

Forget the script

A new tool finally makes managing users through Active Directory and scripts as easy as it was always supposed to be

BY KAY EW BANK

When Active Directory (AD) was introduced, it was touted as being the complete solution for managing user accounts, groups and resources. Experience has shown that that view was perhaps a little optimistic, and managing and administering AD is actually quite tricky.

The standard utility that comes with AD is the Microsoft Active Directory toolset, but it is limited and difficult to use. So the recommendation from Microsoft is that administrators write scripts for the more complex tasks. This method does indeed work, but it requires you to know how to write scripts and not everyone has the time to 'hand roll' their own solutions. What's more, if you write a custom script you can probably work out what it does the next day or the next week – but if, as is more likely, you need to edit it after a few months, or still worse to edit someone else's code, the chances you'll be able to work out what the heck is going on are slim to non-existent.

User Management Resource Administrator (UMRA) from Tools4ever does the hard work of scripting for you. Put simply, what it does is to let you point and click to put together a script. You pick the actions you want to carry out and UMRA puts the actions together and creates the script for you.

User management is quite a broad topic, of course. The basics might be the creation and management of

user accounts, groups and resources in AD, but users have accounts in many more places than the basic network. UMRA can be used to ensure user settings are consistent across all the servers and services you run on your network, and that changes or additions to the user details are populated throughout all the applications where a user account needs to be maintained. So when someone leaves the company, you can immediately close their user accounts, not only in AD but also in your SQL database, Exchange, the HR database, SharePoint and whatever other applications or services you have specified for the purpose.

The list of supported environments, services and servers is suitably impressive and ranges from Exchange to AS/400. The list includes NTFS, LDAP, ODBC, OLEDB, SAP HR, PeopleSoft, Active Directory, Novell, UNIX, Linux, SAM, Windows NT, 2000 and Server 2003, AS/400, eDirectory, Lotus Notes, and Domino among the 'basics'. Siemens and Philips phone systems are also on the list, so your automatic changes can go all the way through to your electronic phone exchange.

The product is split into three modules, each representing a different area that you can control. Forms & Delegation lets you create customised forms that can then be used for simplifying user account management. Tasks can then be delegated to less highly qualified personnel. Automation can be used to ensure that information is consistent across services, so changes to your SAP database are reflected in AD. Finally, Mass is a network administration tool that can be used to import and update the details of many user accounts in a single process.

Let them do it...

The clue to the Forms & Delegation module is in its name. You create customised forms that can then be used to delegate tasks to personnel such as human resources or helpdesk staff, secure in the knowledge that the forms will protect them from the difficulties of setting up accounts. They'll also protect files from



Figure 1: Creating a new user account with UMRA

accidental damage because the forms only permit the actions that you have specified as being allowed. The Forms module of UMRA is clear and easy to use. You drag objects such as pictures, text or tables onto the body of the form and set the properties so they appear the way you'd like them to. The items can pull in information from the network or applications – you might add a table and set its properties to be the list of users on a particular AD domain, say.

You can choose how to select the network attributes that the form will be linked to. You might choose to create a query to select information using an LDAP query that takes information from AD or a global catalogue, for example. In this case, you would be guided through the way the query ought to select users from the AD list, as well as which LDAP attributes should be selected.

The selected attributes can then be passed to a script that you put together to specify what should happen. You assemble the script in much the same way that you'd create the form. You're shown a list of possible script actions and can select ones to create a new user, for example (Figure 1), or to change a user's password. You obviously have to specify the details of your server names, AD domains, or whatever, but you can browse for these to help you get the details fairly easily.

For example, you could create a form that showed a table of user names in your sales department, with the option that when the form is displayed the person viewing the form could select a particular user from that department, then have the option to change the password for that user. This form on its own would save the average administrator hours of time; users are always forgetting their passwords.

Obviously, all this needs pretty hefty security. UMRA and the forms it creates can be locked down and made available only to specified users – you wouldn't want just anyone to be able to run a form to change the access rights of a user, for instance.

UMRA comes with a set of sample forms that you can experiment with and customise to suit your needs. Equally usefully, Tools4ever will offer whatever level of support you require, so you can have their specialists come in and create the forms and scripts for you if necessary.

Making the links

The Automation module has a remit that sounds smaller and simpler than the Forms module, but in fact it covers an area that is potentially much more

difficult. If you have to link AD (or indeed any other LDAP directory service) to other information systems, or to integrate AD into web portals, this is the section you need to use. AD on its own is bad enough; linking it to other systems is horrible. For example, if your organisation runs SAP and AD, and you want to change the information in the SAP database and have the changes mirrored, this is the module to use.

The way it works is that you first identify all the relationships between items in your AD (or other LDAP directory service) and your 'other' information service. So a user in the HR database is the same as a user in the AD service. Once the relationships are defined, you define how information will be retrieved from the information service – running a database query once a day, say. Finally, you define what happens when changes are discovered. In general, this will mean creating a UMRA script to mirror the actions between the two services. So if a user has been removed from the HR database, their AD account should be deleted, for example.

Mass action

Changing details for one or two users is more or less manageable, but there are situations where you need to change the information for a whole set of users. The classic example of this is when school students change their year. Instead of belonging to the Year 8 group, it's the new school year and they should all be moved to the Year 9 group, while the old Year 7s become the new Year 8s, and so on. Other examples might be a change to the main company telephone number, or moving a set of Exchange mailboxes to a new server.

UMRA makes this type of mass action much easier by allowing you to create a set of input data – a comma-separated file, for instance, created in a spreadsheet or database, or the users returned by a particular database query – which is used to specify a group of users to whom an action or set of actions should be applied.

UMRA is easy to use and provides you with all the tools you need to save yourself a lot of work. The team at Tools4ever offer a friendly and efficient backup service that can both get you started and take you further. The Forms & Delegation module alone would save the average administrator hours of time, and with a little extra work both the Automation and Mass modules have the capability to let you create a very sophisticated system. There's a free trial version that you can download, and you can also request an online demo. <

System requirements

OS Supports Active Directory and runs on all editions of Windows 2000, XP and Windows Server 2003. Supports creation, modification and deletion of user accounts in the Windows NT 4.0 SAM.

Minimum hardware requirements:

CPU Pentium, 133MHz

Memory 64Mb

Disk space 16Mb

Recommended hardware:

CPU Intel or AMD 500 MHz+

Memory 128Mb+

Disk space 100Mb+

UK supplier

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Price

Contact Tools4ever for details

Bottom line

Pros Easy way to automate user management.

Cons This isn't a way to avoid learning about Active Directory – you do need to know what you're doing.