Supercharged security awareness: How tournaments are inspiring developers at Erste Group

Erste Group holds its place in history as the first Austrian savings bank, founded in 1819. Today, they are one of the largest financial institutions in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), with over 16 million customers and 45,000 staff across seven countries. As an organization that is no stranger to moving with the times, their comprehensive digital capabilities place them among the top European banks, and of course, their emphasis on cybersecurity best practices makes them a brand customers trust.

Michal Sramka is a Senior Security Architect at Erste Group, running the security program for hundreds of developers across the CEE region. With a focus on security awareness, and bringing the entire organization together in pursuit of a gold standard security program, Michal sought a training solution that could provide practical skills, while delivering a unified approach to secure coding from every developer, no matter where they were coding across their sprawling network of branches.

THE CHALLENGE

Michal's team faced some unique challenges in their pursuit of a training solution to round out their security program, namely, the need to satisfy requirements for security best practices that can flex with developers of different skill levels, as well as regulation and compliance that can differ between countries. As a widespread financial institution with a commitment to secure software without compromise, their development cohort must be brought together with an uncompromising demand for products to be as secure as possible. And in larger companies, dealing with legacy software (and the antiquated best practice guidelines that can go with it) can make the cybersecurity gauntlet just that little bit more difficult to navigate.

With over 300 developers working on many different projects across the business, Michal sought to bring them together with enjoyable training -- including competitive tournaments -- to engage them in security, ensuring it was front-of-mind, and allowed them to achieve regulatory compliance no matter their location.

"We needed to look at security, not just from the solution standpoint that we provide to each of the banks within our group, but also from the development side. In response, we started many initiatives in the secure development area, and one of them was a focus on awareness. We decided to demo Secure Code Warrior with a small test group of 15 developers, and the feedback was positive. It then became part of our wider security program for developer awareness and training in secure code," Michal said.

THE IMPLEMENTATION

Michal and his team worked hard to achieve buy-in, not only from upper management, but also within a developer cohort with varied views on how security fits into their roles and responsibilities. Starting with a voluntary, opt-in Secure Code Warrior tournament, Erste Group's engineers were given the opportunity to test their knowledge and skills, in addition to representing their team and location. This event helps boost the visibility of security initiatives across the business, while creating interest among teams in elevating their status as a security-aware developer:

> *"We decided to hold a company-wide secure coding tournament, and made it a little more fun by offering prizes to the first eight places. Out of 200 invitees, 55 developers decided to participate in the tournament. From an upper management point of view, they were surprised that so many people opted in to compete outside of their usual duties, since it wasn't mandatory. They saw this as a big success in improving engagement in security,"* Michal said.

Key to their successful internal roll-out was clear communication, ensuring that senior developers of long tenure were also brought on the journey, and understood how they could be more security-aware in their daily tasks. Whether they worked with legacy languages like COBOL, right through to modern mobile-centric languages like Swift and Kotlin, relevant training and tournament challenges were made available and had a meaningful context for each engineer.

Capitalizing on the momentum from the tournament, Michal and his team also made use of curated, structured learning paths with baseline assessments. Using Secure Code Warrior's Courses feature, a curated training experience that addressed the secure coding content that was most relevant to business operations was rolled out, furthering engagement with secure coding best practices in a positive, gamified environment.

THE RESULT

The team at Erste Group executed an exciting, highly engaging and job-relevant training component to their security program, ensuring that their developers were best equipped with the tools and knowledge to raise their own levels of security awareness, as well as understand how they can create more secure, quality code.

The success of their opt-in tournament initiatives has proven that more interactive education in secure coding can be more readily embraced by the development community, so much so, that Secure Code Warrior is considered a viable option to roll out for mandatory compliance training among all developers at Erste Group. While this has the potential to create some push-back from individuals who feel they may not achieve a favorable outcome, the careful change management activities employed by Michal and his team set the perfect foundation for developers to get great results, bringing about a more skilled engineering workforce, and safer business operations.

These efforts have been noticed by internal security executives, and their subsequent buy-in has been key in ensuring the training component of Erste Group's security program continues to grow, flourish and get positive attention.

METRICS

Developers have consistently spent an average of about

2 hours
per month upskilling

For an optional course learning structure,

85%
of developers saw it through to completion

Overall, developers performed

12% better
than their peers in the tournament if they spent time upskilling prior to competing.

* Statistics accurate as at December 2020.

"We received a lot of positive feedback from developers and AppSec managers as a result of our tournaments, and this shows to us – as well as management, all the way up to the CSO – that we are doing something good for internal security awareness and action," Michal said.

