Safelinks Summary

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Information Services Group

Security Context

The global cyber threat continues to increase and compromise via email remains a key vector to gain access to organisations to exploit data. The National Cyber Security Centre, highlight that high profile University institutions (particularly those that have significant research data) are specifically being targeted. The University of Edinburgh recognise that threat and have invested in Information Security to help reduce the risk. ISG support utilising the University's existing investments in software including Microsoft 365 and Multi Factor Authentication.

ISG supports around 56k user email accounts, using a range of clients including 46k regular users of Outlook on the Web, 43k for Outlook Mobile, 8k using other mobile clients and 23k using desktop Outlook (Windows or Mac). We also have around 750 users of other email clients such as alpine.

Issue

On 12th Dec 2023, as part of the University's overall cyber security approach ISG implemented Microsoft Safe Links to our Microsoft Tenancy.

The introduction of Safe Links was categorised as delivering an incremental improvement to our overall cyber security controls across our user base by testing URLs for malicious payloads. Unfortunately, as the impact of this change was not correctly assessed or communicated, this change impacted some of our staff and students (predominately in the College of Science and Engineering (CSE)). ISG sincerely apologise for this mistake and are working together with CSE colleagues to reduce the impact by exempting specific web sites and individuals.

Safe Links is part of Microsoft's Defender platform and helps better protect users (staff and students) from malicious links in emails. Safe Links checks links/URLs to see if they are malicious or safe before loading the web page. If the link leads to an attachment, the attachment will be scanned for malware. If the link is identified as insecure, the user is taken to a page displaying a warning message. Safe Links also scans any documents available on that link at the time of click to prevent malicious file downloads to user devices.

In summary, Safe Links service is part of Microsoft 365 Advanced Threat Protection (ATP) for organisations, that are designed to protect users from cyber-attacks via email links.

Information including the form for exempting sites are available here:https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/help-consultancy/it-help/email-and-office365/microsoft-365-safe-links

The impact

ISG thank our colleagues in CSE for highlighting the impact on our staff and students and acknowledge the impact of Safe Links on the usability of email.

This prevents users of emails, in particular plain text emails from communicating effectively over email about web addresses and other URLs.

Actions agreed - ISG are progressing: -

- Reviewing the process on change/releases to identify improvements in assessment of changes.
- Initiating a project to rollout security features in a package known as Defender for Office 365 with CSE involvement
- Have now prevented user email addresses being included in encoded URLs

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- Sharing the process on how to request a site to be exempted and include Q&A – if a group of key sites are identified then ISG will progress those without the need to be individually requested
- Updated 365 service information also link to support https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/help-consultancy/it-help/email-and-office365/microsoft-365-safe-links
- A process for exempting websites is in place
- ISG will temporarily exempt from Safe Links substantially impacted staff.
- Working with colleagues in CSE and any other network users to answer the questions raised and update our Q&A

ISG commits to ongoing collaboration with colleagues from CSE for the purpose of evaluating the effects of Safe Links. This task will be taken forward by Fiona Vine, CSE Head of IT.

On behalf of ISG

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