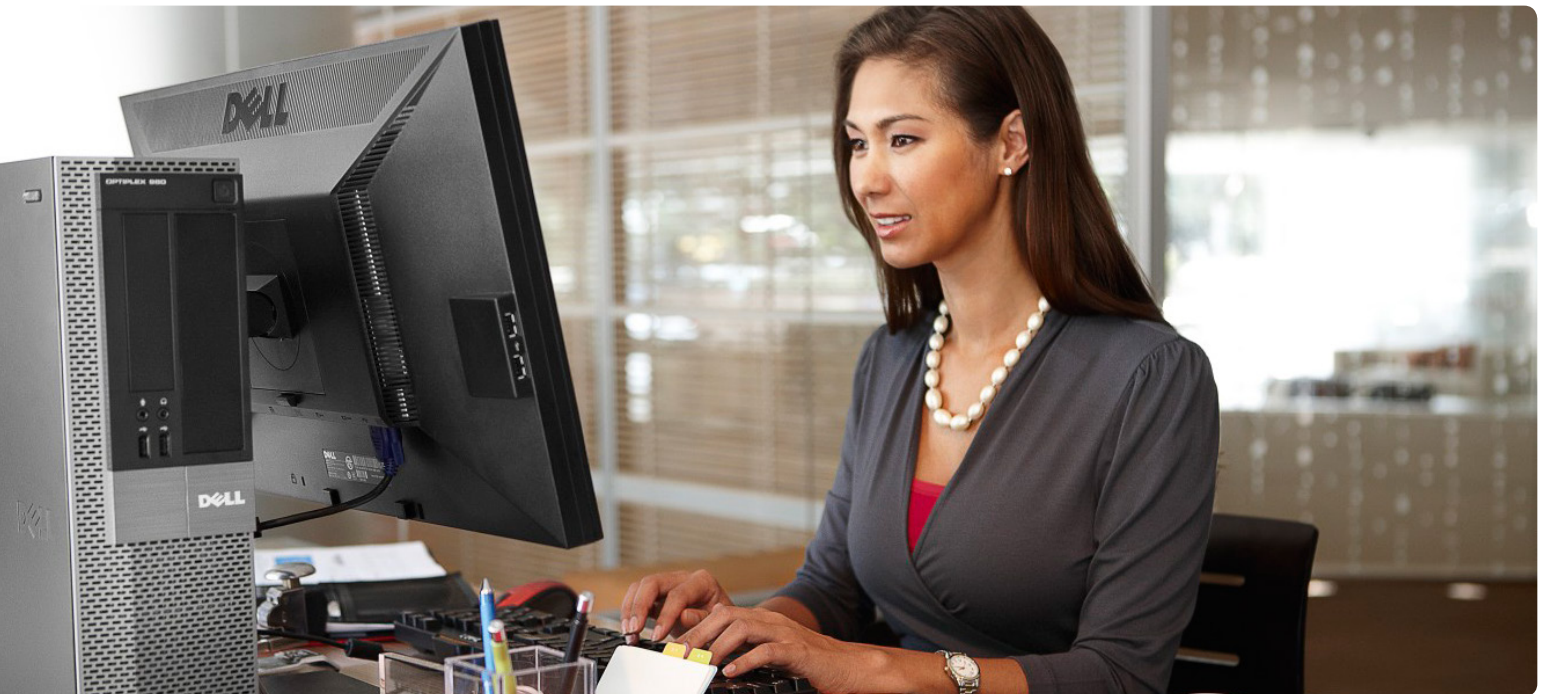# 14 Ways to More Secure and Efficient Active Directory Administration

The Right Tool Makes All the Difference

Abstract

Microsoft® Active Directory® is critical to the health of your network—and your business. The tools you use to administer Active Directory (AD) are at the core of your organization's security and IT operations. That said, do your tools provide the right amount of Active Directory security? Do your tools allow you to complete Active Directory tasks quickly and without error? If you're exploring options to make your Active Directory administration more secure and efficient, this paper provides 14 ways that Active Administrator from Dell Software can solve your most pressing Active Directory issues.

Introduction

Nobody likes wasting time. We hate standing in lines. We hate being put on hold. We hate sitting in traffic. But many IT environments waste a ton of money and time—every day—administering Active Directory using inefficient or outdated tools.

