



CSA STAR Certification is boosting assurance to customers of one of the UK's fastest-growing IT service providers

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Fergus Kennedy,
Head of Compliance and Information Systems, Pulsant

Customer objectives

- Demonstrate cloud security
- Reassure customers
- Build on existing standards
- Underpin future growth

Customer benefits

- Improved cloud security controls
- Visible best practice
- Powerful customer assurance
- Wider business improvement
- Industry leadership
- Competitive advantage

Customer background

Pulsant has been providing high quality IT infrastructure services since 1995. Today, it is one of the UK's largest providers of managed hosting, managed networks, managed application, colocation and cloud services – and one of the UK's fastest-growing private technology companies, with annual sales growth accelerating in the last three years to average 62%.

The company employs around 180 staff and has a turnover of about £38m. With its headquarters in Reading, it owns 10 data centres in five locations across the country, with customers ranging from SMEs through to large private and public sector organizations. It is a recognized business partner of Microsoft, Red Hat and HP and holds a royal warrant as a service provider to the Royal Household.

Why certification?

Pulsant recognizes that to be successful in its highly competitive, rapidly changing industry it has to meet very high standards in its technology and processes. As a result, it has long held certification to management system standards ISO 9001 (quality) and ISO/IEC 27001 (information security), which it applies rigorously throughout its business.

More recently, in October 2013, it also became one of the first organizations to achieve CSA STAR Certification, the new independently audited security verification for cloud service providers. The technology-neutral certification is based on the requirements of ISO/IEC 27001, together with the Cloud Security Alliance's (CSA) Cloud Control Matrix (CCM), and measures the security capability levels of a cloud service provider.

Fergus Kennedy, Head of Compliance and Information Systems at Pulsant, says, "Both ISO/IEC 27001 and ISO 9001 are internationally recognized and respected standards, and these do provide significant assurance to customers around processes and controls related to cloud deployment. But these standards do not necessarily address in sufficient detail the unique security challenges faced in operating cloud platforms."

CSA STAR Certification enables Pulsant to present customers with specific assurance

CSA STAR Certification

of the security of its cloud proposition, increasing their confidence at a crucial time, as the cloud market continues to expand.

Benefits

"Pulsant delivers secure cloud products, but the lack of appropriate assurance mechanisms has made this hard to convey in basic terms to customers – until now," says Kennedy. "CSA STAR Certification is a tremendous leap forward."

He expands, "It wouldn't make any business sense for us to be too transparent about our security policies and controls, because by going public we could compromise them." In addition, Kennedy explains that the technical nature of IT security would make it difficult for many customers to understand protective measures. "The problem is, what can we tell our customers?"

CSA STAR Certification solves the dilemma, building on ISO/IEC 27001 through the addition of specific cloud-focused controls. "Our customers want to know that we are 'doing security right', and in a market where the number of vendors is increasing, they need confidence they are selecting the best vendor for their needs," says Kennedy.

He adds, "While no certification can guarantee 100% security, the CSA STAR Certification offers a path to improvement that's truly rigorous. And because it is audited by an independent body, it holds infinitely more weight than existing self-assessment/self-declaration models."

Implementation

Pulsant has made relatively light work of implementing the CSA STAR Certification controls because it has always taken a thorough approach to cloud security, and therefore already had technology and processes in place that met many of the requirements for CSA STAR Certification.

"We've been involved with the internet since the early days, and we've had cloud offerings for over five years, so in terms of security there is maturity in our platform," says Kennedy. "In addition, we implemented a total redesign in early 2013 that was largely focused on satisfying security requirements."

An initial 'gap analysis' however, did reveal the need for some modifications. Kennedy cites

two examples: indicators of key risk areas were added to diagrams of Pulsant's cloud solutions – this demonstrates how the CSA STAR Certification scheme can make security issues clearer to customers; and security controls required for Pulsant's cloud platform were also applied to the company's general management network – which shows how CSA STAR implementation can benefit other areas of the business.

"Implementing the requirements is about improving the business, not just fighting for the badge. We have definitely learned from the process," he says.

BSI's role

Right from the start, BSI played an integral role in Pulsant's journey to CSA STAR Certification. "When I saw from BSI that a cloud-specific information security scheme was being developed, I got straight on the phone!" says Kennedy. "I've always had a good relationship with BSI and we could both immediately see the benefits of working together. Contributing to the development process of a new standard was very stimulating."

Pulsant was invited by BSI to become part of a pilot scheme for the program, with BSI conducting the initial gap analysis and, as an accredited CSA Certification body, ultimately auditing and awarding its maturity at the Silver Level.

Looking ahead, Kennedy believes the benefits of certification will far outweigh the costs, "which are no more than the cost of adding additional controls to any management system".

He continues, "As the managed services industry matures, and the need for customer assurance increases, there will be a greater demand for cloud providers with the appropriate credentials. Customers are becoming more aware of what to look for and which questions to ask."

Kennedy concludes, "CSA STAR Certification is a very positive addition to our industry and it's a very positive market differentiator for Pulsant. An independent auditor has said 'yes', we are addressing cloud security risks, and that's what customers want to hear."