

WHITE PAPER

Role Engineering and Role-Based Access Control | February 2011

role engineering: the cornerstone of role-based access control

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executive summary

Challenge

Organizations often implement identity and access management (IAM) systems without due consideration of roles. To minimize deployment effort or to avoid project scope creep, role definition is often not considered part of the initial project. Organizations frequently do not invest enough time to define roles in sufficient detail; rather, they tend to define high-level roles that do not reflect actual organizational job functions. Permissions mapped to high-level roles are usually generic in nature. The result of this random process is that additional efforts are required to manage job- and function-specific permissions manually, outside the IAM system. This often results in IAM systems not delivering the expected business value, for example, adherence to compliance and reduced entitlement management costs.

Opportunity

Role-Based Access Control (RBAC) is becoming the norm for managing entitlements within commercial systems and applications. RBAC can play a significant role in establishing a model for enforcing security within organizations. It simplifies entitlement management by using roles (as opposed to users) as authorization subjects. Having a holistic approach to role definition can help alleviate certification-related regulatory compliance challenges, and should be considered an integral part of any IAM initiative.

Benefits

While RBAC should not be considered a panacea for all ills related to access control, it has proven to be cost effective¹ for organizations in reducing entitlement management costs and complexity. It also reduces the risks of users having inappropriate access privileges and aggregating entitlements as they change job functions within the organization. As users change their job function, they are assigned new roles and old roles are removed from their profile. This results in user entitlements matching their job functions.

Section 1:

Evolution of entitlement management

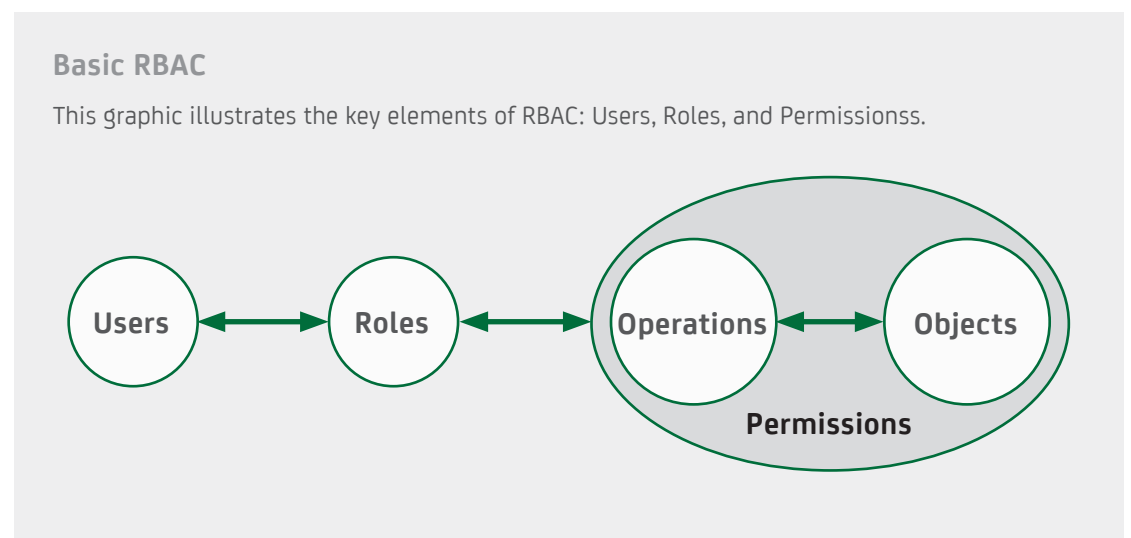
Traditionally, legacy systems and applications managed user permissions by means of groups. Under this model, permissions are assigned to groups—users inherit permissions by being a member of a group. The ability to assign permissions to a group and determine who can inherit the permission is considered discretionary, as these determinations are made by the application and system owners. However, authority to assign members to a group is deemed non-discretionary and usually is performed by the security organization. This construct has evolved in recent times with the adaptation of RBAC in IAM solutions. Assignment of permissions to a role and determining membership of roles is supposed to be non-discretionary. Users inherit a set of entitlements as their birth right, as they are enrolled into the organization as part of the onboarding process.

Conventionally, managing entitlements has been considered technical, as they are related to applications and are managed in silos without much business input. With the emergence of various regulatory requirements such as the US Sarbanes-Oxley Act, US Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act (GLBA) and EU Privacy Protection Directive 2002/58/EC, it is increasingly important to streamline the entitlement management process with business oversight, as it becomes a security governance and compliance issue.

