



WHERE IS IDENTITY MANAGEMENT HEADING?

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ive years ago, Mozilla launched its new identity management system, Persona

(originally called BrowserID). At the time, a sense of optimism was in the air. Everyone thought that the new technology would ease the strain of remembering numerous passwords to gain access to various websites. The alternative — outsourcing unified identity management to social media giants including Twitter, Facebook and Google — raised data privacy and reliability concerns. So everyone hoped that Persona would emerge as a strong unified authentication system and a credible alternative.

Fast forward to 2016. Though Persona has progressed well on the technology front, the aforementioned concerns remain, and Persona has failed to gain popularity. Mozilla has now announced that it will be shutting down Persona by the end of this November “due to low, declining usage.”

Despite its imminent closure, Persona managed to advance the field of identity management. It introduced verified email protocol, which enables users to use one email address to log in to any website that supports the protocol — much like logging in to websites with a Facebook account, for example. That means end users do not have to create site-specific passwords. Instead, they can log in to multiple websites using a single email

address. End users enjoy the twin benefits of not having to remember multiple passwords and not passing along information about their browsing pattern to social media giants.

Persona’s pending shutdown reiterates a few important facts and indicates the direction in which the identity management market is moving:

- Password-based authentication is still the dominant mode, and passwords are here to stay. Life with fewer passwords is still a distant dream.
- Unified authentication systems are clearly needed, but they cannot stand-alone. In most cases, end users cannot avoid creating site-specific passwords. At best, unified authentication systems could co-exist with traditional, site-specific, password-based authentication.
- Data privacy concerns loom large and stand in the way of large-scale adoption of identity management through social media.

Identity management analysts and industry luminaries have long been predicting the disappearance of passwords. Unified authentication technologies including Persona and password alternatives such as biometric authentication, iris authentication, facial authentication and even authentication through watches, jewelry and electronic tattoos are all steps in this direction.

Interestingly, none of the alternative approaches have been viable so far, for various reasons. Passwords are easy to create and are absolutely free. The alternatives, on the other hand, are

typically expensive, difficult to integrate with existing environments, difficult to use and require additional hardware components.

So, where is identity management heading?

The future of identity management will most likely be a combination of password management and unified authentication. However, it seems that password-based authentication will continue to be the most prominent mode, and users will have to create and manage passwords. Wherever possible, unified authentication systems will be leveraged.

Federated identity management solutions, which help subscribers use the same identity to access multiple Web applications, will complement password management. Privileged account management solutions that support federated identity management, along with traditional password management, will prove to be highly beneficial.

Persona will soon be gone. The news has rekindled debates on the death of passwords, the emergence of alternatives, and the future direction of identity and access management. Plans to launch projects similar to Persona are also being discussed in various forums. But the future direction of identity management appears certain: a sound blend of password management and unified authentication. The two will complement each other — one cannot outweigh the other or stand-alone. ■