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Research Article

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Enhancing Security in Release Engineering through Effective Secret Management

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Abstract Release engineering holds a crucial position within contemporary software development, serving as the conduit for seamless software transition from developmental stages to production environments. Its functions encompass meticulous planning, coordination, and execution of software releases, encompassing tasks such as building, testing, and deploying software. A methodical exploration of strategies for secret management can greatly assist practitioners in ensuring secure development practices. This paper aims to support practitioners in mitigating the risk of secret exposure by delineating effective secret management practices within the realm of release engineering.

Keywords Release engineering, Secret Management, Security, Key Management, Vault Management, Identity and Access Management, Certificates based authentication, Cloud Computing, DevOps

Introduction

Release engineering is a critical process responsible for transitioning individual code contributions from developers into high-quality software releases for end-users. Throughout this process, release engineers, who are tasked with developing, maintaining, and operating an organization's release infrastructure, undertake a variety of tasks.

In general, the patches submitted by developers undergo review and integration, transitioning from developer branches to team and product branches before being compiled and tested by the Continuous Integration (CI) system. Eventually, these changes are merged into the master branch. As a release approaches its feature-complete stage, release stabilization ensues, focusing on addressing major bugs in the release's functionality. Closer to the release date, the new version is deployed, typically to a web server, virtual machine, or app store. Finally, the deployed release is made accessible to users.

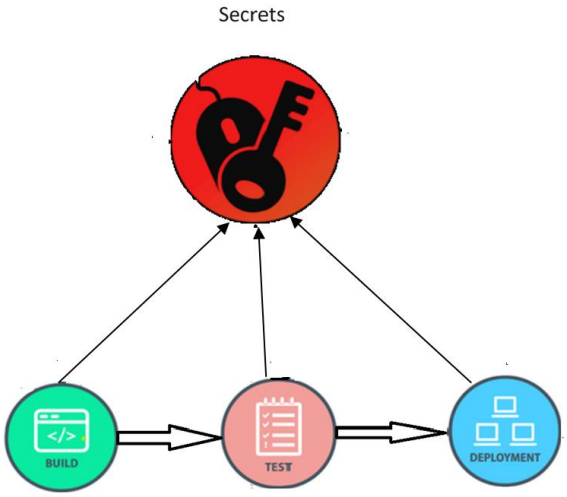
Throughout the process, numerous tasks demand access to sensitive information, commonly referred to as "secrets." These encompass authentication credentials crucial for DevOps services and applications, spanning API tokens, encryption keys, usernames, passwords, as well as activities like registering VMs, connecting to databases, logging into portals, and accessing artifacts. Effective secret management becomes imperative at this stage to uphold security and the smooth operation of the release process.

In today's digital landscape, where cybersecurity threats loom large, ensuring the security of software releases stands as a paramount concern. Central to this is the practice of secret management, which plays a pivotal role in fortifying the release engineering process by safeguarding sensitive information. A recent report, The State of Secrets Sprawl 2024, conducted by Git Guardian in March 2024, brought to light a concerning trend: a 28% surge in leaked secrets on GitHub. Shockingly, this surge resulted in the exposure of 12.8 million new secrets in 2023 alone, underscoring the pressing need for markedly enhanced security protocols. In the face of this, release teams find themselves at a crossroads, grappling with the challenge of balancing productivity with security, particularly when the prevailing inclination is to prioritize productivity over security measures.

For the seamless functioning of Release Engineering DevOps and CI/CD tools, repositories, containers, and applications, effective communication and access between them are imperative. This communication and access hinge on the management of secrets. Secrets and keys constitute some of the most widely utilized and critical

resources within any organization, serving to authenticate applications and users while granting them access to sensitive systems, services, and data. Throughout the software development lifecycle, these secrets may necessitate sharing among developers collaborating on a project and, post-deployment, may require distribution to applications. Given that the transmission of secrets must be secure, proper secrets management must address and mitigate the inherent risks associated with both their transmission and storage.

The primary objective of our paper is to assist release engineers in averting the exposure of secrets by delineating best practices for secret management throughout the build, testing, and deployment phases.



Key Management For secure communication between different modules, generally, the data are encrypted and decrypted using a key. The process of creating, distributing, storing, deploying, and finally revoking the cryptographic keys is called key management. Successful key management is critical to the security of release engineering. There are two types of keys:

[1]. Symmetric-key
[2]. Asymmetric key

Symmetric-key cryptography are algorithms for cryptography that use the same cryptographic keys for both the encryption of plaintext and the decryption of ciphertext The keys may be identical, or there may be a simple transformation to go between the two keys. The requirement that both parties have access to the secret key is one of the main drawbacks of symmetric-key encryption.

