIG. 3 is a block diagram that illustrates non-real time updating of user password stores in the secure system. FIG. 3 shows a user 302, user's computer 304, a software implemented credentials updater 316, an application server 306, an application user password store or directory 308, a server-based credentials updater 310, and a hardware credentials generator such as a PDA or custom token 314. A predictive credentials updater, such as software implemented credentials updater 316 and server-based credentials updater 310, is used for updating the user

password store in non-real time. By updating the user password store with the latest passwords in non-real time, the user password store is able to authenticate credentials that are input by authorized users who wish to access applications maintained by application server 306.

A predictive credentials updater is a credentials generator with the additional function of updating credential stores associated with a given application. To explain, the predictive credentials updater has a list of authorized users and a list of the applications that each user is authorized to access. The predictive credentials updater then determines ahead of time all the passwords needed by each user to access each of the applications on the list corresponding to all values of the agreed-upon periodic event (the hour of the day, for example). The predictive credentials updater then updates the credentials store associated with each given application by writing into the credentials store all the passwords that the predictive credentials updater had predicted ahead of time. Thus, the credentials store associated with a given application will have non-real time updated knowledge of all the passwords needed for authenticating input passwords sent by users who are attempting to login into applications. In other words, the credential store will have knowledge of the passwords needed for authentication well before the user inputs his passwords for logging into a desired application.

Predictive credentials updaters can use existing interfaces provided by the applications. Thus, minimal infrastructure changes are needed. Users continue to use existing login interfaces for each application.

The non-real time synchronization aspect of predictive credential generators and updaters is amenable to scalability. Multiple predictive credentials updaters can be deployed in the system because predictive credential updaters (and generators) are idempotent in that credentials stored in the credential stores can be overwritten. Overwriting of credentials is not a concern because the predictive credential updaters (and generators) in the system are instantiated with the same predictive function and so will generate identical sets of passwords corresponding to the set of authorized users, applications and agreed-upon periodic event.

According to certain embodiments, a predictive credential updater may be of the type that effects credential update through a server-side credential update interface. An illustrative and non-limiting example is that a predictive credential updater on the server side may use the lightweight directory access protocol (LDAP) password interface to effect a password update.

According to some embodiments, a predictive credentials updater may be of the type that effects credential update through a client-side credential update interface. For example, a predictive credential updater on the client-side may be adapted to automate a click-through sequence that is required for a client-side password change. To illustrate, a client-side predictive credential updater may post a password change using an html form for web-based applications. As another illustration, a client-side predictive credential updater may generate desktop events that, in turn, effect a manual click-through of a desktop program to effect a password change.

In some other embodiments, the application that is to be protected by a password can be modified to provide an interface that a predictive credential updater may call to effect a password (credential) update.

Not all applications require a predictive credentials updater. Application servers that support redirection may use a predictive credentials verifier for verifying predictive passwords on demand.

FIG. 4 is a block diagram that illustrates a secure system that includes a predictive credential verifier for verifying passwords in real-time. FIG. 4 shows a user 402, user's computer 404, an application server 406, an application user password store or directory 408, and a predictive credentials verifier 420.

The predictive credential verifier is an optional component of the system. The predictive credential verifier obviates the need for predictive credential updaters because of the verifier's ability to authenticate credentials on demand. Predictive credential verifiers are best suited for applications that support redirection of authentication procedures to a separate authenticating system such as the predictive credentials verifier. Predictive credential verifiers are also suitable

for networks that can ill afford the extra load generated by predictive credentials updaters. When logging in, a user selects her desired application, and enters her username, and password. The predictive credentials verifier, like the predictive credentials generator and updater, either has knowledge of the current event or is capable of obtaining knowledge of the current event. The verifier can then regenerate the user's password based on the username, selected application and the current event. The verifier authenticates the login password inputted by the user by comparing the login password with the regenerated password.

FIG. 5 is a block diagram that illustrates aspects of a predictive function, according to certain embodiments. The tasks illustrated in FIG. 5 are not restricted to any particular order. At block 504, a one-way function, "F", that is difficult to invert is selected. F has the arguments "a" "u" and "e". A non-limiting example of F is a one-way hash. At block 502, a seed "a" that is unique to each application for which credentials are to be generated is selected. At block 506, a seed "u" that is unique to each user for whom credentials are to be generated is selected. At block 508, an agreed-upon deterministic and periodic event "e" is selected. Non-limiting examples of "e" are the minute of day, the hour of day, the day of week, the day of month or some agreed upon data (with periodicity) present in a particular file that is accessible by the deployed credential generators, updaters and verifiers. Another non-limiting example of "e" may be a complex business rule such as "midnight on the last day of each calendar month."

In certain embodiments, $F(a,u,e)$ may employ a common "a" seed across all applications but "u" remains unique to each user. In certain other embodiments, $F(a,u,e)$ may employ a common "u" across all applications but "a" remains unique to each application. Such a credential may be further strengthened by requiring an additional PIN unique to each user.

Generators, updaters and verifiers may also automatically generate credentials corresponding to $F(a,u,e-1)$ and $F(a,u,e+1)$ to cover boundary conditions. To explain, assume that a user "u1", attempts to access application "a1" at time "e". Further assume that at the time of user u's attempt, a credentials updater has only updated the credentials store with credential

$F(a,u,e-1)$. The user's credential generator will automatically generate credential $F(a,u,e-1)$ in order to match the credential in the credentials store.

In the foregoing specification, embodiments of the invention have been described with reference to numerous specific details that may vary from implementation to implementation. It will be evident that various modifications and changes may be made thereto without departing from the broader spirit and scope of the invention. The specification and drawings are, accordingly, to be regarded in an illustrative rather than a restrictive sense.

