

Alzheimer's Association Bids Farewell to Excel for Managing Passwords

Spurred by the need to protect data using a highly secure 'vault'

At a Glance

- Association's reach extends internationally as well via its interactive online message boards
- National office in Chicago houses IT staff that supports all local chapters
- Founded in 1980 to foster education, support, and research into a cure for Alzheimer's
- 3,000 employees at local chapters nationally
- Voted by The NonProfit Times to list of Best Nonprofits to Work for seven consecutive years
- Mariano Lopez leads IT team that supports all virtual desktop activities
- **Challenge:** To shore up security around passwords that had been "managed" using an Excel spreadsheet, as the Association initiated central support for all previously independent local chapters

As the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer's care, the Alzheimer's Association has gone to the forefront of Alzheimer's education and research funding since its inception 37 years ago. Recently the Association moved to unify efforts within its scores of formerly independent national chapters. In doing so, the IT staff at the Chicago headquarters began supporting all 3,000 Association workers, including all systems and applications support.

Realizing that security overall would need a boost as IT services were expanded, the IT team took a close look at how it was handling password management. Similar to a lot of organizations, passwordmanagement was almost a misnomer. Essentially various passwords were kept on an Excel spreadsheet. And while the spreadsheet was usually stored in a safe place, the fact is that passwords were often shared among users via email, which is not always secure.

Further, individual password "hygiene" among users mirrored that at many if not most other organizations. The same or nearly the same passwords were often used for multiple sites and data access points, mainly because remembering multiple passwords is just cumbersome if not impossible. In fact, according to a landmark 2016 study from the Ponemon Institute, 60% of employees use the same password for everything. Small wonder that another study from Verizon found that nearly two-thirds (63%) of confirmed data breaches involve weak, default, or stolen passwords.

Filling the Need for Secure Password Management

It became increasingly aware of better ways to store and manage passwords, and using an Excel spreadsheet wasn't one of them. Furthermore, the IT department wanted a solution that would leverage the increasing use of mobile solutions by Association employees. So the Alzheimer's Association took action.

Fortunately, Mariano Lopez, systems administrator in the IT team, had been using a personal password manager for his own use, one offered free from Keeper Security. He found that the solution made it very easy to manage all of his many passwords, while offering the protection of these passwords in its highly secure digital vault. So opting for the business version of Keeper Security Password Manager and Secure Digital Vault was an easy decision.

Lopez said that, as much as anything, he wanted a password management system that is easy to deploy, easy to use, and bulletproof when it comes to password security. The initial deployment of the solution to a half-dozen IT workers was just that—smooth and easy.

Once the Keeper solution had been in use for a while, Lopez started exploring other capabilities and was pleased to find a free plug-in available on the Keeper site that made it easy to create groups or “teams” that routinely share passwords. Only instead of doing so using unsecure emails, this vital task is now accomplished securely.

A Feature-Rich Solution

In addition, Lopez appreciates the user-friendly dashboard through which he or another administrator can check to see just how strong or weak the passwords in use are. Only the individuals who created them know the actual passwords. This feature can allow for ongoing education about the value of strong passwords, and the importance of changing them frequently.

Meanwhile, the problem of having to remember or record dozens of different, complex passwords is left to the Keeper solution. Plus, the solution also generates these complex, strong passwords, which are safely stored in Keeper’s Secure Digital Vault.

Looking ahead, Lopez says that other departments in the Association may well benefit from an expansion of the Keeper solution, such as human resources or legal. In addition to the many advantages of the solution, such departments would benefit from an administrator knowing that passwords in use are very strong, but not having visibility into what the passwords are, assuring password compliance in audits.

“Keeper is just a great product and I’ve been very happy with it,” Lopez says. “There is no trouble at all getting others to use it.”

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