Benchmarking in Dutch education sector

Universities have been the founding fathers of the internet, recognizing the power of sharing data and collaboration with peers across large distances. At the start of the millennium the networks of universities were mainly open, with free access to all systems, all servers, all workstations. Researchers recognised the power of internet and used it massively. With the openness and easy access to large amounts of storage, computing and bandwidth came the other side of the coin: large scale abuse of facilities and large scale compromising of workstations. A 2002 report showed that despite having security officers, universities were not in control.

Coblue helped SURF set up a relevant sector wide cyber security maturity assessment and benchmark.

The collaborative ICT organisation for Dutch higher education and research institutions in The Netherlands (SURF) and some leading Dutch universities[1] wanted to address the issues and joined forces to work more efficiently. The longstanding active university incident response community recognized more was necessary to tackle the challenges academics and scholars were facing. The educational sector needed policies and a general, national approach in the sector with regards to security policies and organising mutual trust.

The bundling of forces has resulted in a largely used guidance framework with a comprehensive set of policies, guidelines, starter kits and instructions. This has resulted in a controlling framework, based on the ISO27k-family, for information security. Key is that the whole sector, both on board level as well on ICT and information security levels, has agreed upon the selection of controls in this framework.

The sector also agreed on periodical assessments for monitoring the maturity of information security implementation and processes. In 2007 the Dutch academic community started with measuring the maturity of information security. In order to add even more value, the sector wanted to benchmark the individual assessments.

Our solution

While at first the assessments were supported by spreadsheets, the community requested a dedicated easy-to-use benchmark tool. It should support both the information security professional and the IT professional who is responsible for the system and internal and external audits. SURF asked Coblue Cybersecurity to help organise this benchmark and to automate the assessment using benchmark platform Coable.

Results overview report; report screen of Coable

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[1] The Netherlands has 14 academic research universities and approx. 40 universities of applied sciences

Coable allows a benchmark to be more than just a snapshot. It should give an organisation actionable insight, like information about the improvement process and how improvements can be made.

Benchmark comparison reports; report screen of Coable

Universities can perform bi-yearly benchmarks using Coable, and can compare their scores with the scores of their peers. They can monitor their progress by performing regular self-assessments for the whole organisation, for departments or for specific information systems. Peer audits, a fraternal review of the assessment a university has made, enlarge the trust in this system.

Benchmark platform Coable supports all these functions and groups. It is fully multi-lingual. It gives a comprehensive overview of the state of information security within a university, while still supplying access to all necessary details about the framework and about the evidence needed for proving a certain maturity level.

Impact and result

SURF organizes annual benchmark rounds which are facilitated by the Coable benchmark platform. This creates awareness from top to bottom.

The benchmark rounds gain more traction and attention each year. More than fourty higher education and research institutions joined for the 2014 benchmark.

Management reports help the top of the organisation understand much more needs to be done than initially expected with organisations scoring a 1.8 out of 5 on average.

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