The OpenAthens Publisher Manifesto

The road to unifying the Identity and Access Management landscape to enhance the end user journey

A discussion paper
Introduction

Identity and Access Management (IAM) is based on a simple concept: connecting users to essential knowledge. The reality of IAM is anything but simple, with different publishers, vendors, institutions, and end-users each having their own varied needs to consider when implementing access pathways.

For more than two decades, OpenAthens has sought to provide Identity Providers such as healthcare and academic institutions, and Service Providers of academic and professional knowledge, with an easy-to-navigate solution that connects end-users with the information they refer to on a daily basis. From laptops to smartphones and tablets, the proliferation of personal devices into users’ workflows and the need to access knowledge at any time and any place has resulted in increasingly complex IAM scenarios for both identity providers and service providers to navigate.

There is a clear need for IAM solutions to evolve to meet end-user expectations of access to content, as well as anticipating and addressing potential future needs, and working with service providers to ensure the knowledge value chain remains unbroken.

This is why we have adopted the OpenAthens Publisher Manifesto – five commitments that we’ve made to help service providers from across the publishing landscape address common challenges, both now and in the future.
The OpenAthens Publisher Manifesto

1. Provide the **best end-user experience** possible at the heart of authentication into e-resources and applications.

2. Enable single sign-on that is **simple to set up and easy to maintain** within publishing platforms.

3. Lead the use of **common standards** across SAML and other authentication protocols to deliver interoperability.

4. Provide a **forum** where all parties involved in access and authentication into e-resources can share views and challenge orthodoxies.

5. Recognise that **change is now constant**, and that our services must continually evolve to meet new challenges.
Commitment 1: Authentication
Providing the best possible end-user experience

As service providers are all too aware, any barrier to access is also a barrier to use – and end users’ experiences of using IAM systems can be all too confusing and complex, with unfamiliar technical terms finding their way into user-facing interfaces.

On-campus access is typically by way of IP recognition that can automatically grant access to resources for any user whose device is part of an institutional network. VPNs can provide access for individuals working remotely, but problems typically arise when users attempt to access resources they are entitled to via a mobile device or a laptop computer outside of their institution’s network.

As soon as you put up a challenge to a user, you’re asking them to find a better or easier-to-access copy. Publishers need to make the process as seamless as possible. Perhaps the biggest flaw right now is off-campus access to content – users have some extraordinary hoops to jump through!

I do enough research in my work to know how bad off-network access can be. Even though I am used to negotiating proxy servers and VPNs – it’s often easier to just click on a free copy than to negotiate login prompts.

John Sack, HighWire

Addressing these issues is key for both identity providers – whose users expect to be able to access information on their own terms – and service providers. OpenAthens is committed to rolling out new approaches to IAM that will remove ambiguity and frustration from users’ workflows, helping to drive use of the valuable resources that their institution provides.

Commitment 2: Single Sign-On
Enabling simple SSO within publishing platforms

Service providers operate a variety of platforms, each with their own individually-designed user journeys from discovery to access. Additionally, because IAM has historically been viewed as a technical issue to be solved by platform development teams, the terminology and techniques involved can lead to technical terminology making its way into the user journey.

From the end-user’s perspective, this can lead to confusion and frustration: the path to accessing content is frequently complex and inconsistent, with many different approaches needed to reach articles or other information sources from different publishers.

User discovery is implemented in a pretty variable way – there’s a lack of consistency across the industry. A seamless experience for users is the ideal I think we’re all working towards, but the way technology has been implemented means that it’s not very intuitive for users to navigate.

Consistency is key here; we’ve long been advocating for a similar user experience across publisher sites, because if the sign-in process isn’t intuitive in and of itself, then consistency and familiarity – having the same terminology and steps along the way regardless of which content the user’s trying to access – are second-best.

Rhys Smith, Jisc

Straightforward single sign-on with consistent terminology and implementation is the key to easing end-user frustrations. OpenAthens is committed to enabling this for publishers through a continuing programme of technical development, including an API-based approach that enables IAM to be easily integrated into individual platforms.
Commitment 3: Establishing standards
Driving common standards for interoperability

The variable approaches to IAM across service providers – implementing what works from a platform perspective – has led to a proliferation of different standards. In turn, this has resulted in significant overheads at the identity provider level: for example, if an institution’s IP range changes, the identity provider will typically need to feed that information to a variety of different service providers to ensure that end users’ access to resources is not interrupted.

