Two Factor Authentication (2FA)

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2FA is an essential security layer to make hackers’ lives much more difficult. Passwords are a basic form of authentication but as we know they are not perfect.

2FA is the answer to our password woes.

How It Works

A website will ask for a 2FA code to authenticate your identity. Authentication, confirming you are who you say you are, is based on a number of premises. Most relevant to our discussion are:
- something you know (for example a password or your mother’s maiden name)
- something you have (for example a mobile phone, or a bank card)

2FA combines something you know with something you have. A hacker with your password does not immediately have details like your mother’s maiden name, nor does the hacker have your mobile phone. So, they will be unable to answer the 2FA question after they try and log in with your password.

How You Use it

You can set 2FA up by logging into the web service as usual and then going into the settings where it will usually say "Turn on Two-Factor Authentication". Once on, it will prompt you to set up your account in the future by asking for a specific number that it will send you after you have put your password in. It may send you the number via:
- a text
- an email
- an authenticator app.

A USB key is growing in popularity but isn’t the most affordable option yet.

Not Perfect

There are still ways for hackers to attack your account, even if you activate 2FA:
- Hackers could phone up and trick you into giving the code. A web service will never ask for your code, so you will know you’re on a scam phone call if your 2FA details are requested.
- Though rare, hackers have been able to trick mobile phone companies into sending over a new version of your sim card to them, and then use your sim card to receive 2FA codes. If this is a concern for you, stick to using an authenticator app.
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Most websites do not ask for 2FA by default, and you instead have to turn it on yourself. This isn’t ideal, and some companies are learning to ask for 2FA by default after they suffer a security breach.

Authentication apps are secure but can become frustrating. Some of the apps do not store your details online, so if your phone is lost or stolen, and you download the authenticator app on a new phone, the codes will not be loaded on there. Which is a huge inconvenience. There are some authentication apps who do store your details in their cloud storage, so read up on the different authentication providers and find one that works for you.

2FA Considerations with Employees

Security can become complicated if you want 2FA Considerations with Employees. A former employee holding a device with your 2FA keys has the potential to do a lot of damage to your systems. To manage this security risk:
- Part of the departure process for an exiting employee should always be a housekeeping of their IT credentials, which includes removing their 2FA tokens from their device.
- Some dedicated 2FA providers who can offer administrative management for the 2FA accounts of your employees.

Backup Codes

The reinforcement of backup codes is a security risk that isn’t spoken about enough on the topic of 2FA.

When first setting up 2FA, the website will offer you backup codes - a list of one-time pass codes that will serve as a safety net in case you lose access to your original method of 2FA. These backup codes are able to override whatever settings you have on your phone for 2FA, and log you in to your account.

You may have the option to download your backup codes or send them to you. It is a huge security issue if you do this and then leave a digital copy sitting in your email in case you had on your phone for 2FA, and log you in to your account.

Convenience V Inconvenience

For the sake of convenience, most web services ask for your 2FA once and then allow you stay logged in for a set amount of time (such as a week, a month etc.). This is a reason some opt-out of security versus convenience, so you don’t have to re-input your 2FA codes every time you navigate to the page.

If there’s a particular service integral to your workflow that doesn’t support 2FA, or offer a similar authentication security layer, it is perhaps worth switching to a service that does offer these settings. 2FA cannot be underestimated. It is a massive obstacle to the average-hacker.