Section 2: RBAC 101

The fundamental concept of RBAC is that roles aggregate privileges. Users are assigned roles and inherit predefined permissions by being members of roles. They are given entitlements — no more than what is required to perform their job function — based on the least privilege access principle. The following diagram in Figure A depicts the key building blocks of the core RBAC reference model per the American National Standard for Information (ANSI)/International Committee for Information Technology Standards (INCITS) 359-2004 Standard.

Figure A



The key elements of RBAC are:

Users: By definition, users are individuals who perform a job function within an organization. Users have traditionally been designed to perform individual functions within an organization.

Roles: In a business context, roles represent job functions and related responsibilities. Responsibilities represent users' implicit or explicit authority to execute their job function. In a technology context, roles represent a collection of entitlements that a person inherits from an application perspective to perform a job function.

Permissions: In a technology context, a permission is the provision of authority to someone to perform an operation against an RBAC-controlled object within an application or system.

Section 3:

Role engineering

As organizations start deploying IAM solutions, it is becoming increasingly important to devise a common set of roles that can be reused, over and over again, as opposed to defining roles every time an IAM component is deployed. One of the challenges often faced is that, if defined incorrectly, roles are ineffective and fail to meet the organization's requirements.

Roles can be defined at an abstract level from a business perspective, or context-specific to an application or system from a technology perspective. At an abstract level, roles can be a simple label that defines the job function with a set of responsibilities and authority that goes with it. For example, a bank teller's job function can be a role defined as teller with the responsibility to perform financial transactions with certain limits (authority). At an abstract level, there is no enforcement capability. The role teller in an application has specific entitlements that enable a user to execute transactions with certain limits. How this is configured within the application and how it is enforced is specific to the individual application's capability.

Whether an organization looks at defining roles either abstract or specific to a context, the requirements to define roles are important and role definition is a critical step in deploying any RBAC system.

Role engineering is the process of defining roles and related information, such as permissions, constraints, and role hierarchies, as they pertain to the user's functional use of systems, applications, and business processes. It is one of the critical steps in deploying RBAC-oriented IAM systems. Organizations often implement IAM systems based on a role-based paradigm without much consideration for roles. To minimize deployment effort or to avoid project scope creep, role definition is often not considered part of the initial project. Organizations frequently do not invest enough time to define roles in sufficient detail; rather, they tend to define high-level roles that do not reflect actual organizational job functions. Permissions mapped to high-level roles are usually generic in nature. The result of this random process is that additional efforts are required to manage job- and function-specific permissions manually, outside the IAM system. This often results in IAM systems not delivering the expected business value, for example, adherence to compliance and reduced entitlement management costs. The process of defining roles should be based on a complete analysis of how an organization functions and should include input from a wide spectrum of users, including business line managers and human resources.

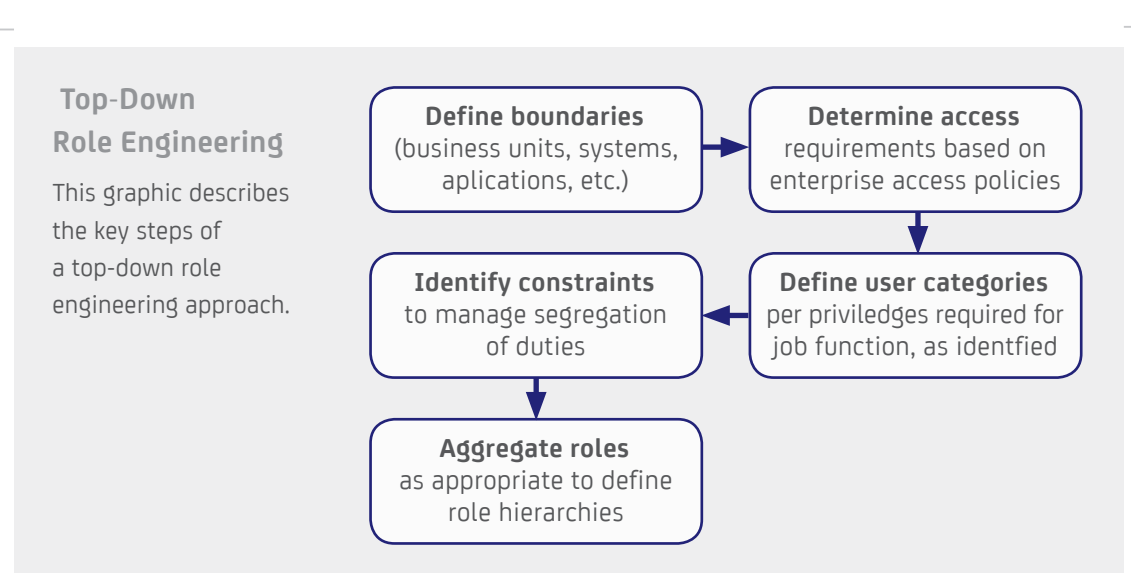
Role definition and management requires alignment between business and IT. It requires a strong commitment and cooperation among the business units, as a role engineering initiative could transcend the enterprise.

