

The Sysadmin's Daily Grind: PwManager

Forget-me-not

Now, was it *D\$65sZ%a* or possibly *O?ezTu%L?* The average admin will tend to forget most of her passwords during a 14 day holiday. If you are not into mind mapping, and want to avoid writing your passwords down, you need a software safe.

BY CHARLY KÜHNAST

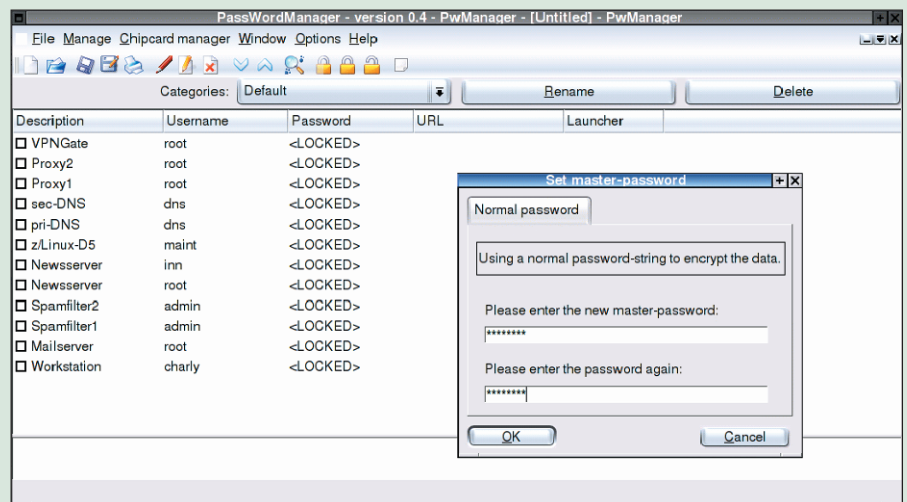


Figure 1: The PwManager user is prompted to enter the master password before storing the password list.

Good passwords should not be too short. They should not be dictionary words, and they should use a combination of small and capital letters, numbers, and non-standard characters. If you are a genius, or only log on to a single machine – and possibly your Ebay account –, feel free to skip this page and carry on reading the rest of the magazine.

For the others – especially admins who manage a whole farm of computers, just like I do – there is always the temptation to write down your passwords on a scrap of paper which you put in your purse or your pocket. And that almost puts you on a par with the little old lady I met at my local bank the other day. She was standing in front of the cash dispenser, and looked puzzled.

Little old lady: “Oh dear, now how do I get at that secret number?”

Charly: “Have you forgotten your code?”

Little old lady: “No, I wrote it on my card, but the card’s in the machine now!”

Safe GUI

This conversation brought home to me that I needed a password safe myself – not a steel safe, mind you, but a software solution. Some kind of file that stored all my passwords and used a master password to protect them. My research showed that there were many “safe solutions” of this type. But what I liked about PwManager [1] was the fact that it only needed the Libxml2, Libbzip2 and Zlib libraries, no matter whether I opted for the tarball, source or binary RPM. Good, sensible libraries. And it was easy to compile and install the program.

PwManager provides a neat X11 GUI interface for password entry, and organizes your passwords in categories. There are also a few functions for sorting and quickly locating passwords. When you attempt to store your password list, PwManager prompts you for a master password (see Figure 1) and uses Blowfish to encrypt the file before storing it.

If I need to retrieve a password from the safe, I simply use PwManager to load my password file. The program prompts me for the master password, and then lets me search the list for the magic

word. Removing that piece of paper from my purse, and feeding it to the document shredder, certainly made me feel good.

À la Card

With a card reader and Libchipcard installed, you can assign the master password function to a chip card. Enable the `--enable-keycard` configure option when compiling PwManager.

However, using a *single* file to provide access to *multiple* accounts constitutes a single point of failure. That is real trouble if someone hacks my PwManager machine, or if I forget the master password, lose the chip card, or destroy the password file. I use a tape backup to protect against the latter case. ■

INFO

[1] PwManager: <http://passwordmanager.sourceforge.net>

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