Asymmetric keys cryptography or asymmetric cryptography, is the field of cryptographic systems that use pairs of related keys. Each key pair consists of a public key and a corresponding private key. Security of public-key cryptography depends on keeping the private key secret; the public key can be openly distributed without compromising security.

Challenges in Key Management:

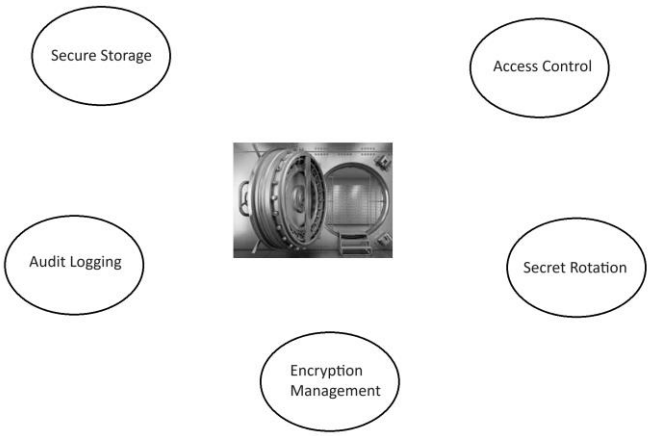
[1]. Scalability: managing large numbers of keys across distributed systems
[2]. Key generation: ensuring randomness and entropy
[3]. Key distribution: securely transmitting keys to intended recipients
[4]. Key storage: protecting keys from unauthorized access and loss
[5]. Key revocation: effectively invalidating compromised keys

Vault systems

Vault systems serve as secure repositories for storing and managing secrets such as passwords, API tokens, and encryption keys. These systems offer features such as access control, audit logging, and encryption to protect sensitive information. Vault systems help release engineers centralize secret management, reducing the risk of inadvertent exposure or leakage. Leveraging vault systems enhances security by enforcing best practices for secret storage and access.

Key Features

- **Secure Storage:** Vault systems employ advanced encryption techniques to securely store sensitive data. Encrypted storage ensures that even if unauthorized access is gained, the data remains unintelligible without the proper decryption keys.
- **Access Control:** Access to the stored secrets within vault systems is tightly controlled. Role-based access control (RBAC) mechanisms ensure that only authorized personnel can retrieve or modify the stored secrets. This helps prevent unauthorized access and misuse of sensitive information.
- **Audit Logging:** Vault systems maintain detailed audit logs of all access and modification activities. Audit logging is essential for compliance purposes and enables organizations to track who accessed what information and when, aiding in forensic analysis in case of security incidents.
- **Encryption Management:** In addition to storing secrets securely, vault systems also facilitate the management of encryption keys. They can generate, store, and distribute cryptographic keys used for data encryption and decryption, ensuring data confidentiality and integrity.
- **Secret Rotation:** Vault systems support automated secret rotation processes, allowing organizations to regularly update and refresh sensitive credentials such as passwords and API tokens. Automated rotation reduces the risk of credential compromise due to prolonged exposure.



Identity And Access Management

In contemporary settings, identity management systems typically integrate biometric data, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and risk assessment techniques. These systems enable IT administrators to authorize or deny access to company information through an Identity and Access Management (IAM) platform. IAM solutions empower system administrators to control access to computer systems or networks based on user account activities within the organization. Recognized for their complexity and diversity, IAM components are pivotal for businesses reliant on technology, where distinct identities, roles, processes, and permissions are essential.

Single Sign-On: Single Sign-On is an authentication and authorization platform that enables users to access various applications, systems, and data without the need to log in separately for each domain. SSO provision streamlines cloud user experience by allowing a single password for accessing multiple applications/services. By maintaining one credential per user, SSO ensures secure and uninterrupted services. It facilitates secure storage and transmission of user credentials through encrypted sessions and can be configured to implement SSO using various multifactor authentication methods.

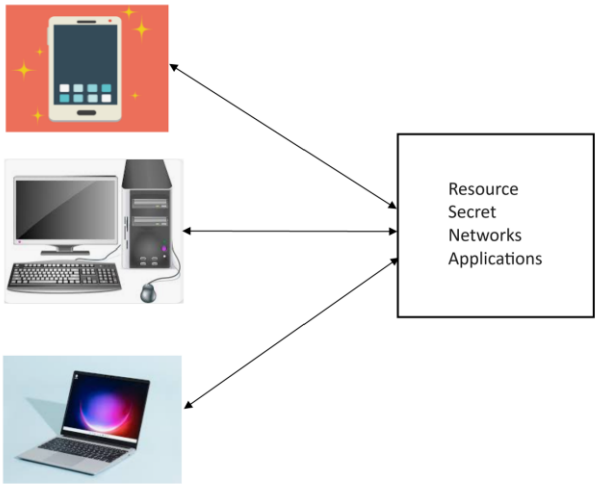
Multi-Factor Authentication: Multifactor authentication enhances the security of digital assets and transactions on the Internet. To meet diverse government, industry, and security practice requirements, identity verification needs to surpass the security level provided by basic username and password logins. This authentication method verifies individuals and grants access by combining something the user knows such as password, something the user possesses such as security token, and something inherent to the user such as biometrics.

