

Email poses an increasingly attractive vector for criminals to exploit. Most inboxes contain some form of confidential information, from chatter about new products, sensitive information between C-suite members and all the way to vendor payment authorization. Unauthorized access into email servers/inboxes is known as Business Email Compromise.

Microsoft Office 365 usage is also accelerating at an ever-increasing pace and adoption will not slow down anytime soon. The impending expiry of extended support for Exchange 2010, the need to support a remote workforce while the COVID-19 pandemic exists, or the simple allure of not needing to manage email servers; more businesses are moving their email services to Exchange Online in the Office 365 service.

The shared security model adopted by most cloud service shifts a portion of securing data to the customer. Microsoft is no different in this respect, and they have published their security support matrix here:

<https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/azure/security/fundamentals/shared-responsibility>. In this model, Microsoft will protect the platform by securing access to the physical components, making sure the underlying operating systems and applications are patched, and providing the customer the ability to apply network controls. The customer is then responsible for managing identity, defining access to data, and maintaining configuration of the service to meet the security needs of their organization.

The base configuration of Exchange Online is set to allow quick onboarding of customers and migration of email into the service with minimal barriers. The configuration does require tweaks in order to make it more secure. I aim to cover some of the more effective tweaks in this document.

## **Securing Identity**

Account takeover is one of the most common forms of breach in Office 365. Malicious actors commonly take advantage of reused passwords that are leaked in breaches, and short, easy to guess passwords are easily broken by password spraying attacks. Criminals find this vector one of the easiest to exploit, so here are some ways to make it harder for them to succeed.

**Identity source.** The following four authentication methods are available:

- Cloud only
- Directory sync with password hash
- Directory sync with pass through authentication
- Directory sync with Active Directory Federation Services

Most business migrate from an on premise Exchange system into Exchange Online and will already have Microsoft Active Directory (AD) in place. Part of the migration process is to synchronize identities from AD into Azure AD for use in Office 365. Microsoft has published a handy guide to help the implementer decide which path is better for their organization <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/azure/active-directory/hybrid/choose-ad-authn#decision-tree>

Azure AD has a number of feature you can use to detect and block risky login. Many of the premium features require the password hash be synchronized into Azure AD and work best when business users use the Microsoft Azure authentication portal. As Active Directory Federation does not synchronize the hash to Azure AD, many of the protections offered with Azure AD identity are not available with this authentication method.

**Multifactor Authentication (MFA).** There are two forms of MFA supported in Office 365:

- Office 365 MFA: this is managed through the Office 365 Admin portal, and is available to any consumer of the service.
- Azure Active Directory (Azure AD) MFA: this is managed through the Azure AD blade in the Azure Portal, and offers tight integration into other security services.

Both types support application based push notifications (Approve / Deny), text message (SMS) and voice based One-time Passcodes (OTP). While the consensus is that SMS and voice based OTP are not secure, the use of any MFA will raise security significantly.

Microsoft outline the pros and cons of each service in this document. They also include links to further documentation on how to enable each type of MFA. <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/azure/active-directory/authentication/concept-mfa-licensing#available-versions-of-azure-multi-factor-authentication>

The Azure AD version of MFA offers more protection when you include the use of Conditional Access (Azure P1 license) or Risk Based Conditional Access (Azure P2 license).

**Conditional Access.** Configuring conditional access specifies the conditions that must be satisfied before allowing use of the service.

While it can be somewhat tricky to initially configure, it is worth the time as you can require a combination of conditions be present like: Trusted IP addresses, AD domain joined / Intune Compliant, type of app (legacy, browser, compliant app), MFA, Device type (Android, Windows, iOS), users/groups.

To make it easier to implement new policies, Microsoft added a “Report Only” toggle that allows you to test out your policies before enforcing them. There is also a “What if” feature that allows you to validate the combination of conditions without needing to first build the policy.