Tools are the mainstay of every working individual. Have you ever seen a carpenter frame a new house with just a hammer? Of course not; today carpenters use advanced tools like nail guns. The same principle goes for your mechanic, your plumber, even your barista: a good set of tools makes them efficient, and better at their jobs.

Microsoft's Active Directory is critically important to the health of your network—and your business. Maintaining it efficiently requires the right tools. Get more efficient with Active Administrator from Dell Software. This toolset will make you faster and more effective at 14 critical tasks you need to perform all the time. (You may want to print out this document and hand it directly to the person for whom you work.)

> Active Administrator makes delegation of AD permissions easy with Active Templates, a complete permission set "package" you create. Assign a template to a user or group, and they instantly have the desired permissions.

1. Safely delegate AD permissions.

Many environments operate without using native AD delegation because managing delegation with native tools is overwhelmingly difficult and time-consuming. AD's Delegation of Control Wizard seems like a quick way to assign delegated AD permissions—until you've used it for some time. You need several minutes—each time—to run through this native tool, especially if you need to delegate permissions that differ from one of its pre-defined profiles.

Active Administrator makes delegation of AD permissions easy with Active Templates, a complete permission set "package" you create. Assign a template to a user or group, and they instantly have the desired permissions. Changing a template instantly changes the permissions for the users to whom that template is applied. Need to give the help desk a couple of extra permissions? Just update the "help desk" Active Template and the deed is done in moments—no need to spin through directory objects, modify group memberships, or click through a million confusing dialog boxes. You can work with as many templates as you want and quickly and easily define the sets of permissions that best fit your environment. Define one, then use it forever!

2. Completely un-delegate AD permissions.

A feature notably missing from native AD is a simple and efficient way to "Un-delegate Control." The native Delegation of Control Wizard permanently assigns permissions on AD objects; if you need to change or remove those permissions, you have to remember and locate them and modify the affected objects by hand. It can take hours or even days to find everything. And if you have a complex delegation structure in place, you're likely to miss a setting or two, which introduces serious security issues.

Active Administrator's Active Templates don't permanently tattoo permissions onto objects, forcing you to manually remove or change them. Instead, simply remove the template from whatever users or groups you like, and they instantly lose these specific permissions. It takes just a minute or so, and best of all, you'll never miss a setting. The template keeps track of everything you need.

3. Assess AD permissions.

Natively determining where permissions are applied is exceptionally time-consuming. Windows isn't designed to present a resultant set of permissions in a concise visual way. Viewing permissions requires right-clicking an object, selecting Properties, clicking the Security tab, and then opening the Advanced dialog. That's five clicks just to see a single object's permissions. Given the complexity of inheritance, you'll repeat this for every object to get a complete assessment. This process could take a while for even an average file server.

Active Administrator, in contrast, presents the resultant set of permissions at a glance. Its Security Viewer provides a hierarchical view of containers and objects that includes both native permissions and those assigned through Active Administrator's templates. You can view group membership right from the same console, and even filter for inherited and natively assigned permissions.

4. Assign temporary AD permissions.

Have you even been told something like this: "This contractor is going to help us reorganize some of the OUs, so give him permissions, but remember to remove them after the end of the week"?

Doing this manually is painful and time-consuming (and often relies on Post-it® Notes), in part because of AD's missing un-delegation functionality discussed earlier. As a consequence, completing this task requires carefully documenting what permissions you're assigning, and then later removing them manually when the time comes. If you remember.

Share:

Active Administrator's permissions templates solve the problem very neatly. Active Templates can both assign and un-assign permissions in a safe, one-step process. Assigned templates can specify an expiration date, letting Active Administrator handle the removal task for you—safely, automatically and without error.

5. Create AD security reports.

Creating AD security reports is a mind-numbing activity that requires hours of time, custom scripts, Excel® spreadsheets and usually a bit of manual hackery to gather the data you need. It's one of the biggest time-wasters every AD administrator faces.

