SECURITY -

Wisekey, HP and Microsoft bring electronic identity to life

From identity cards to e-government services, this flexible solution responds to governmental needs in respect of security.

Sylvie Gardel (Agefi.com)

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Security, terrorism, biometry. To say the least these concerns have been at the heart of intense activity in the last few days. At the beginning of the week Brussels welcomed US Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff on his first visit since his election in January, who urged Europeans to harmonise security controls with American methods for the purpose of improving the effectiveness of the fight against terrorism. The international press was invited to a conference at Hewlett Packard's (HP) innovation centre in Geneva on Friday to announce the setting up of a new national identification system (NIS), jointly developed in particular by HP, Microsoft and start-up company Wisekey from Geneva.

Even if these two events were not really linked, management of identity constitutes one of the most important challenges for our governments. According to a study by US company Morgan Keegan, the market is worth around 4.8 billion dollars worldwide and this figure should come to around 10.7 billion by 2007. In Europe more than 120 billion euros have already been invested in the public sector for this purpose (government, police, Lisbon agenda, etc.), while the budget dedicated to security has doubled to 70 billion, and 8 billion euros have been released for protection of borders, as mentioned on Friday by Pascal Detemmerman, public sector vice-president at HP. «The needs of individuals in the national and international sphere today in respect of secured identification are such that developing optimal solutions, and their success, can only be guaranteed via an alliance of various partners», added Gilles Polin, head of e-government at Microsoft in the EMEA region.

Responding to security policy

in each country

The NIS solution of HP was developed on Microsoft's .net platform, and therefore calls upon the unique know-how of Wisekey in respect of digital authentication. This young company from Geneva is effectively recognised worldwide for its ability to deploy a global security infrastructure rooted in national ownership. «These roots are indispensable in deploying eID numerical identification projects to the extent that, by means of neutrality, they assure that governments have total control over their national identification process, and guarantee their sovereignty»,

concluded Juan Avellan, vice-president and corporate development & policy chief at Wisekey.

In terms of the general public, the combination of all these technologies could soon be realised in the form of a smart card similar to a bankcard to replace the current identity documents (identity cards, passports, driving licenses, etc.). Such eID is fitted with a digitally certified microchip on which higher levels of encryption may be modulated depending on end usage (financial transactions, etc.). The partners in the NIS project claim some 100 million Europeans will use such a card between now and the end of the decade, while 33 countries have shown an interest in this system in the EMEA region (Europe, Middle East and Africa) and 3 million Belgians will benefit from it between now and the end of the year. «We anticipate this massive deployment will involve several applications to integrate eID's and will provide a new dimension to secured Internet transactions», states Juan Avellan.

More than an identification document - a service

As in the case of classical identity cards, the eID will contain certain visible information (photo, surname and first name, sex, nationality, date and place of birth, signature, national identity number, card validity period), as well as hidden biometric data, which will all be stored on the chip, as this card is intended to be more than a guarantee of identity (visually or electronically). «We are no longer talking about a secured document, more about a document that provides access to the Internet and a large number of applications, explains Juan Avellan. This is a service aimed at reducing the distance between citizens and their government.» In effect eID allows for the creation of a duly certified signature for information technology applications, thereby offering users a trustworthy method of identifying themselves online, with numerous options as a result. Holders of such eID's will be able to attach their electronic signature to documents, access their local authority registers, vote over the Internet (Wisekey Geneva's e-voting project), acquire documents online from their local council (birth certificate, etc.), exchange information with their local council (tax declarations) or with private companies, implement distance transactions (insurance, banking, online shopping, etc.) and keep in touch with their local council, regional or federal services over the Internet, etc. Undeniably adopting such solutions might provide Europe with a not inconsiderable head start, in respect of identity management, over the United States, where the driving license still serves as an identity document in the absence of any national identity card…

Perspective: Interview with Juan Avellan, VP Corporate Development & Policy Chief, WISeKey.

«We expect to implement 2 to 3 electronic

identity projects in 2 to 3 years»

reflective comments compiled by Sylvie Gardel

How many national identity contracts has Wisekey signed so far?

Juan Avellan: Before replying to your question, I'd like to recall the fact that the major activity of our company is actually related to electronic identity management systems and in this sense all our projects are for identity systems. It is equally important to bear in mind that this industry is in the process of transition and as a result the integration process for electronic identity systems is only just beginning. Taking all project partners into consideration, we are currently in negotiation on more than four solutions of this type. In my capacity as a representative of Wisekey, I can tell you that we are already in contact with the government of Angola on the subject of national identity card projects and are considering Portugal.

You mention Angola. Not a country that one would immediately associate with a concern for this type of problem…

Strange as it might seem, Angola, South Africa and Senegal are three especially active and demanding nations in this field. The government of Angola in particular exhibits a fully integral vision for electronic signature. This country aspires to impose itself as a leader in Africa by setting up such an identification system.

What is going on in Switzerland, where the pilot stage for the numerical passport will not begin before September 2006?

In Switzerland things always take a little longer than elsewhere (smiles). Adopting this type of system depends solely on the country's political authorities, and as yet they have not yet fully decided. For our part, we are ready both technically and legally, and have some ideas, which could take shape immediately on the communal, cantonal or federal level. This has been proved on the international stage so why not Switzerland?

The United States is unable to reach agreement on an identity card system. By virtue of its agreements with two American giants, would Wisekey have the option of participating in such a project from the time a decision is taken?

Our strength is obviously working with everyone, so who knows?

What is the estimated fallout from this new partnership?

Globally we project two to three electronic identity projects (cards or other support) will be realised in the next two to three years. However, based on the partnership with Microsoft and HP, this number may increase significantly. This should translate into revenues from some 200 million electronic identities for our group between now and the end of the decade. Nevertheless making assessments is difficult to the extent that each country is unique, and thus each solution adapts to its own specific situation. As a result royalties vary from one contract to another.

You revealed that this new solution presented today was actually discussed four years ago. What system are you working on now to be unveiled in four years time?

The big issue we are concerned with right now is how to avoid loss or theft of identity. By way of response, we are constantly looking for techniques and ideas

being developed at companies, research institutions, etc. all over the world. For this purpose we have a team of developers available, who sniff out, test and recommend new solutions every day, even if sometimes they are rather eccentric. This is how we perfect the best technologies.

In four years time I'd like to see an appliance on this table - mobile telephone, personal digital assistant (PDA) or whatever - which I can plug a keyboard into, and it offers perfectly secured access to the Internet, containing all my personal data and all biometric data relevant to my identity such that it even replaces my passport, and over which I can exercise total control. All that would be left to introduce into this system would be the necessary flaws for each individual to have room for manoeuvre in respect of his or her individual freedom.

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