**Journal of Computer Science and Technology Studies**
ISSN: 2709-104X
DOI: 10.32996/jcsts
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/jcsts

JCSTS
AL-KINDI CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Cloud Identity Debt: Quantifying and Managing the Risk of Over-Provisioned Access in Enterprise Cloud Transformation

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**| ABSTRACT**

In the midst of rapid enterprise cloud adoption, a subtle yet significant security vulnerability often goes unnoticed: cloud identity debt. Think of it as the digital equivalent of clutter, where excessive, unused, or orphaned access rights accumulate in dynamic cloud environments. It's a growing security risk that goes against the fundamental principle of least privilege, essentially widening the door for potential breaches. Like technical debt in software development, identity debt represents deferred governance costs that only grow over time, increasing the likelihood of a security incident. This article introduces a robust framework to understand, measure, and fix this critical security issue using the Identity Debt Quotient (IDQ), a new metric that quantifies over-provisioned access in cloud environments. This mismatch often leads to "permission bloat," a surge in service accounts, and significant gaps in governance. To truly address this, organizations need sophisticated strategies. Researchers talking about combining automated entitlement reviews, smart policy-based provisioning, and integrated analytics with strong governance structures. By putting these measurement and remediation strategies into practice, organizations can significantly shrink their attack surface and optimize their governance resources, leading to sustainable identity debt management in complex cloud environments.

**| KEYWORDS**

Cloud identity debt, permission over-provisioning, identity governance, least privilege, access lifecycle management

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 12 July 2025 **PUBLISHED:** 01 August 2025 **DOI:** 10.32996/jcsts.2025.7.8.32

## Introduction

Enterprise cloud adoption has accelerated dramatically, with global cloud infrastructure spending reaching $178.3 billion in 2024, representing a 23.7% year-over-year increase. This transformation introduces complex identity governance challenges as organizations migrate from static on-premises environments to dynamic cloud infrastructures [1]. "Cloud Identity Debt"—the accumulated burden of excessive, unused, or orphaned access rights—represents a critical yet under-examined security vulnerability in cloud ecosystems. Comprehensive analysis across 312 enterprise environments reveals organizations accumulate an average of 5,834 unnecessary permissions per 1,000 identities within six months of cloud migration, with this figure escalating to 11,267 permissions by month twelve, creating a 214% expansion in potential attack surface. The accumulation rate accelerates most rapidly during the third month post-migration when operational demands typically override governance considerations [2].

Similar to technical debt in software development, cloud identity debt represents deferred governance costs that compound over time, with 78.3% of organizations reporting significant challenges in measuring and remediating excessive permissions across hybrid environments. The economic impact of unmanaged identity debt is substantial, with the average data breach involving over-provisioned cloud access costing $3.86 million, approximately 2.4 times higher than incidents where proper permission boundaries were maintained. Research indicates that permissions associated with terminated employees remain active for an average of 63 days in cloud environments, compared to just 4.2 days in well-governed on-premises systems. Analysis of 17,432

cloud security incidents across financial services, healthcare, and manufacturing sectors demonstrated that 72.6% involved exploitation of excessive permissions that violated least-privilege principles [1].

84.3% of organizations utilize cloud services with identity configurations exceeding functional requirements by 37.8% on average, with only 23.4% implementing systematic processes to measure permission utilization. 62% of organizations lack confidence in their ability to identify and remediate unnecessary access rights, with 71% reporting increased complexity in permission management following cloud migration. Most concerning, the average enterprise maintains 176 orphaned privileged accounts across cloud environments, with a mean time to discovery extending to 68 days, significantly exceeding the 24-hour detection window recommended by leading security frameworks [2]. Organizations implementing automated entitlement review processes experience 42.3% faster identification of excessive permissions and achieve 27.6% greater reduction in overall identity debt compared to those relying on manual processes. Despite recognition of these risks, only 31% of surveyed organizations have established formal metrics for cloud identity debt, indicating a substantial gap between governance awareness and operational implementation that must be addressed through comprehensive identity analytics, lifecycle optimization, and policy-driven governance mechanisms [2].

**Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

The conceptual foundation of cloud identity debt integrates multiple theoretical disciplines, establishing a nuanced framework for analyzing access governance challenges during digital transformation. Technical debt theory, when extended to identity management contexts, provides critical insights into the accumulation of security liabilities through deferred governance decisions. An extensive analysis of 183 cloud migration initiatives across financial services organizations documented that 73.8% of enterprises accumulate significant identity governance liabilities within the first 12 months of migration. Economic analysis revealed that organizations implementing formal identity governance methodologies during initial migration phases realized an average 27.6% reduction in operational costs, translating to approximately $328,000 in annual savings for mid-sized enterprises. Moreover, research established that cloud environments with unstructured permission models experienced 3.2 times higher security incident rates compared to organizations with formalized governance frameworks, with each security breach associated with an average financial impact of $3.86 million when excessive permissions were implicated [3].

The theoretical underpinnings of measuring cloud identity debt derive from least privilege principles, which face unprecedented challenges in modern cloud architectures. Analysis of access patterns across 42 enterprise environments documented that the average AWS role contains 41.7 distinct permissions, compared to 9.4 in equivalent on-premises roles, representing a 343% increase in permission complexity [3]. A comprehensive audit of 124,872 cloud permission sets revealed that 64.2% of provisioned permissions remained completely unused during a standard 90-day measurement period, with an additional 21.3% utilized fewer than five times. This under-utilization creates substantial security vulnerabilities, as demonstrated by statistical analysis establishing a significant correlation ($r=0.73$, $p<0.001$) between permission over-provisioning and security incidents. Research further documented that each 10% increase in unused permissions corresponds with a 19.7% higher probability of data exfiltration events across examined organizations [3].

Most concerning, 77.3% of surveyed organizations lacked automated mechanisms to measure permission utilization in cloud environments, with only 12.4% implementing continuous monitoring of access patterns [4]. This governance gap contributes to permission accumulation rates of approximately 24.6% annually in the absence of systematic entitlement reviews. Organizations implementing identity analytics solutions demonstrated 57.2% improvement in permission rationalization outcomes compared to manual governance approaches, with machine learning models trained on 1.8 million access events achieving 87.3% accuracy in predicting unnecessary permissions based on role function and industry vertical. These quantitative findings underscore the critical importance of developing robust theoretical frameworks that align governance principles with operational cloud security practices while addressing the unique challenges of complex, granular permission models inherent to modern cloud architectures [4].

| Usage Category | Percentage of Provisioned Permissions |
|---|---|
| Never Used (0 times in 90 days) | 64.20% |
| Rarely Used (1-2 times in 90 days) | 13.80% |
| Occasionally Used (3-5 times in 90 days) | 7.50% |
| Moderately Used (6-15 times in 90 days) | 8.70% |
| Frequently Used (>15 times in 90 days) | 5.80% |

Table 1: Analysis of actual permission utilization patterns in cloud environments [4]

**Quantifying Cloud Identity Debt**

Empirical measurement of cloud identity debt requires sophisticated quantitative analysis frameworks that capture the multidimensional nature of over-provisioned access in modern cloud environments. A comprehensive quantitative framework for evaluating security risks in cloud environments through composite metrics can be effectively adapted to measure identity debt [5]. Analysis of 176 cloud deployments established that security risk quantification utilizing weighted metrics demonstrates 73.2% higher accuracy in predicting vulnerability exploitation compared to binary assessment approaches. Building upon this methodology, the Identity Debt Quotient (IDQ) can be calculated through a weighted formula: IDQ = (UP × WU) + (EP × WE) + (OP × WO), where UP represents unused permissions (measured as percentage of provisioned permissions without utilization during the measurement period), EP represents excessive permissions (permissions exceeding functional requirements), and OP represents orphaned permissions (permissions associated with terminated identities). Research across financial services, healthcare, and government sectors documented average weighted security risk scores of 37.8%, 32.4%, and 28.7%, respectively, which closely aligns with observed identity debt distributions in these industries.

Experimental application of this framework across 43 cloud environments revealed that permissions with utilization rates below 3.7% exhibited a 91.2% probability of being permanently unnecessary, with each excessive permission adding approximately $23.84 in annualized risk cost based on breach probability calculations. The research established statistically significant correlations between security risk scores and breach incidents ($p<0.001$), with organizations in the highest risk quartile experiencing 342% more security incidents compared to those in the lowest quartile. The study further documented that 76.3% of organizations lacked quantitative frameworks for measuring identity-related security risks, relying instead on qualitative assessments that demonstrated only a 31.7% correlation with actual security outcomes [5].

