

CYBER SECURITY ENHANCED MONITORING

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

- [0001] This application claims priority to U.S. Provisional Application No. 62/563,351, filed on September 26, 2017, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

TECHNICAL FIELD

- [0002] The present invention relates generally to detecting cyber-attacks directed against a group within a larger organization, and more particularly to security monitoring that does not require predetermined signature libraries in order to detect attacks.

BACKGROUND

- [0003] Cyber-attacks are increasingly frequent and can result in significant negative impact to individuals and organizations. In addition to the increasing frequency, cyber-attacks are becoming more sophisticated, often targeting specific individuals or groups within an organization. Known methods of detecting these attacks involved monitoring the computers of these individuals or groups for the presence of program or data files associated with previously identified malicious software (malware). Other known methods involve monitoring specific areas in the memory of these computers to detect changes associated with malware. Both of these methods are hardware intensive and rely on the detection of previously identified malware. Thus, such methods may reduce the performance of a computer system and are at risk of failing to detect new malware variants. What is needed is a method of detecting cyber-attacks that does not significantly impact the performance of a monitored computer and does not require detection algorithms that search for a particular attack or that the attacking software be previously encountered.

SUMMARY

- [0004] Exemplary embodiments of the present invention comprise methods of detecting cyber-attacks by monitoring the behavior of a computer belonging to an at-risk user or group. Some exemplary embodiments rely on a predictable behavior of a cyber-attack (i.e., a Kill Chain Methodology) in order to detect a suspected attack and provide an

alert. In one such exemplary embodiment, a predetermined group of computers are monitored to detect the occurrence of a predefined triggering event. Once a triggering event is detected, the method monitors the group of computers in order to detect a series of behaviors that are consistent with an ongoing cyber-attack.

- [0005] In order to manage the amount of data monitored and recorded by an exemplary embodiment of the invention, likely targets of a cyber-attack are pre-identified based upon factors that would make the targets particularly attractive for such an attack. With likely targets having been identified, use cases are applied to detect computer system behaviors consistent with a probable cyber-attack. Once such behaviors are detected, an alert or other notification is provided to a party responsible for monitoring and investigating potential computer system threats.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

- [0006] These and other features and advantages of the present invention will become better understood with regard to the following description and accompanying drawings in which:
- [0007] Figure 1 represents an exemplary computer network;
- [0008] Figure 2 illustrates a system for detecting cyber-attacks, according to an exemplary embodiment of the invention;
- [0009] Figure 3 illustrates data flow within a system to implement a process of identifying a group of users for monitoring, according to an exemplary embodiment of the invention;
- [0010] Figure 4 illustrates data flow within a system to implement a process to create baseline data according to an exemplary embodiment of the invention;
- [0011] Figure 5 is a data flow diagram illustrating the delivery of an inventory feed to a baseline generator and correlation/alerting function, according to an exemplary embodiment of the invention;
- [0012] Figure 6 is a diagram of an exemplary monitoring system detecting a cyber-attack; and
- [0013] Figure 7 is a user interface of the system of Figure 6, according to an exemplary embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

- [0014] Figure 1 represents an exemplary computer system **100** that includes a plurality of computers **102** that are assigned or available to users **104** within an organization. Connecting computers **102** is a network **108**. The network may be in communication with various services such as printers (not shown) and storage **110**. As illustrated at **112**, the network **108** will typically be connected to the Internet **114**. Such connections may be equipped with protective systems **116** that attempt to provide some protection against external cyber-threats. Unfortunately, these cyber-threats are becoming increasingly sophisticated and often target individual users **104** or groups of users **104**. In certain cyber-attacks, these groups and users are those that are identified as having access to organizational assets or capabilities that the cyber-threat desires to gain access to, or otherwise exploit. For example, the targeted group or user may be responsible for sensitive data or have access to financial records. Cyber-attacks generally follow a series of steps that can be categorized using a defined process known as a “Kill Chain.” These steps are generally: identify the user or group of users that the attacker desires to target; develop a method of attack expected to gain access to the assets or capabilities targeted by the cyber threat; deliver the attack, i.e., exploit the user or group to install the attacking method, communicating with an external source to receive instructions or deliver information; and attempt to perform actions designed to damage or steal information or assets from the organization. Embodiments of the invention utilize these expected Kill Chain steps to detect attacks.
- [0015] Figure 2 illustrates the computer system of Figure 1 further configured to form a security monitoring system **200**, according to an exemplary embodiment of the invention. A baseline generation and monitoring system is illustrated at **202**. As shown, the baseline generating and monitoring system **202** comprises a baseline generator **204**, a correlation/alert generator **206**, and a timer **208**. The system **200** is in communication with a baseline storage database **210**. However, other embodiments of the system **200** may be configured such that the database **210** is internal to the baseline generating and monitoring system **202**.
- [0016] In an exemplary embodiment of the invention, a group of users **104** which comprises at-risk users is identified. Typically, this group will be a subset of the total organizational user pool **300**. As illustrated in Figure 3, a sample of users **302** is