Privileged Access Management: Privileged Identity Management (PIM) governs the administration of superuser accounts and associated privileges. PIM implements tools and processes, such as provisioning tools or specialized PIM products, for effective identity management

Certificates based authentication and management

In the realm of release engineering, various stages demand the utilization of Virtual Machines (VMs), such as during build, testing, and deployment phases. The advent of microservice architecture has significantly amplified this necessity, driving software development processes towards the convergence of development (Dev) and operation (Ops). Leveraging certificate-based authentication offers heightened security and simplifies secret management within these environments. Digital certificates serve as identifiers for machines within the release process workflow, granting access to resources, networks, or applications. Unlike authentication methods tailored for individuals, like biometrics or one-time passwords (OTP), certificates are purposefully crafted for machines, providing a more robust and convenient authorization mechanism.

This approach entails the generation and signing of certificates. Once a certificate is generated and authenticated, it can be downloaded and installed. The installation procedure varies depending on the server or platform in use, such as Windows, Ubuntu, Red Hat, etc. Subsequently, upon installation on the device, the certificate can be utilized to access other resources based on its designated permissions.



Outlined below is a systematic process

A. Establish a Certificate Authority (CA):
   [1]. Establish a Certificate Authority (CA) responsible for issuing and signing certificates for microservices.
   [2]. Utilize tools like OpenSSL to create the CA certificate and private key.
B. Generate Certificate Signing Requests (CSRs):
   [1]. Create a CSR for each microservice requiring a certificate.
   [2]. Include essential information such as the Common Name (CN), organizational details, and other pertinent metadata.
C. Sign CSRs with the CA:
   [1]. Submit each CSR to the CA for validation and signing.
   [2]. The CA verifies the information and signs the CSR, thereby generating a certificate for each microservice.
D. Distribute Certificates:
   [1]. Upon signing, distribute the certificates to the respective microservices.
   [2]. Ensure each microservice has access to its certificate and private key.
E. Configure Microservices:
   [1]. Configure each microservice to employ its certificate for secure communication.
   [2]. This typically entails setting up the microservice to present its certificate during the TLS handshake.

F. Enable Mutual TLS (optional):
   [1]. If desired, enable mutual TLS (mTLS), where both the client and server present certificates during the TLS handshake.
   [2]. This enhances security by authenticating both parties involved.

Additional Topics

Secret Rotation: Regular rotation of secrets such as passwords and encryption keys is essential for mitigating the risk of compromise. Automated secret rotation mechanisms help release engineers maintain security posture by periodically updating secrets without disrupting the release process.

Secret Encryption: Encrypting sensitive information at rest and in transit adds an extra layer of protection against unauthorized access. Encryption algorithms and key management practices must be carefully chosen to ensure robust encryption without compromising performance or usability.

Secrets as Code: Treating secrets as code allows release engineers to manage secrets alongside application code using version control systems. Infrastructure as code (IaC) tools facilitate the provisioning and configuration of secrets, ensuring consistency and reproducibility across environments.

Auditing and Compliance: Comprehensive auditing capabilities enable organizations to track the usage of secrets and detect anomalous activities. Compliance requirements such as GDPR, HIPAA, and PCI-DSS mandate strict controls over sensitive data, necessitating robust auditing mechanisms in release engineering processes.

Pattern-based authentication: In release engineering we can access to resources and systems is based on recognizable patterns or behaviors rather than static credentials. This approach leverages machine learning algorithms and analytics to continuously monitor and analyze user interactions, identifying patterns that indicate legitimate access. By dynamically adapting to evolving usage patterns, it enhances security by detecting anomalies and unauthorized access attempts in real-time. Pattern-based authentication aligns with the agile nature of DevOps by providing seamless yet robust access control, enabling teams to focus on innovation while ensuring the integrity and security of their systems.

Conclusion

Effective secret management is indispensable for ensuring the security and integrity of software releases in modern release engineering environments. By implementing robust key management practices, leveraging vault systems, integrating identity management solutions, managing certificates effectively, and addressing additional topics such as secret rotation, encryption, secrets as code, and auditing, organizations can enhance security posture and mitigate the risk of data breaches. Adopting a proactive approach to secret management enables release engineers to safeguard sensitive information throughout the release lifecycle, thereby fostering trust and confidence among stakeholders.

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