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OPINION

Moskowitz: On Choosing Usernames

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opinion

On Choosing Usernames

Every site faces the problem of how usernames (or “login names”) are created or selected, by whom, and how conflicts are resolved. Every solution has its proponents, all with seemingly sound arguments – arguments that I think miss the real point. Based on over a dozen years as a user and another dozen as a system administrator (or manager of system administrators), I believe I finally understand the real problem and the best solution.

First, though, let me address two simple technical issues: conflicts and length. Schemes based solely on the user’s name(s) will almost certainly result in conflicts. There are any number of ways to resolve such conflicts, but the point is that for almost every username scheme, there will be conflicts. With regard to length, there are still plenty of operating systems that limit usernames to eight characters or fewer. For a reasonably large segment of the population, this results in awkward truncations such as “amoskowi” or “cdagdigi” (for my co-worker with the last name “Dagdigan”).

So back to the questions at hand: How should usernames be chosen, and by whom?

I think the best way is to let the users choose their own usernames; in the case of a conflict, let the users resolve it however they wish. Limitations, if any, should be based on lengths and character sets acceptable to the systems on which the username will be used. Businesses may choose to prohibit obscene usernames, but there’s no technical reason why this must be done.

Why?

First and foremost, usernames are perceived by users as names. One can argue that they’re not actually names, but if the user perceives them as names, then they are. In general, if a person says, “Hi, my name is Joe,” it’s considered rude to say, “Well, I’m going to insist on calling you Joseph.” Imagine, then, when a user says “I prefer ‘joef’ as my username” and hears, “We’re going to give you ‘jsfritze’ instead.”

Second, it’s the users who have to type their usernames every day, maybe several times a day. Not the system administrator, not the IT director – the users. An awkward username (like “amoskowi”) can only detract from the user’s overall experience. Maybe not by much, but if the user mistypes the name a few times, they’re going to get frustrated.

Over the years, I’ve heard plenty of arguments against letting users chose their own usernames; most of the arguments boil down to one of these two: “It’s not convenient for me [the system administrator]” or “That will cause problems with email.”

On the first point, system administrators need to remember that their job is to help other people (users) get their jobs done (with due consideration to overall company benefit). If we can do that in a way that also makes our jobs easier, great — but user convenience trumps sysadmin convenience. On the technical side, nothing should be “encoded” in the usernames; that is, any additional information about the user should be stored somewhere else, in some other form. This could be as simple as how the UID is assigned or as complex as Jon Finke’s use of Oracle databases.

The second argument I hear, that of email problems, is specious: Usernames are not email addresses! In most companies there may be an email address that happens to match a username, but there doesn’t have to be. As long as the system has some way to

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map email addresses to usernames (and this can happen fairly late in the delivery process), usernames never have to be known by anyone except the receiving user. In fact, there's probably even some (small?) security benefit to not propagating usernames beyond the institution's security perimeter.

Inside the company there should be some sort of "shared address book," whether an LDAP system or something like Microsoft Exchange, that users can consult for email addresses. Even this system doesn't need to return a username, just a valid email address. Outside the company there might be several email addresses for each person: `f_lastname`, `firstname_lastname`, `f_oldlastname` and `f_newlastname`, etc. Conflicts (Joe or John Smith) can be resolved in any number of ways, a common one being that messages to `j_smith` get a reply to the effect of "ambiguous email address; please use `joe_smith` or `john_smith`."

I will be surprised if what I'm proposing doesn't leave many of you spitting and sputtering and saying things like, "Well, *this* argument will change his mind." Before you send me email, please take a moment to consider whether your "killer reason" isn't really just a variation of "sysadmin convenience." Many of us are set in our ways and can't see that what makes our job easier is often not what's best for our customers. I certainly was, and it took working in a very special research environment with some very bright, articulate people to see that not only could I make my users happy, I could still do my job without any real loss of convenience. In fact, I also got a pat on the back from my boss after she got a note from a user saying, "Thanks for hiring Adam; he fixed my problem (changing my username) for me with no hassle at all, and I've been trying to get that done for over a year now." Not bad for having been on the job barely a month.

As a friend of mine says, "Change is required; growth is optional."