Implementing Risk-Based Vulnerability Management

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Table of Contents

3 Foundational Vulnerability Management Framework

5 Risk-Based Vulnerability Management (RBVM)
   5 Five Pillars to Building a Risk-Based Vulnerability Management Program

6 Unlock the Value of Qualys VMDR to Drive a Risk-Based VM Program
   7 Automate Asset Discovery with Near Real-Time Visibility
   7 Assign Business Context and Criticality to High-Value Assets
   7 Use Qualys TruRisk™ to Prioritize and Remediate the Most Critical Threats
   9 Visualize Prioritization and Monitor Trends with Real-Time Dashboards
   10 Reduce Risk with Automated Vulnerability Remediation

10 References
Foundational Vulnerability Management Framework

Establishing a Vulnerability Management program enables an organization to properly identify, prioritize, and remediate vulnerabilities on information technology assets used to conduct business operations. A mature vulnerability management program is a foundational element of any functioning cybersecurity program.

Organizations should choose to adopt a successful program strategy to apply high-level functions; to identify, protect, detect, and respond to vulnerability management. Each function defines key objectives that can be incorporated into a vulnerability management process. Meeting these key objectives will contribute to a more mature cybersecurity strategy.
Identify
Develop an understanding of information assets that are used to meet business needs and the risk to business operations
✓ Inventory assets, software, and applications
✓ Assign business context and criticality to an asset
✓ Ingest threat intelligence and map it to vulnerabilities
✓ Use threats, vulnerabilities, likelihood, and impact to prioritize remediation

Protect
Implement safeguards to limit the impact of a malicious event
✓ Document a vulnerability management plan to include policies, processes, procedures, and controls

Detect
Implement solutions to identify vulnerabilities
✓ Perform vulnerability scans and continually assess the effectiveness of the scans

Respond
Implement activities to act on new vulnerabilities
✓ Investigate and remediate findings
✓ Establish processes on how to respond to vulnerabilities
✓ Certain vulnerabilities identified are accepted within risk tolerance or subject to risk reduction through mitigation where remediation is not possible

In addition to these key objectives, successful VM programs have a defined scope, exception tracking, reporting, and metrics. These functions and objectives are supported by the NIST Cybersecurity framework.¹

While these elements serve as an important foundation for vulnerability management the sheer number of vulnerabilities disclosed daily creates a challenge for Cybersecurity and IT teams seeking the most expedient way to reduce risk to the organization. Organizations should therefore pivot to a risk-based approach to address the most significant flaws to reduce risk to critical systems and make efficient use of limited resources.

¹ Framework for Improving Critical Infrastructure Cybersecurity
Risk-Based Vulnerability Management (RBVM)

The scale of vulnerabilities identified in large organizations in today's threat landscape has made the practice of managing them a seemingly endless challenge. Traditional vulnerability management programs tend to adopt an “everything is a risk” approach which leads to frustration among IT remediation teams to remediate an exponentially increasing pool of vulnerabilities many of which do not pose a real risk to the organization.

Instead of using arbitrary methods to prioritize remediation organizations should refine their remediation methods to enrich vulnerability data with business context, threat intelligence, data science, and machine learning to prioritize vulnerabilities that are most likely to be exploited thereby causing the most harm to a given organization. This requires vulnerability management programs to use more accurate methods of assessing risk to keep pace with evolving threats.

Five Pillars to Building a Risk-Based Vulnerability Management Program

1. Identify
   Build a comprehensive up-to-date inventory of all assets across modern fragmented IT environments. This includes on-premises, public cloud, mobile devices, OT environments, and items that are hosted outside of your network or that are internet-facing. Maintaining an asset inventory of hardware and software is core to any successful cybersecurity program.

2. Context
   Use business context to assign criticality to assets e.g., production assets hosting critical information vs dev systems. Use threat intelligence to enrich understanding of vulnerabilities e.g., which ones are exploited in the wild, have an exploit available, and the ease with which they can be exploited. These are vulnerabilities that are more likely to be exploited.

3. Assess
   Perform continuous vulnerability assessment to maintain an accurate picture of risk as often as possible. Perform secure configuration assessments to validate system hardening is consistent with adopted security controls based on industry standard guides such as Centre for Internet Security (CIS) or DISA STIGs.

4. Remedyate
   Use the combination of asset criticality assignment and threat intelligence to prioritize the remediation of vulnerabilities that pose the most significant risk to the business and mission-critical applications. Implement automation where possible to proactively patch and configure systems to reduce resource constraints on remediation teams. Automate ticket creation to assign vulnerability triage tasks to remediation teams for action.