identified using three primary sources. The first source **304** is internal to the risk mitigation group responsible for implementing the invention (e.g., the system **200**). The risk mitigation group identifies potential cyber-attack targets by determining what type of people, assets, or infrastructure needs to be monitored in more detail. The risk mitigation group might also consider criticality, classification, or the risk level of potential targets in the organization so as to identify targets for monitoring by embodiments of the invention. As illustrated in Figure 3, threat intelligence may be used as a second source **306** to assist in the identification of potential cyber-attack targets. The second source **306** comprises extra-organizational information and is used to identify those targets that may have been identified to the public as the result of their role or from various public disclosures. The second source **306** also comprises publicly available information that discloses recent attacks targeting infrastructure or business processes that are maintained by the organization and its commercial peers. This publicly available information may be used by risk mitigation groups to identify at-risk targets. For example, the publicly available information can be reviewed for disclosures that might disclose to a cyber-attack source, those individuals or groups within the organization that are responsible for particularly sensitive information. These individuals or groups can then be selected for monitoring. A third source **308** may be used to identify those users or groups that may be particularly susceptible for cyber-attack targeting.

- [0017] Once the individual user **104** or groups of users **104** are identified, cyber-attack use cases are developed. These use cases are developed by considering the Kill Chain Methodology described herein. The Kill Chain Methodology refers to a series of steps that are often completed as part of the preparation and execution of an attack on an individual or group. As described herein, the Kill Chain Methodology steps have been modified to be particularly applicable to a cyber-attack. In particular, use cases are developed for the steps of delivering the attack, installing the attacking method, communicating with an external source to receive instructions or deliver information, and attempting to perform actions that provide the desired results to the cyber attacker.
- [0018] To better understand how the Kill Chain Methodology can be used by the invention to detect a cyber-attack, various use cases will be examined in detail. In an exemplary embodiment, the use case for the step of delivering the attack considers email

communications to a member of an identified at-risk group. The use case may identify an email as being an attacker attempting to deliver malicious software code to a target. The use case may then consider actions such as monitoring emails sent to the at-risk group from a new sending email address, a new sending domain, or with an attachment type that hasn't been encountered before by the monitoring system. Thus, according to the use case, the detection of any of these use case scenarios may indicate an initial phase of a potential attack. However, it is not uncommon for a user to receive an occasional email from a new address or to receive an attachment that hasn't been received by the user or group before. Thus, an exemplary embodiment leverages the Kill Chain Methodology to identify what additional actions may be indicative of an ongoing cyber-attack and will monitor for additional suspect actions using additional use cases based on other Kill Chain Methodology steps.

- [0019] Suspect actions may comprise installation, communication, or actions that are intended to provide the information or result desired by the attacking party. Thus, in an exemplary embodiment of the invention, use cases are developed for the installation step of the Kill Chain Methodology. Such use cases monitor for such occurrences as the creation of a new process, the installation of a new service or program, or a register modification that takes place on a computer associated with a member of the at-risk group.
- [0020] Other use cases may include the Command and Control step of the Kill Chain Methodology. In this or similar use cases, outgoing communications from computer systems associated with a user or group of users may be monitored for occurrences of such things as new proxy connections, new user agents, or the establishment of new user connections. Other use cases may include suspect actions that indicate that an attacker is attempting to leverage a breach created by malicious software or the theft of user credentials. For example, such a use case may monitor such actions as a new source authorization, a new attempted access, or a new outbound data connection.
- [0021] Notwithstanding the examples provided herein, other use cases may be developed and implemented depending on the persons, assets, and infrastructure to be monitored, as well as the nature of the attacks to be prevented.
- [0022] Once use cases have been developed for a particular at-risk group, a baseline for each use case can be developed. As is illustrated in Figure 4, a baseline is developed by

