Configure ssh certificate based authentication

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Configure Certificate-Based SSH User Authentication

Overview: This article describes configuring certificate-based SSH user authentication with OpenSSH. It details creating a CA key, signing user SSH keys, and updating server settings to trust the CA. Additionally, it explains issuing short-lived certificates for temporary access, including setting validity periods. This setup provides secure, password-less SSH access by configuring both the server and client machines.

Support for certificate authentication of users and hosts using the new OpenSSH certificate format was introduced in Red Hat Enterprise Linux 6.5, in the openssh-5.3p1-94.el6 package. If required, to ensure the latest OpenSSH package is installed, enter the following command as root :

```
:~# yum install openssh
```

Step 1: Setting Up Certificate Authority Infrastructure

Generate the CA key (cert_ca) for signing user ssh keys with the following command

```
:~# ssh-keygen -f cert_ca


Generating public/private RSA key pair.
Enter passphrase (empty for no passphrase):
Enter the same passphrase again:
Your identification has been saved in cert_ca.
Your public key has been saved in cert_ca.pub.
The key fingerprint is:
b3:af:e8:ef:c4:5d:90:f8:be:16:99:74:f2:39:3a:3e root@server
The key's randomart image is:
+---[RSA 2048]----+
|                 |
|        . .      |
|       . o       |
|        .o..     |
|       S..*..    |
|      . =+.+     |
```

```
|       + oo .   |
|      o .E.     |
|    .oo+++o     |
+----------------+


:~# ls
cert_ca  cert_ca.pub
```

Step 2: Copy the keys to **/etc/ssh/**

```
:~# cp -pr cert_ca* /etc/ssh/
```

Step 3: Add **CA public key** (cert_ca.pub) as **Trusted Key** in the ssh server machines

```
 vi /etc/ssh/sshd_config

(Add the following lines)

 TrustedUserCAKeys /etc/ssh/cert_ca.pub
```

Step 4: Restart SSH service

```
service sshd restart (For centos / rhel)

service ssh restart (For ubuntu / debian)
```

Step 5: Generate **SSH key** for the user

```
:~# ssh-keygen -trsa
Generating public/private rsa key pair.
Enter file in which to save the key (/root/.ssh/id_rsa):
Enter passphrase (empty for no passphrase):
Enter same passphrase again:
Your identification has been saved in /root/.ssh/id_rsa.
Your public key has been saved in /root/.ssh/id_rsa.pub.
The key fingerprint is:
6f:d0:27:36:69:80:e4:ad:0c:5c:f9:d9:d8:af:a9:8d  root@server
The key's randomart image is:
+---[RSA 2048]----+
| o. |
| . +.o |
| o o.o= |
| o .+oo. |
| o S B.. |
| = +. |
| oo |
| +o |
| E.. |
+-----------------+
```

Step 6: Sign user ssh public key by CA with the following command

```
:~# ssh-keygen -s cert_ca -I user_username -n username -V +52w id_rsa.pub
```

```
Signed user key id_rsa-cert.pub: id "user_username" serial 0 for username valid from 2020-04-17T10:33:00 to
2021-04-16T10:34:42
```

Note: You should sign with user(username) you want to login to the server machine. For example, If you want to login as user " TED " to the server, You should sign the with the user " TED ". Example : ssh-keygen -s cert_ca -I user_ted -n ted -V +52w id_rsa.pub

Step 7: Copy the ssh keys to the client machine .ssh directory

```
:~# scp id_rsa-cert.pub  id_rsa admin@client1:/home/admin/.ssh/
```

Step 8: Once you copied the ssh keys to the client machine, the user will be able to login into the server with ssh certificate authentication without any password.

```
admin@client1:~# ssh username@server.com

Last login: Fri Apr 17 11:39:17 2020 from client1

[username@server~]#
```

You can also issue short-lived certificates for giving temporary ssh access

Step 1: Follow the first three steps in the article.

Step 2: You can generate short-lived certificates for a day or a week or for some minutes while Sign user SSH public key by CA with the following command: You can specify the validity interval (-V)while signing the certificate. We have issued a certificate that is valid for 60 minutes from the generated time. We can specify the Validity after **-V** option.

```
 -V validity_interval

Specify a validity interval when signing a certificate. A
validity interval may consist of a single time, indicating
that the certificate is valid beginning now and expiring at
that time, or may consist of two times separated by a colon
to indicate an explicit time interval.

The start time may be specified as the string “always” to
indicate the certificate has no specified start time, a
date in YYYYMMDD format, a time in YYYYMMDDHHMM[SS] format,
a relative time (to the current time) consisting of a minus
sign followed by an interval in the format described in the
TIME FORMATS section of sshd_config(5).

The end time may be specified as a YYYYMMDD date, a
YYYYMMDDHHMM[SS] time, a relative time starting with a plus
character or the string “forever” to indicate that the
the certificate has no expiry date.

For example: “+52w1d” (valid from now to 52 weeks and one
day from now), “-4w:+4w” (valid from four weeks ago to four
weeks from now), “20100101123000:20110101123000” (valid
from 12:30 PM, January 1st, 2010 to 12:30 PM, January 1st,
2011), “-1d:20110101” (valid from yesterday to midnight,
January 1st, 2011), “-1m:forever” (valid from one minute
ago and never expiring).
```

```
:~# ssh-keygen -s cert_ca -I user_username -n username -V +60m id_rsa.pub

Signed user key id_rsa-cert.pub: id "user_username" serial 0 for username valid from 2022-04-17T10:33:00 to
2022-04-17T11:33:00
```

Note: You should sign with the user(username) you want to log in to the server machine. For example, If you want to login as user " TED " to the server, You should sign the with the user " TED ". Example : ssh-keygen -s cert_ca -I user_ted -n ted -V +60m id_rsa.pub

Step 3: Copy the ssh keys to the client machine .ssh directory

```
:~# scp id_rsa-cert.pub  id_rsa admin@client1:/home/admin/.ssh/
```

Step 4: Once you copied the ssh keys to the client machine, the user will be able to login into the server with ssh certificate authentication without any password till **60 minutes** from the certificated generated time. The certificate will expire after 60 minutes, so the user will not be able to ssh to that server with that certificate after 60 minutes.

```
admin@client1:~# ssh username@server.com

Last login: Fri Apr 17 11:39:17 2020 from client1

[username@server~]#
```

Related Articles

How to install ssl certs in jump server [secure connection] ?

How To Create a Self-Signed SSL Certificate for Nginx on debian

Online URL: https://www.ezeelogin.com/kb/article/configure-ssh-certificate-based-authentication-298.html