Moreover, many IT managers underestimate the time required to create AD reports until they've tried to create one themselves. Managers often request information without realizing the manual effort and time involved. Active Administrator includes a full range of built-in reports that can be exported to a variety of different formats, so you can meet an auditor's demand or your manager's last-minute request in a matter of seconds. How many users are in that OU? What permissions have been delegated? What templates apply to an OU? Who has permission to what? With Active Administrator, you can answer these questions quickly and easily.

Still need a justification? Think about the time you spent on your last set of AD reports. Divide your salary into that time. You'll quickly find that an Active Administrator toolset will pay for itself after only a few requests it would have automated.

6. Dig into Group Policy Objects.

Ever wondered, "What exactly does this GPO do?" It's hard to tell. Windows alone doesn't offer great GPO reporting—getting detailed information requires back-and-forth clicking across multiple tools and a lot of time-consuming correlation and consolidation of data.

Active Administrator speeds things by doing discovery and GPO mapping for you. You can quickly see where GPOs are linked and which are unlinked. View the GPO security filters in effect and the changes made in every revision on each GPO, as well as other useful statistics. These reports take moments to run, and they deliver a complete set of documentation for your entire GPO structure.

7. Safely edit and test GPOs.

Another flaw in native GPO tools is that editing is done on live, production GPOs. One wrong move and your mistakes are immediately replicated to production computers everywhere. That's a risk many IT managers and Active Directory administrators would rather not take.

Active Administrator reduces the risk with its offline GPO editor. Check out a production Group Policy and that object is locked to protect your work from others. Then edit it offline for however long you need. When you're ready, use Active Administrator's "what if" modeling to test your GPO before you go live. You'll get an exact picture of what your GPO will do and for whom it applies. You'll also get reports that make change management meetings an easy approval.

Just about everything in IT gets a test phase before going live. With Active Administrator your GPOs are no different.

8. Roll back GPO changes.

"Good morning, everything's broken!" It doesn't take much in the way of human error to really mess up your environment. One minor change to a GPO can do it. Then you're stuck trying to figure out exactly what was changed and how to get the GPO back in order. Heck, given that the native tools force you to edit live GPOs, you can mess things up just by poking around in the GPO Editor console if you're not careful.

> Active Administrator includes a full range of built-in reports that can be exported to a variety of formats, so you can meet an auditor's demand or your manager's last-minute request in seconds.

> Active Administrator has a backup plan. It keeps a version history of every GPO, and enables you to, with one click, simply roll back any GPO to a prior working version, at any time.

Active Administrator has a backup plan. It keeps a version history of every GPO, and enables you to, with one click, simply roll back any GPO to a prior working version, at any time. Moreover, Active Administrator "watches" your GPOs for changes, so even if someone edits them using the native tools like Group Policy Management Console (GPMC), you'll still capture a version history and gain the ability to roll back. The rollback process takes just a few seconds, and you'll have your environment back up and running in no time!

9. Compare GPOs.

You've got two GPOs, maybe two different versions of the same one, or maybe two that you're looking to reconcile and merge.

How do you tell what the differences are between them?

That's going to take time to find out, because the native tools barely understand the concept of "two different versions," let alone enable you to compare them. You'll be manually clicking through tree views and list views, documenting each setting—probably in an Excel spreadsheet—and then trying to manually compare the settings side by side. You can spend hours or days doing this, and every time you have two GPOs to compare you'll start over. Some organizations "solve" the problem by doubling their GPO administrative overhead and documenting every setting and every change in spreadsheets, all the time, just to make the eventual comparison activity faster.

Active Administrator eliminates all this pain. Just pick two versions of a GPO and it highlights exactly what's changed over time. You can dump the GPO's settings to a comprehensive report, and ditch those Excel spreadsheets. And it only takes a minute or two. If you've ever had to figure out the differences between two GPO versions, you know that Active Administrator can earn its keep with this one feature alone!

10. Nag your users.

Windows can notify users when their passwords are about to expire—notices users can completely ignore, and ignore and ignore. All too often, a password expires at just the wrong moment, and some user's last-minute password change becomes your immediate problem.

Plenty of administrators address the problem by proactively sending email notices to users with soon-to-expire passwords. That task requires manual effort to write and maintain scripts that scan for expirations and deliver email notifications.