5. Monitor
   Implement actionable metrics to convey risk to operational and executive teams. These metrics will aid in decisions on allocating resources to tackle risk items and measure program effectiveness.
Unlock the Value of Qualys VMDR to Drive a Risk-Based VM Program

Using a risk-based approach to remediating vulnerabilities is revolutionizing the way organizations traditionally approach vulnerability management with an all-or-nothing strategy of remediation. Prioritizing the remediation of vulnerabilities that are most likely to be exploited on critical systems will greatly improve risk posture and reduce remediation fatigue.

Qualys VMDR with Qualys TruRisk™ helps organizations quantify cyber risk so that they can accurately measure it, take steps to reduce exposure, track risk reduction trends over time, and better measure the effectiveness of their cyber security program. The chart below illustrates at a high level how teams can use VMDR to operationalize their risk-based vulnerability management program against the five pillars of RBVM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PILLAR</th>
<th>OBJECTIVE</th>
<th>QUALYS VMDR APPROACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify</td>
<td>Inventory Assets and Services Exposed to the Public Internet</td>
<td>Automate attack surface discovery using the Qualys Internet Scanners and Qualys Cybersecurity Asset Management (CSAM) with External Attack Surface Management (EASM)² to discover blind spots for internet-connected assets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inventory Internal On-Premises Assets</td>
<td>Automate asset discovery with Qualys VMDR by deploying Qualys scanner appliances, agents, passive sensors, and more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inventory Public Cloud Workloads</td>
<td>Configure Qualys Cloud connectors to inventory virtual workloads on Public Cloud accounts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Assign Criticality to Assets</td>
<td>Assign criticality to assets using Qualys TruRisk™ or directly import and assign business criticality to assets using Global AssetView or CSAM from a CMDB such as ServiceNow³.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess</td>
<td>Continuous Vulnerability Scanning</td>
<td>Perform regular vulnerability scanning of the environment using Qualys VMDR. Realtime vulnerability scanning every 4 hours or less with Qualys agents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>System Configuration Auditing and Security Hardening</td>
<td>Perform regular configuration audits using Qualys Secure Configuration Assessment (SCA).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RemEDIATE</td>
<td>Prioritize Vulnerability Remediation</td>
<td>Pinpoint vulnerabilities that pose the most risk to the organization by using Qualys TruRisk™ Qualys Detection Scores on critical assets. Automate remediation using Qualys Patch Management and dispatch tickets to remediation teams with Qualys VMDR for IT Service Management (ITSM) integration⁴.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor</td>
<td>Use Metrics to Evaluate Program Efficacy</td>
<td>Monitor asset posture in real time using Qualys dashboards that aggregate risk data with near real-time visibility.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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² Introducing CyberSecurity Asset Management 2.0 with Natively Integrated External Attack Surface Management
³ Implement Risk-Based Vulnerability Management with Qualys TruRisk™ Part 1
⁴ Close the Gap Between IT & Security with Our New App: Qualys VMDR for ITSM
Automate Asset Discovery with Near Real-Time Visibility

To effectively manage vulnerabilities based on risk, it is crucial to have a complete understanding of the complex and dispersed IT landscape. In addition to utilizing scanner tools, incorporating Qualys Cloud Agents and Qualys Cloud Connectors can provide real-time inventory data. Integrating with solutions such as ServiceNow CMDB and CSAM with EASM can also help identify additional assets and potential areas of vulnerability that may have been overlooked.

Assign Business Context and Criticality to High-Value Assets

Assign an asset criticality score (ACS) of 1-5 to assets to identify high-value assets in risk score calculation. ACS can be assigned dynamically through CMDB sync, asset tagging, or manually to each asset in Global AssetView or CSAM. The maximum asset criticality score is assigned when multiple tags are applied to the same asset.\(^5\)

Use Qualys TruRisk™ to Prioritize and Remediate the Most Critical Threats

Qualys TruRisk™ calculates a total risk score that represents the likelihood of exploitation by using business criticality, CVSS score, threat intelligence, and applied mitigation controls. Arbitrary-based scoring systems only represent the vulnerability metrics of the risk equation without consideration of real-time threat data that is commonly used to decide where the business needs to focus its efforts on trying to lower its risk exposure.

