15.1.2 Use su

Click one of the buttons to take you to that part of the video.

[Use 'su' 0:00-1:44]

In this demonstration we're going to look at using the 'su' command. su stands for switch user and it can be used from the shell prompt to switch to any user account on the system.

I'm going to run the 'tail /etc/passwd' file. We see that on the system I have an rtracy user account--who I'm currently logged in to the system as--but I also have a ksanders user account. I can use the su command at the shell prompt to switch from the rtracy user account to the ksanders user account.

To do this, I would type 'su ksanders'. Then I would include a dash. This dash is very important. This dash tells su that when we switch to the ksanders user, we want to have all of the ksanders user's environment variables loaded when we do.

This is very important because if I don't include this dash, then the environment variables from my current user account will remain in effect, which can cause some odd things to happen. For example, my home directory would remain /home/rtracy, even if I switch to the ksanders user account.

There may be times when you want that to happen, but most likely you won't. It could cause a lot of confusion, so I'm going to load ksanders' environment variables as I switch to her account. Press Enter and I provide her password.

I'm now logged in as the ksanders user. At this point I could run commands, complete tasks--whatever it is I need to do as ksanders. When I'm done and I want to switch back to my original rtracy user account, all I have to do is type 'exit' and I'm back to rtracy.

That is probably not what you're going to use su for very much.

[Standard User Account 1:45-2:33]

What you will use su for all the time is to switch to the root user account. In fact, su is used this way so much that, by default, if you don't supply a username with the command, su just assumes that you want to switch to root because that's what everybody uses it for anyway.

To switch to root, I can just type 'su -'. This will switch me to the root user account and load the root user's environment variables as we do so. I'll provide the root user's password. We are now switched to the root user.

You can always check to see who you are logged in as with the whoami command. It just tells you who you are logged in as. I'm logged in as root. Notice with this distribution, the name of the current user is automatically displayed over here in the prompt, so you don't really need to use the whoami command. Some distributions don't. And if you're confused as to who you have currently switched users to, you can use whoami to verify.

[Proper Use of Root Account 2:34-3:31]

Before we end, I want to emphasize how important it is that you use the su command properly. A common mistake made by new Linux administrators is to log in to their system as root and perform all their mundane day-to-day tasks as root.

From a security perspective that's a bad idea. If I do that, I log in to my system as root and then I work throughout the day, and then I go to the break room or to the vending machine to buy a soda or something and I leave my system logged in, somebody could sit down and cause all kinds of havoc because they would have root level access to the system.

As a general rule of thumb, always log in to your system as a regular user account, such as my rtracy user account. Only when I need root level access to perform a particular task do I use the su command to switch to root. I perform whatever task I'm supposed to do as root, and then when I'm done, I exit back out to my standard user account.

[Summary 3:32-3:47]

That's it for this demonstration. In this demo we talked about using the su command. We used su first to switch to a standard user account on the system. Then we used su to switch to the root user account. Then we ended this demonstration by talking about the proper use of the root account on a Linux system.

Copyright © 2022 TestOut Corporation All rights reserved.