We Claim:

1. A method for providing a set of authorized users secure access to a plurality of applications, the method characterized by using multiple instances of a pre-selected predictive scheme for generating and synchronizing authentication credentials in non-real time, wherein said each user is afforded use of one or more of said multiple instances for retrieving said authentication credentials needed for logging into said plurality of applications.
2. The method of Claim 1, further comprising adapting an existing credentials verifier for authenticating said generated authentication credentials for accessing said each application when redirection to said credentials verifier is desirable, wherein said credentials verifier includes an instance of said predictive scheme.
3. The method of Claim 1, further includes leveraging existing authentication mechanisms, if any, that are associated with said plurality of applications.
4. The method of Claim 1, wherein synchronizing in non-real time further comprises using said one or more of said multiple instances as predictive credentials updaters for updating credential stores associated with said each application, wherein said generated authentication credentials is authenticated against said credential stores.
5. The method of Claim 4, wherein updating said credential stores includes leveraging existing updating mechanisms, if any, that are associated with said plurality of applications.
6. The method of Claim 1, further includes leveraging existing support for offline login, if any, that are associated with said plurality of applications.

7. The method of Claim 1, wherein said plurality of applications are accessible through a plurality of different access interfaces using said generated authentication credentials corresponding to each application being accessed.

8. The method of Claim 1, wherein said plurality of applications are accessible from a plurality of different remote sites and computers.

9. The method of Claim 1, wherein one or more of said multiple instances is implemented as a combination of hardware and software.

10. The method of Claim 1, wherein one or more of said multiple instances is implemented as hardware.

11. The method of Claim 1, wherein one or more of said multiple instances is implemented as software.

12. The method of Claim 1, wherein each of said multiple instances is embodied in any device from a set of devices comprising:

a PDA;

a phone;

a web server;

a server;

a personal computer; and

a handheld device.

13. The method of Claim 1, wherein said pre-selected predictive scheme includes using a difficult to invert one-way function with arguments that include a first seed that is unique to each application of said plurality of applications.

14. The method of Claim 1, wherein said pre-selected predictive scheme includes using a difficult to invert one-way function with arguments that include a second seed that is unique to each user authorized to access said plurality of applications.
15. The method of Claim 1, wherein said pre-selected predictive scheme includes using a difficult to invert one-way function with arguments that include an agreed upon deterministic event with periodicity.
16. The method of Claim 13, further includes applying a one-way hash to said one-way function.
17. A method for increasing security for accessing a plurality of applications, the method comprising the computer-implemented acts of:
using multiple instances of a predictive credentials generator adapted for generating credentials associated with each application of said plurality of applications and each user attempting to access said application using a pre-selected predictive scheme, wherein said each user uses any of said multiple instances to obtain said generated credentials; and
when redirection to a credentials verifier is undesirable, using one or more of said predictive credentials generator for updating credential stores associated with said each application, wherein said generated credentials is authenticated against said credential stores.
18. An authentication system, the authentication system comprising a plurality of credentials mechanisms adapted for providing authentication information to a user attempting to access one or more applications protected by said authentication system, wherein said credentials mechanisms employ a predictive scheme for predicting said authentication information and are further adaptable for updating, in non-real time, a credentials

directory used for verifying said authentication information associated with each application of said one or more applications and authorized users of said each application, and said credentials mechanisms being further adaptable for verifying on-demand said authentication information received from said user when verification on-demand is desired.

19. The authentication system of Claim 18, wherein said means for creating credentials includes a pre-selected predictive scheme using a difficult to invert one-way function with arguments that comprises a first seed that is unique to each application of said plurality of applications.
20. The authentication system of Claim 18, wherein said means for creating credentials includes a pre-selected predictive scheme using a difficult to invert one-way function with arguments that comprises a second seed that is unique to each user authorized to access said plurality of applications.
21. The authentication system of Claim 18, wherein said means for creating credentials includes a pre-selected predictive scheme using a difficult to invert one-way function with arguments that comprises an agreed upon deterministic event with periodicity.
22. The authentication system of Claim 18, further comprising adapting an existing credentials verifier for authenticating said authentication information for accessing said each application when redirection to said credentials verifier is desirable, wherein said credentials verifier includes an instance of said predictive scheme.
23. The authentication system of Claim 18, further includes leveraging existing authentication mechanisms, if any, that are associated with said plurality of applications.

24. The authentication system of Claim 18, further includes leveraging existing support for offline login, if any, that are associated with said plurality of applications.
25. The authentication system of Claim 18, wherein said plurality of applications are accessible through a plurality of different access interfaces using said authentication information corresponding to each application being accessed.
26. The authentication system of Claim 18, wherein said plurality of applications are accessible from a plurality of different remote sites and computers.
27. An authentication system, the authentication system comprising:
means for creating credentials needed for accessing one or more applications;
means for updating credential information in a credentials store, if non-real time updating is desirable, wherein said credential store is used for authenticating credential input from a user attempting to access said one or more applications;
means for communicating said credential information to said user; and
means for verifying on-demand said credential input from said user when on-demand verification is desired.
28. The authentication system of Claim 27, further includes adapting existing login interfaces for accessing said applications.
29. The authentication system of Claim 27, wherein said means for creating credentials includes a pre-selected predictive scheme using a difficult to invert one-way function with arguments that comprises a first seed that is unique to each application of said plurality of applications.
30. The authentication system of Claim 27, wherein said means for creating credentials includes a pre-selected predictive scheme using a difficult to invert one-way function

with arguments that comprises a second seed that is unique to each user authorized to access said plurality of applications.

31. The authentication system of Claim 27, wherein said means for creating credentials includes a pre-selected predictive scheme using a difficult to invert one-way function with arguments that comprises an agreed upon deterministic event with periodicity.

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