More information on how to put together a Conditional Access policy is located here: <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/azure/active-directory/conditional-access/concept-conditional-access-policies>

**Azure AD Identity Protection.** Requiring a Premium Azure AD license, this service adds additional reporting of risky logins, which can help raise awareness of potentially compromised logins. Here is a guide on how to turn this feature on: <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/azure/active-directory/identity-protection/howto-identity-protection-configure-notifications>

**Azure AD Password Protection.** You can use this feature to restrict the use of easy to guess passwords along with their common letter substitutions. You can also extend it into your on-premise Active Directory by installing an agent on your domain controllers. Here is the Microsoft document on this feature: <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/azure/active-directory/authentication/concept-password-ban-bad>

**Limit Global / Exchange Administrators.** Criminals that attack Azure AD / Exchange online tenants are themselves very competent Azure Administrators. Limit the exposure by reducing the number of accounts in privileged roles like the Global / Exchange Administrator roles, using Privileged Identity Management (Azure P2), or by moving accounts into lower privileged groups (like Global Reader). Make sure that any accounts that remain in those roles are protected with MFA. A “break-glass” administrator account should be configured with no MFA and needs to have a long and complex password.

### **Securing Exchange Online**

Exchange Online contains many different vectors of attack. Examples include annoying email constituents with group spam, to persistent access for email account compromise. Here are some ways to increase security in Exchange Online.

**Disable third party app integration.** Allowing end users to approve the use of Office 365 apps opens up the risk of malicious persistent access to their email mailbox. Use the following document to turn this feature off to mitigate this risk.

<https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/admin/misc/integrated-apps?view=o365-worldwide#turning-user-consent-on-or-off>

If you have had this feature enabled in your tenant for a while, an Administrator should review the list of applications that have been granted access and remove any that do not have a valid business justification.

<https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/security/office-365-security/detect-and-remediate-illicit-consent-grants?view=o365-worldwide#steps-for-using-the-azure-active-directory-portal>

**Disable auto-forwarding email.** If a criminal gains access to a user's mailbox, they can configure auto-forwarding rules to send the user's email to an outside address that the criminal controls. Also, it can be used by well-meaning employees who may inadvertently exfiltrate company data into personal email services. Exploited more often in business email compromise attacks, this allows the criminal to exfiltrate sensitive data, mask their presence, and maintain some level of persistence after credentials are changed.

Three ways to mitigate this attack are outlined in this article:

<https://techcommunity.microsoft.com/t5/exchange-team-blog/the-many-ways-to-block-automatic-email-forwarding-in-exchange/ba-p/607579>

**Enable notifications.** Email alerts can be set up to trigger when risky activity is detected. Go to <https://protection.office.com/alertpolicies> and at minimum, enable the following rules:

- Creation of forwarding/redirect rule
- Impossible travel activity
- Elevation of Exchange admin privilege
- Users targeted by phishing campaigns
- Phishing (High Confidence) Detected during delivery

You can see alerts that were triggered by going to

<https://protection.office.com/viewalerts>, but note that more detail on each event is actually located in the Cloud App Security portal

<https://portal.cloudappsecurity.com/#/alerts>

**Mark external emails with a banner.** You can add text to an email if the sender originates from outside of your organization. This is useful to mark inbound messages from external senders, especially if it is a spoofed email from “the CEO”.

The basic steps to enable this feature are:

- In the Exchange admin center, navigate to Mail Flow and create a new rule called "External Mail Warning".
- Set the rule as follows:
  - Set "Apply this rule if..." > The sender is located... > Outside the organization
  - Click “More Options....” at the bottom of the rule dialog
  - Set “Do the following...” > Prepend the disclaimer... > Add text (or HTML if you want it to stand out).
  - Set “Choose a mode for this rule” > Enforced.

**Disable Legacy Authentication.** Basic Authentication (aka Legacy Authentication) is used by older applications like Outlook 2010 and earlier versions of Exchange Online PowerShell, and older protocols like POP3 and IMAP. This type of authentication attracts password spraying and credential stuffing attacks because MFA is not inserted as a further check.

First, you need to turn on Modern Authentication and then monitor Azure AD Sign In blade for legacy “Client Apps”. Once you have migrated the users of those legacy applications to their modern counterparts, you can either use Conditional Access to block access to legacy applications, disable use of specific protocols, or disable basic authentication for Exchange Online altogether.