Why not automate? Active Administrator can automatically create context-appropriate email messages that get delivered whenever passwords are about to expire. This set-it-and-forget-it feature can save you time and effort, as well as prevent those urgent calls from users in distress.

11. Be alerted to unwanted AD changes—and fix them automatically.

Ever discover that someone's been messing around in AD? Accounts disabled. Security permissions changed. Configurations amiss. Of course, you usually discover those unwanted changes while troubleshooting the problem they caused, so you spend hours tracking down the problem where you just need it fixed.

Active Administrator can automatically alert you when changes are made to Active Directory. It delivers a list of alerts, giving you the visibility to track where changes have occurred. More importantly, most changes can be automatically remediated. Active Administrator can execute a program, script or batch file in response to selected alerts—meaning problems can fix themselves.

Share:

This combination of Active Administrator's alerts and automatic actions is like having another Active Directory administrator on your team—for a fraction of the cost.

12. Audit like the NSA.

Need to keep a closer eye on AD activity? User account creation, account lockouts, accounts being disabled and enabled, and more. It's difficult to see those changes because Windows alone doesn't natively track what's changed by default.

Active Administrator offers dashboards to visualize today's configuration from periods in the past. A simple and straightforward User Activity dashboard displays what's been happening in the forest—and across domains—within a configurable time frame. In just a minute or two, you'll understand exactly what happened and be able to report on it.

13. Find inactive AD accounts.

Old user accounts, unused computer accounts—these inactive accounts clog up your domain and present a security risk that, in many organizations, **must** be dealt with. How do you find them?

The time-consuming way requires scripting to carefully analyze accounts across all your domain controllers that haven't logged on in a while or passwords that haven't gotten changed. Those scripts aren't trivial to develop and maintain, nor is their information easy to convert into actions.

Active Administrator handles inactive users and computers in just a few mouse clicks: just run a report, review it, and click to disable or remove accounts that need to go. It can even do it automatically.

14. Assess AD health and replication status.

Is your AD infrastructure healthy? Is its replication working well? Answering those questions can be remarkably difficult. Windows doesn't provide much information without some complex command-line work. Moreover, what you get is raw data—forest health data, site status, replication details, and domain and trust data. Translating it into useful information requires hours of time and years of experience.

Active Administrator helps with both AD health and replication status. It quickly analyzes replication on all your domain controllers at once and provides a visual representation of errors that directs your attention to what needs attention. Assessment reports can run automatically to outline overall AD health. Instead of spending hours slogging through performance counters and command-line tools, why not spend a minute scanning this morning's Active Administrator health report?

Your Active Directory will thank you.

Improve the tools, improve the job.

Still not convinced? See for yourself how Active Administrator will change the way you manage and administer your Active Directory environment. Download a free trial today at http://software.dell.com/products/active-administrator.

Dell Software: Delivering complete and connected solutions

Dell Software empowers organizations of all sizes to experience Dell's "power to do more" by delivering scalable yet simple-to-use solutions that can increase productivity, responsiveness and efficiency. Dell Software is uniquely positioned to address today's most pressing business and IT challenges with holistic, connected software offerings across five core solution areas, encompassing data center and cloud management, information management, mobile workforce management, security and data protection. This software, when combined with Dell hardware and services, helps customers simplify IT, mitigate risk and accelerate business results. www.dellsoftware.com.

The combination of Active Administrator's alerts and automatic actions is like having another Active Directory administrator on your team—for a fraction of the cost.

Share:

For More Information

Dell Software: Delivering complete and connected solutions

Dell Software empowers organizations of all sizes to experience Dell's "power to do more" by delivering scalable yet simple-to-use solutions that can increase productivity, responsiveness and efficiency. Dell Software is uniquely positioned to address today's most pressing business and IT challenges with holistic, connected software offerings across five core solution areas, encompassing data center and cloud management, information management, mobile workforce management, security and data protection. This software, when combined with Dell hardware and services, helps customers simplify IT, mitigate risk and accelerate business results. www.dellsoftware.com.

If you have any questions regarding your potential use of this material, contact:

Dell Software

5 Polaris Way
Aliso Viejo, CA 92656
www.dellsoftware.com
Refer to our Web site for regional and international office information.

Share:

TechBrief-FasterADAdmin-US-KS-2013-07-11