Machine learning approaches significantly enhance the precision of identity debt measurements, as demonstrated through sophisticated models for detecting security anomalies in cloud environments. An ensemble classification model, trained on 8.7 million access events, achieved 89.4% accuracy in identifying unnecessary permissions while reducing false positives by 57.8% compared to traditional rule-based approaches [6]. Research established that deep learning models utilizing temporal features outperformed static analysis by 23.7% in detecting access anomalies, with neural networks demonstrating particular effectiveness in identifying credential misuse patterns. Time-series analysis revealed a strong correlation ($r=0.79$) between rapid cloud adoption and security control deterioration, with organizations migrating more than 30% of workloads quarterly experiencing 3.2 times higher security incident rates compared to those implementing phased approaches. Most concerning, the average detection window for compromised cloud credentials extended to 53 days, with privileged access exploitation remaining undetected for an average of 27.6 days, creating substantial opportunities for lateral movement within compromised environments. These findings underscore the critical importance of implementing sophisticated quantitative frameworks for measuring identity debt that combine traditional security metrics with advanced machine learning approaches to provide accurate risk visibility across complex multi-cloud environments [6].

| Industry Sector | Average Weighted Security Risk Score | Mean Time to Discovery (Days) |
|---|---|---|
| Financial Services | 37.80% | 53 |
| Healthcare | 32.40% | 68 |
| Government | 28.70% | 72 |
| Retail | 26.50% | 61 |
| Manufacturing | 29.30% | 57 |

Table 2: Industry-specific identity debt measurements and orphaned account distribution [5]

**Identity Lifecycle Mismanagement in Cloud Environments**

The accumulation of cloud identity debt frequently originates from systematic deficiencies in identity lifecycle management processes during enterprise cloud transformation initiatives. Research examining multi-cloud identity governance challenges found 74.3% of organizations struggle with maintaining consistent identity controls across diverse cloud platforms, with 82.1% reporting significant increases in administrative overhead following multi-cloud adoption [7]. Analysis of 142 enterprises revealed that traditional joiner-mover-leaver (JML) workflows designed for static on-premises environments demonstrate only 27.4% effectiveness when applied to dynamic cloud ecosystems without significant modification. Organizations with fragmented identity management across multiple cloud providers experience 3.2 times longer offboarding completion times, with deprovisioning processes requiring an average of 11.7 days compared to 3.6 days in environments with unified identity governance. Most

concerning, the study documented that approximately 23.8% of all cloud permissions remain associated with departed identities for an average of 67 days after termination, creating substantial security vulnerabilities that account for 31.7% of cloud security incidents analyzed during the research period [7].

Detailed examination of lifecycle management deficiencies across 128 enterprise environments identified critical patterns that disproportionately contribute to identity debt accumulation. A mixed-methods analysis combining a quantitative assessment of 3.7 million permission grants with qualitative interviews of 216 security practitioners established that 79.6% of organizations lack automated processes for detecting excessive permissions during role transitions. This governance gap results in permission accumulation rates of approximately 37.2% annually in the absence of systematic entitlement reviews, with each role change generating an average of 8.4 unnecessary permissions that persist for a mean duration of 317 days. Research further documented that the transition from coarse-grained on-premises roles (average of 9.3 distinct permissions) to fine-grained cloud permission sets (average of 34.6 distinct permissions) creates 272% permission inflation when legacy access patterns are replicated without optimization [8]. This phenomenon manifests most acutely in hybrid environments where synchronized identities maintain dual permission sets, resulting in 3.1 times higher identity debt compared to cloud-native organizations implementing clean-slate permission models. Service account proliferation presents particularly severe governance challenges, with non-human identities receiving 4.7 times more permissions than human accounts performing equivalent functions. Statistical analysis revealed that 86.3% of service accounts lack formal ownership assignment, 93.1% operate without periodic certification requirements, and 71.4% remain active indefinitely without expiration controls—creating a rapidly expanding identity debt surface that represents 27.3% of total observed access governance liabilities across examined organizations [8].

| Environment Type | JML Workflow Effectiveness | Average Days Permissions Remain After Termination | Permission Accumulation Rate (Annual) | Successful Offboarding Rate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Well-governed On-premises | 89.60% | 4.2 | 7.30% | 96.80% |
| Hybrid Environment | 41.30% | 47.5 | 31.40% | 68.20% |
| Multi-cloud Environment | 27.40% | 63 | 37.20% | 52.70% |
| Single Cloud Provider | 53.80% | 37.2 | 28.60% | 71.40% |
| Cloud-native Organization | 61.70% | 22.8 | 18.30% | 82.30% |

Table 3: Effectiveness of identity lifecycle management processes across environment types [7]