Section 4: Role engineering approaches

Top-down

This approach is primarily business-driven, and roles are defined based on the responsibilities of a given job function. For roles to be effective there should be a strong alignment between business and IT objectives. Roles are defined by reviewing organizational business and job functions and mapping the permissions for each job function. This approach provides business oversight and alignment of roles with business functions and reusability.

Figure B



Following are the key steps for a top-down role engineering approach:

- For a successful role engineering project, it is pivotal to define the scope and boundaries for the project. If the organization has a large user population, it would be ideal to conduct a pilot to validate the approach and the outcome. The boundaries could be specific business units or applications that are being considered for role definition.
- It is important to identify enterprise access policies to determine entitlements for a given job function. The objective of this exercise is to define entitlements based on the *least privilege access* principle.

- The next step is to group users in a given business unit based on privileges corresponding to their job function. This would provide some basis for determining appropriate criteria to identify and define the user population.
- One of the critical aspects of role definition is not to have mutually exclusive roles assigned to the same person. For example, a person who creates a purchase order should not be the one who approves it. These types of constraints are defined as part of segregation-of-duties policies. It is important to capture these constraints so that rules can be established to evaluate what types of roles can be assigned to a user for a given job function.
- Role hierarchies help simplify role definitions by aggregating roles. Role hierarchies usually follow the pattern of organizational hierarchies, where users in the higher organizational structure are able to perform the job functions of their direct and indirect reports. For example, a bank branch manager can perform the job function of a bank teller. Creating role hierarchies simplifies the number of roles assigned to a user.

Bottom-up

This approach is based on performing role-mining/discovery by exploring existing user permissions in current applications and systems. Once user permissions are explored, the next step is to perform role normalization and rationalization. In this approach, roles are defined to meet specific application or system access requirements.

One of the challenges of this approach is that it requires viable commercial tools to perform role mining. An alternate approach is to select a set of representative users and extract the entitlements that best describe the job function. If the user population is significant, it would be ideal to sample a certain percentage of the population to validate the accuracy of the results.

One of the outcomes of this approach is that users often accumulate entitlements based on their previous job functions performed over a period of time; it can become too daunting to extract the entitlements without the business involvement. This is a key aspect of role rationalization to be considered as part of a bottom-up approach.

Hybrid

This approach combines the previous two approaches. It leverages normalized roles derived from role mining and aligns them to job functions, with the involvement of business.

Section 5: Conclusions

As organizations embark on various RBAC-oriented IAM initiatives, it is becoming evident that defining high-level roles with basic entitlements will not deliver expected business benefits. It is imperative for a successful role definition to have management support, sufficient funding for the role engineering effort, business unit participation, and resources committed to the project. The importance of roles should not become an afterthought, but should be considered an integral part of any IAM initiative. Organizations also need to address requirements for roles from a compliance standpoint. Entitlement certification is becoming a critical aspect of various regulatory compliance initiatives. Having a holistic approach to role definition helps alleviate certification-related regulatory compliance challenges.

It is important for organizations to get the expected business benefits with careful consideration for how roles are going to be defined and managed on an ongoing basis. Defining roles is difficult under any circumstances, but the process could be overbearing without established limits. It is important to define boundaries for user population, applications and platforms, and the number of business units to be covered by the project.

Role engineering, in a top-down or bottom-up approach, is a key cornerstone in the process of defining roles that meet the organizational requirements. Once the roles are defined and inventory has been published, it has to be maintained by both the business and IT, as this helps to keep the information current and available for any future IAM initiatives.

Section 6: References

1. National Institute of Standards and Technology, “The Economic Impact of RBAC”, USA, <http://csrc.nist.gov/rbac/>
2. Kampman, Kevin, “The Business of Roles”, Methodologies and Best Practices, vol. 1, 1 February 2006, Burton Group, www.burtongroup.com
3. Ibid.

Section 7: About the Author

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