The Difference Between Authentication and Authorization

As mentioned, authentication and authorization may sound alike, but each plays a different role in securing systems and data. Unfortunately, people often use both terms interchangeably as they both refer to system access. However, they are distinct processes. Simply put, one verifies the identity of a user or service before granting them access, while the other determines what they can do once they have access.

The best way to illustrate the differences between the two terms is with a simple example. Let's say you decide to go and visit a friend's home. On arrival, you knock on the door, and your friend opens it. She recognizes you (authentication) and greets you.

As your friend has authenticated you, she is now comfortable letting you into her home.

However, based on your relationship, there are certain things you can do and others you cannot (authorization). For example, you may enter the kitchen area, but you cannot go into her private office. In other words, you have the authorization to enter the kitchen, but access to her private office is prohibited.

What are the Similarities Between Authorization and Authentication?

Authentication and authorization are similar in that they are two parts of the underlying process that provides access. Consequently, the two terms are often confused in information security as they share the same "auth" abbreviation. Authentication and authorization are also similar in the way they both leverage identity. For example, one verifies an identity before granting access, while the other uses this verified identity to control access.