This can also lead to issues around innovation for service providers – new services and technology that could provide a competitive advantage may be met with lower than anticipated engagement by identity providers due to the additional overhead they require.

*There are opportunities to do things better – but I think any such changes need to be communicated industry-wide, as it’s hard to improve [the technology] in a vacuum. It’s difficult for libraries to adapt to something only one [service provider] is doing, even if it’s exceptional. Different systems are difficult and expensive to implement, and discourage discoverability.*

*If there’s a way to improve the situation for everyone, then I’m sure publishers will be willing to work together. This isn’t a pricing situation – rather, it’s something that is good for the content.*

*Vida Damijonaitis, American Medical Association*

OpenAthens is committed to developing and promoting standards around SAML and other technologies to help streamline the implementation process and ensure full interoperability between systems.
Commitment 4: Facilitating discussions
Providing forums for discussion

Service providers represent a tremendous pool of talent for the development of systems – but there are precious few opportunities for those involved in tackling the challenges of IAM to meet and discuss their respective approaches, leading to different teams replicating each other’s work in isolation.

There’s not really much in the way of organised discussion, and I wish there was. I think we could do better by working together – we’re all facing the same challenges. Unified expression and exploration of these issues within the industry will bring institutions forward – as an industry we would develop standards and best practices that could be used to make the user experience as close to parity as possible across publishers and platforms, which can only be a good thing for our users.

Craig Griffin, Silverchair

This interest in sharing expertise is thrown into sharp relief by a lack of organised opportunities for knowledge transfer around the technical challenges around IAM. This is particularly pressing as new markets – such as the corporate space – start to move away from secure one-to-one connections with service providers in favour of IAM solutions that are well established in the academic and healthcare markets, providing service providers with access to new markets for their products.

OpenAthens is committed to providing and sharing the outcomes of forums for developers from across the identity and service provider space to meet and discuss the core issues surrounding IAM, in the interests of the industry as a whole.
Commitment 5: Embracing change
Understanding that change is constant

There have been more changes to access pathways in the past decade than in the previous thirty years; digital access to content has been the norm for some time, but mobile, off-network access has proliferated as smartphones and tablets join laptops as essential equipment for accessing and consuming information.

Similarly, the importance of individual discovery channels such as service provider’s platforms and library portals has declined as web search engines become ever more popular as a single point of discovery across the full spectrum of global resources: the convenience they offer end users is a powerful draw.

In future, I think the priority [for service providers] will be the consolidation of systems that they use. They’re developing a better understanding of their own platforms – and in some cases, there’s an evolution of back-end applications to integrate with a more user-friendly front end. As part of that, certainly within libraries, there’s a better understanding of the user journey around discovery.

These changes aren’t driven by design, but rather by the needs of end users. [Both identity providers and service providers] are starting to realise that the customer experience doesn’t exist uniquely on their own site – there’s a whole ecology of systems. The key challenge is managing experiences across a range of platforms, where the end user really shouldn’t be concerned about which platform they’re on.

Jon Bentley, OpenAthens

Both identity providers and service providers are still racing to catch up with end users’ emerging needs. OpenAthens is committed to supporting this by working closely with stakeholders at every stage of the information value chain to understand not only what ground is still left to cover, but also in staying constantly vigilant of new developments that enable us to address new workflows and user requirements.
Looking ahead:  
Our commitment to the future

Identity providers, service providers, and end-users all share the same expectation: that the ideal experience should be seamless access for users regardless of device and access method. Whatever solutions emerge, they need to be easy for identity providers to implement with minimal technical overhead, and for service providers to include in their platforms while at the same time facilitating the free exchange of expertise that will allow service providers to optimise their efforts and reach new markets.

This philosophy is the fundamental driving force behind our technical developments, including the new OpenAthens access management service which provides API-based single sign-on for service providers and a consistent journey for end users.

We’re committed to working with stakeholders throughout the information value chain to make IAM as invisible to end-users as possible, and simple to implement for identity and service providers of all sizes.

Your feedback is invaluable in making this happen, so please do get in touch at openathens@eduserv.org.uk, or by phone at +44 (0) 844 5000 115 to share your thoughts.