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FAST FACTS

✔ The implementation of Secure Code Warrior's Courses module significantly reduced the typical time frame expected of baseline, curated training by implementing short, highly relevant challenges that can be completed quickly and easily

✔ Participants from the opt-in tournament quickly spread the word that it was worthwhile, with skill development opportunities (and prizes, of course!)

✔ Post-tournament, the event had the pleasant upside of facilitating inter-team interaction and team building, with several participants meeting for a celebration dinner upon completion.
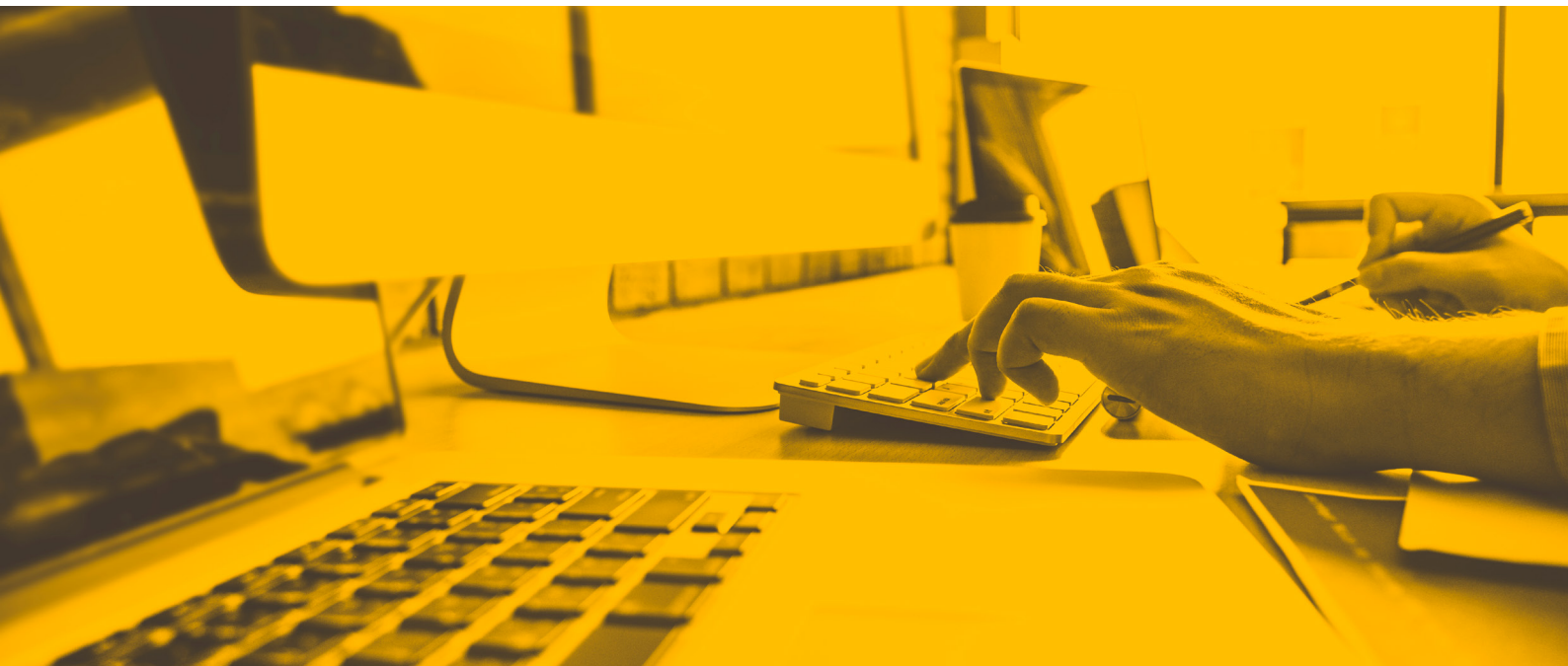
ABOUT ERSTE GROUP BANK AG

Erste Group Bank AG was founded in 1819 as the first Austrian savings bank. Around 45,000 employees are serving over 16 million clients in more than 2,100 branches in 7 countries. Erste Group is one of the largest financial services providers in Central and Eastern Europe.

ABOUT SECURE CODE WARRIOR

Secure Code Warrior is the developer-chosen solution for growing powerful secure coding skills. By making security a positive and engaging experience, our human-led approach uncovers the secure developer inside every coder, helping development teams ship quality code faster.

Through inspiring a global community of security-conscious developers to embrace a preventative secure coding approach, our mission is to pioneer a people-first solution to security upskilling, stamping out poor coding patterns for good.

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