Qualys begins by assessing over 185K known CVEs including those that do not have a registered QID based on external threat and exploit intelligence and assigns it a Qualys Vulnerability Score (QVS).\(^6\)

Each vulnerability registered as a QID in the Qualys knowledge base is assigned a Qualys Detection Score (QDS) ranging from 0-100. The QDS score combines the QVS score with applied mitigation controls for a given vulnerability. In the case where multiple CVEs are assigned to a QID, the highest QVS is selected.\(^6\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QDS SCORE</th>
<th>SEVERITY</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt;=90</td>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>CVSS Critical, exploited in the wild, weaponized exploit available, trending on social media, and the dark web</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-89</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>CVSS Critical or High, weaponized exploit available but no evidence of exploitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-69</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>CVSS High, no exploits available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-39</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>CVSS Low, low risk of exploitation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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5. [Implement Risk-Based Vulnerability Management with Qualys TruRisk™: Part 1](#)
6. [In-Depth Look Into Data-Driven Science Behind Qualys TruRisk](#)
The platform uses a weighted average of all identified vulnerabilities identified by QDS on an asset and ACS to compute a score of 0-1000. Organizations can quickly identify assets that are in most critical need of remediation with TruRisk™.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TruRisk SCORE</th>
<th>SEVERITY</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>850-1000</td>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Mission-critical assets with multiple critical vulnerabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700-849</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High-value asset with multiple critical or high vulnerabilities or is exposed to the internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-699</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Moderate-value assets with critical or high vulnerabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-499</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low-value assets with multiple vulnerabilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cybersecurity programs calculate risk by applying the basic risk formula (Risk = Likelihood x Impact) to allow decision-makers to apply limited IT resources effectively.

**Risk = Likelihood x Impact**

Likelihood is calculated as (Threat x Vulnerabilities). By using Qualys TruRisk™ we can accurately gauge the threat portion of this equation instead of relying only on threat levels using CVSS or Qualys Severity levels alone.

**Risk = (Threat x Vulnerabilities) x Impact**

The TruRisk™ values that overlay this formula represent risk as an Asset Risk Score (ARS) that equals a weighted vulnerability Qualys Detection Score (QDS) multiplied by the impact that is determined by applying an Asset Criticality Score (ACS) on a given asset. The weighted average of vulnerabilities scales based on the count and severity of vulnerabilities identified on scanned assets.

**ARS = QDS (weighted average of vulnerabilities) x ACS**
Visualize Prioritization and Monitor Trends with Real-Time Dashboards

Qualys VMDR prioritization provides a risk-based view of assets. This customizable view can prioritize based on asset criticality, QDS, and TruRisk™ scores for focused remediation. VMDR reporting now includes QDS, ACS, and ARS values.

Use Qualys Dashboards with prioritization data to review organizational risk posture with near real-time visibility. The dashboards use prioritization data by gathering information from across the Qualys platform captured by the suite of sensors to a single place for visualization. Customize TruRisk™ dashboard widgets with trending enabled to demonstrate risk reduction over time and measure the effectiveness of the vulnerability management program.

Figure 1 Qualys TruRisk™ Quickly Visualizes Prioritization of Assets for Remediation

Figure 2 Customize trending Qualys dashboards to monitor and trend risk posture

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7. [Implement Risk-Based Vulnerability Management with Qualys TruRisk™: Part 3](#)
8. [A Deep Dive into VMDR 2.0 with Qualys TruRisk™](#)
Reduce Risk with Automated Vulnerability Remediation

The ad-hoc prioritization report shows vulnerabilities with available patches which can be sent to Qualys Patch Management for individual remediation. Proactive patching can be set up using automated deployments to reduce MTTR for critical assets’ newly discovered vulnerabilities.

Examples of automated zero-touch patch policies:

- External or Internet Facing assets with a vulnerability score (QDS) >= 90
- High Value Assets with an ACS of 4 or 5 with a vulnerability score (QDS) >= 90
- Remediate client-side vulnerabilities in browsers (Google Chrome, Firefox) with a score of 90 or higher

Read the following blogs for more information on implementing a risk-based vulnerability management program with VMDR.

References

A Deep Dive into VMDR 2.0 with Qualys TruRisk™
Implement Risk-Based Vulnerability Management with Qualys TruRisk™: Part 1
Implement Risk-Based Vulnerability Management with Qualys TruRisk™: Part 2
Implement Risk-Based Vulnerability Management with Qualys TruRisk™: Part 3
In-Depth Look Into Data-Driven Science Behind Qualys TruRisk
Risk-based Remediation Powered by Patch Management in Qualys VMDR 2.0
Introducing CyberSecurity Asset Management 2.0 with Natively Integrated External Attack Surface Management
Close the Gap Between IT & Security with Our New App: Qualys VMDR for ITSM
Framework for Improving Critical Infrastructure Cybersecurity

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