**Remediation Strategies and Governance Frameworks**

Effective remediation of cloud identity debt requires sophisticated approaches combining technological solutions with comprehensive governance frameworks. Research examining security challenges in cloud computing environments found that organizations implementing structured governance frameworks demonstrate 68.7% higher effectiveness in addressing security vulnerabilities compared to those utilizing ad-hoc approaches. Analysis of 47 cloud security implementation case studies established that identity and access management deficiencies represent the most prevalent security concern, accounting for 37.4% of documented vulnerabilities across examined environments [9]. Organizations implementing automated review processes realized an average reduction of 32.8% in security incidents directly attributable to access governance failures, with enterprises achieving mature implementation status experiencing 73.2% lower breach probability compared to those with immature governance. The research documented that comprehensive security assessment methodologies incorporating identity analytics demonstrated 81.3% higher detection rates for excessive permission configurations compared to traditional security scanning approaches, with automated remediation workflows reducing mean time to resolution by 67.4% [9].

A comprehensive analysis examining governance frameworks for cloud environments established that integrated remediation approaches significantly outperform isolated strategies. Research across 156 organizations implementing cloud governance initiatives documented that enterprises adopting AI-powered identity analytics for permission optimization experienced 57.3% lower identity debt accumulation compared to those relying on manual review processes. Organizations implementing dynamic policy-based provisioning at the access creation point demonstrated particularly impressive outcomes, with just-in-time access provisioning reducing standing privileges by 76.2% and context-aware authorization decreasing permission exploitation incidents

by 64.7%. The integration of identity analytics with comprehensive security monitoring platforms emerged as a critical success factor, with organizations implementing unified visibility achieving 49.6% faster remediation velocity compared to those utilizing siloed tools [10]. Statistical modeling revealed that governance maturity explains 71.8% of the variance in remediation effectiveness, with cross-functional governance frameworks incorporating representation from security, operations, compliance, and business stakeholders achieving optimal outcomes[10]. Most notably, organizations establishing formal risk management committees with executive sponsorship demonstrated 3.7 times higher implementation success rates compared to those without structured governance[10]. Research further documented that implementing automated attestation workflows, distributing certification responsibilities across appropriate resource owners, resulted in 82.4% higher completion rates while reducing administrative overhead by 41.7%, creating sustainable governance processes that prevent debt recurrence[10]. These findings underscore the critical importance of implementing comprehensive remediation strategies that combine technological solutions with mature governance frameworks to address the complex challenges of identity debt in modern cloud environments [9].

| Remediation Approach | Identity Debt Reduction | Administrative Overhead Reduction | Mean Time to Implement (Days) | Implementation Success Rate | ROI (12-month) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AI-powered Analytics | 57.30% | 41.70% | 64 | 68.70% | 3.4x |
| Just-in-time Provisioning | 76.20% | 54.30% | 87 | 61.40% | 4.2x |
| Automated Certification | 43.80% | 62.10% | 42 | 73.60% | 2.8x |
| Integrated CSPM Tools | 49.60% | 37.80% | 56 | 82.10% | 3.7x |

Table 4: Comparative effectiveness of different identity debt remediation strategies [10]

## Conclusion

Cloud identity debt represents a significant yet frequently overlooked security and compliance challenge in enterprise cloud transformation initiatives. The accumulation of excessive, unused, and orphaned access rights creates an expanded attack surface that violates least-privilege principles and increases organizational risk exposure. Traditional identity lifecycle workflows demonstrate limited effectiveness when applied to dynamic cloud ecosystems, creating systematic deficiencies in governance processes. The Identity Debt Quotient (IDQ) provides a structured approach to quantifying this risk through a composite measurement of unused permissions, excessive permissions, and orphaned permissions, enabling organizations to establish appropriate governance thresholds. Effective remediation requires sophisticated approaches combining technological solutions with comprehensive governance frameworks, including automated entitlement reviews, policy-based provisioning, and integration of identity analytics with security monitoring platforms. Cross-functional governance committees with executive sponsorship represent a critical success factor in sustainable debt reduction, while automated attestation workflows distribute certification responsibilities across appropriate resource owners to prevent debt recurrence. As cloud transformation initiatives continue to accelerate, proactive management of identity debt becomes increasingly critical to maintaining security posture and regulatory compliance. By establishing continuous monitoring and automated remediation workflows, organizations can address the complex challenges of identity debt in modern cloud environments while optimizing governance resources to support business objectives.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.
**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.


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