Enable Modern Authentication: <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/exchange/clients-and-mobile-in-exchange-online/enable-or-disable-modern-authentication-in-exchange-online>

Monitoring Sign-Ins for Legacy app authentication:  
<https://techcommunity.microsoft.com/t5/azure-active-directory-identity/new-tools-to-block-legacy-authentication-in-your-organization/ba-p/1225302>

Block Legacy authentication by app with Conditional Access:  
<https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/azure/active-directory/conditional-access/block-legacy-authentication>

OR:

Disable Legacy Authentication: <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/exchange/clients-and-mobile-in-exchange-online/disable-basic-authentication-in-exchange-online>

OR:

Disable individual protocols on individual mailboxes:

<https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/exchange/clients-and-mobile-in-exchange-online/pop3-and-imap4/enable-or-disable-pop3-or-imap4-access>

**Enable Mobile Device quarantine.** While Intune and Conditional Access offer a seamless way to control access to email on a mobile device, they are only available for tenants licensed for P1 and P2 or have a enterprise mobility license. Exchange Online has a feature that allows you to quarantine mobile device connections to Exchange.

To enable the feature, open the Exchange admin center, navigate to Mobile, and create a rule to cover the device types you want to control.

**Enable Mailbox Level auditing.** Mailbox auditing keeps a 90-day log of connections to mailboxes and the actions performed. Use this document to learn how to turn on auditing: <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/Exchange/policy-and-compliance/mailbox-audit-logging/enable-or-disable?view=exchserver-2019#enable-or-disable-mailbox-audit-logging>

**Enable Sender Policy Framework (SPF).** SPF helps email administrators by reducing spoofed emails for their email domains. The key to enabling this feature is knowing about all email sources that could send email for your domain. Examples include internal email servers that send to outside recipients, Office 365, your marketing email provider and antispam solutions.

Once you have collected this information, you can use online SPF generators to create the record, and then you can apply the suggested TXT record change to your public DNS zone.

Note: If you maintain a split DNS zone (same domain name maintained internally and externally on different DNS servers), you will need to make sure both zones are updated with the TXT record.

**Enable Domain Keys (DKIM) and DMARC.** DKIM provides a way to verify the sender of the email. The sender does not have to match the From information, it's more about the server responsible for sending the email.

Like with SPF, you need to find all sources of emails from your domains, make sure they support DKIM, turn on the feature and publish the signature generated by DKIM for that mail source into the relevant DNS TXT record. Each mail source will have its own signature, and you will have one DNS record per mail source. If the mail sources support it, you can import a single signature in the TXT record.

DMARC allows other email systems to validate that the signature matches the one advertised for the originating mail server, and take the action prescribed in the DNS DMARC record.

DKIM: <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/security/office-365-security/use-dkim-to-validate-outbound-email?view=o365-worldwide>

DMARC: <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/security/office-365-security/use-dmarc-to-validate-email?view=o365-worldwide>

**Limit Calendar Sharing.** If anonymous calendar sharing is enabled, your users can share the full details of their calendars with external, unauthenticated users. Calendars contain enough information to help attackers understand organizational relationships, gather information intended for internal parties, and determine when specific users may be travelling or more vulnerable to an attack.

To disable anonymous sharing:

1. Go to the Services and Add-ins  
<https://portal.office.com/adminportal/home?switchtomodern=true#/Settings/ServicesAndAddIns>
2. Click on Calendar
3. Uncheck "Let your users share their calendar with people outside of your organizations who have Office 365 or Exchange".

**Restrict email from outside senders to sensitive groups.** Email Groups can be used by criminals to distribute malicious emails. Your sensitive groups should be set to block mail originating outside of your organization. Pay particular attention to groups that have less characters in the user part of the email address (before the @ symbol). There is a good chance that spam engines already found them by cycling through letter combinations.

1. In the Exchange admin center, navigate to Recipients and then Groups.
2. Open each sensitive group, click on "delivery management" and select "Only senders inside my organization"

## **Final thoughts**

Some features require more work to configure properly, while other features may cause a change in end user workflow. With this in mind, here is a list of my quick wins to increase security:

- Enable MFA. Available in some form regardless of the level you've purchased, it requires both configuration and end user setup. The security gained makes this well worth the effort.
- Disable third party app integration. No complex configuration required, and most users will not know that the feature exists.
- Disable auto-forwarding email. This is very easy to do and shuts down a very commonly method of data exfiltration and persistence.
- Enable notifications. Configured correctly, you get alerts when a compromise is detected which you can then follow up with the appropriate incident response.
- Mark external emails with a banner. Providing visibility to end users will help them to more easily identify spoofed emails from "their CEO".

Each of the features and controls listed above will help your organization maintain a more secure Exchange Online environment.