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VIRTUAL CHIEF INFORMATION SECURITY OFFICER SERVICES HELP HIGHER-EDUCATION INSTITUTE IMPROVE IT SECURITY AND CONTROL COSTS

CONTEXT:

This 70-year-old state agency and higher-education research institute includes 700 professionals, students, and support staff from 38 different countries. Its researchers play a key role in professional education, training students both in the laboratory and in the classroom. The Institute has a vast network of more than 200 public and private research sponsors, including cities, counties, and other US states, the US government, private companies, and airports. When the Institute had a vacancy in their Chief Information Security Officer role, the organization decided to hire Columbia Advisory Group as its Virtual CISO to secure higher-level expertise within departmental budget constraints.

CHALLENGES:

Although cybersecurity concerns continued to be of increasing importance, the mid-sized organization's CIO realized that their needs exceeded their personnel budget. As a state agency and educational institution, the Institute required a partner to advise on compliance with NIST 800-171, NIST 800-53, FERPA, and TAC 202. In addition, the organization was only a few months away from their next two-year reporting deadline to the State, requiring a Risk Register, Security Plan and Security Program. The CIO for the Institute explains, "We faced significant security concerns, but we couldn't absorb the cost of a qualified, full-time CISO when ours accepted a promotion. We had heard about Columbia Advisory Group through their work with peer institutions, and we decided to consider their services in lieu of making another hire."

STRATEGIES:

Columbia Advisory Group began by filling the CISO role on a six-month interim basis, assigning an experienced vCISO with certifications in CISSP, CCSP, CCNP, MCITP. The assigned vCISO and CAG had a track record of success with NIST 800-171 and 800-53, FERPA and TAC 202 in the context of an educational and research institution. CAG's extensive references reassured the Institute that they were more than adequately qualified to provide policy guidance and fill the role. The Institute realized that they would still need someone to execute the security strategy day-to-day, so they also promoted an operational IT staff member into a junior cybersecurity role to work closely with the new vCISO on policies.

OUTCOMES:

The Institute found that CAG's virtual Chief Information Security Officer services increased the overall effectiveness of the security program while offering modest savings. CAG implementation of a vCISO saved the Institute 40% compared to the cost of a full-time CISO. The Institute was able to repurpose some of the saved funds for organizational development by transitioning an internal IT operator into a junior security role, resulting in 20% increased support for the IT department. Moreover, the junior security person is being mentored by the CAG vCISO, resulting in a stronger bench for the institute as well as personal career advancement for the employee.

The CAG vCISO program is very closely aligned with constantly changing requirements of Texas DIR and TAC 202, which directly benefits the Institute's policies and decision-making when they may be too busy to remain apprised of the changes. Since the vCISO program provides both the attention of a senior CISO and the knowledge base of the entire CAG cybersecurity practice group, the Institute benefits from that entire body of knowledge.

"We have found CAG to be responsive and efficient at leading and managing all cybersecurity projects and needs. CAG provides product and tool recommendations for security monitoring as part of our vCISO service, helping us make more nimble and cost-effective solutions," explains the Institute's CIO. "As part of the vCISO service, CAG provides ongoing vulnerability scans, more often than the organization did previously. Our vCISO is fully integrated into weekly staff meetings and meets with researchers and staff regularly. Sometimes the vCISO acts as the 'heavy' when tough decisions need to be communicated to researchers and stakeholders regarding cybersecurity and their work. The voice of his expertise and seniority within higher education data security circles adds weight to these decisions."

The Institute struggled at first with the decision to outsource. "We were concerned about the level of attention and quality of service we'd have when hiring a vCISO and worried that we would lose control, but our experience has proven that those fears were unfounded. The opposite is actually true. The level of attention and quality of service has been improved. We have a strategic and an operational resource where we used to have one person attempting to do both, and our costs have improved," this CIO said. "I really appreciate the insight and professionalism CAG brings to my team. I would recommend CAG to anyone needing cybersecurity support."

ABOUT CAG: CAG is a highly experienced IT consulting firm. With 100+ years of combined technology experience and business acumen, CAG's team has assessed and helped improve the performance of more than 300 technology organizations and IT departments. By focusing on simple, meaningful, and practical solutions combined with straight-forward analysis and recommendations, CAG's team has experience in many regulatory and economic environments with companies and organizations of all sizes. CAG not only offers a deep understanding of IT, but its solutions are software and hardware agnostic. Whether a client is high growth or economically challenged, CAG can adapt to the complexities and nuances of that business. Based in Dallas, Texas, CAG works extensively with clients throughout the U.S. For more information, visit **columbiaadvisory.com**