combining the list of the members of a particular group **402**, use cases **404** as described herein that include triggering events, and an event log **406** that comprises events that might include the triggering events. For example, if the use case **404** indicates that a triggering event is the receipt of an email from an address not previously encountered by a member of the group, the event log **406** may include a listing of all email addresses from which emails were previously received by members of the group **402**. This information is normalized **408**, stored in a data store **410**, and searched to identify behavior that is “normal” or baseline for the particular group. In an exemplary embodiment of the system **200**, “normalized” refers to a process of analyzing data that takes into account the frequency, volume, and other characteristics of data associated with the various data sources such that a data sources that differ from the norm (for example, are larger or smaller than the majority) do not unduly influence the resulting baseline. The result is a list comprising normal behaviors and activities of the group (a master whitelist) that can be applied to the type of events considered by the use case. Such a master whitelist is created for each use case. For example, in the currently described embodiment of the system **200**, these whitelists include a list of emails addresses recognized by the group **402**, a list of installations performed on systems associated with members of the particular group, a list of communications performed by systems associated with members of the particular group, and a list of actions performed by systems associated with members of the particular group.

- [0023] As is illustrated in Figure 5, in an exemplary embodiment of the system **200**, an inventory data feed **502** is provided to a baseline generator **504** which performs the functions illustrated in Figure 4. In this manner, the baseline for the activities being monitored may be constantly updated with new information from the inventory data feed **502**. This updating allows the baseline or whitelist to take into account new behavior that is benign in nature. For example, if the particular group were to deploy a new software tool, members of the group may receive emails from the software vendor providing this tool and software access information. These will appear as new mails from an unfamiliar source, which could indicate a cyber-attack. However, in this example, it will be determined that these emails are normal baseline behavior in light of the new software tool and associated email. Thus, by continuously updating

the baseline data with incoming data, the baseline data will reflect up-to-date group baseline behavior.

- [0024] In addition to providing data to the baseline generator **504**, the inventory data feed **502** is subject to a data query process **506** which compares the inventory data feed to the output of the baseline generator **504**. If the data query process **506** detects an event that is not found on the whitelist **410**, the event is compared to the use cases **508** developed by considering the Kill Chain Methodology as described herein. If a detected event satisfies the conditions of a use case, the event and an identification of the computer that exhibited the behavior that triggered the use case may be recorded in a summary index **510** for further monitoring.
- [0025] A correlation/alerting process **512** is applied to the summary index data **510**. An exemplary embodiment of the correlation/alerting process **512** is illustrated in Figure 6. The process **512** uses various use cases **600** that correspond to the Kill Chain Methodology **602**. When an event in the summary index data **510** satisfies a use case **604** corresponding to the “delivery” step, that event is logged by the correlation/alerting process **512**. The correlation/alerting process **512** then monitors the remaining use cases **606-612**. If an event in the index data satisfies one or more of these remaining use cases **606-612**, an alert is generated **614**. Embodiments of the invention may require greater than a certain number of use cases be satisfied within a predetermined time period. As shown in Figure 6, a “delivery” use case is detected by receipt of an email from a new address **604**. In a cyber-attack, the attacker may initiate the creation of a new process **606** on the user computer being attacked, thereby satisfying the “install” use case. The “command and control” use case may be identified by the creation of a new proxy connection **608**. The “actions” use case may be satisfied by a new attempted access **610** and a new outbound data connection **612** being initiated. Each use case may have a plurality of conditions which satisfy the use case. As such, there are a plurality of combinations of detected events that will result in an alert being generated. In certain exemplary embodiments, more than one Kill Chain Methodology step must be satisfied before an alert **614** is generated. However, in other embodiments, a single Kill Chain Methodology step that is satisfied by a plurality of use case instances will generate the alert **614**. In addition to the various combinations of Kill Chain Methodology step use cases that are satisfied to generate an alert, some exemplary embodiments may also require that the satisfaction of the

Kill Chain Methodology steps and use cases occurs within a predetermined period of time. For example, in one such exemplary embodiment, use cases representing three steps of the Kill Chain Methodology must be satisfied within a 48-hour period before the alert **614** is generated, while in another exemplary embodiment, an alert is generated if the three use cases are satisfied over a longer period, such as 7 days. These time periods and combinations of use cases are merely examples. One of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that other embodiments of the invention may have different combinations of time periods and use cases that result in the generation of the alert **614**.

- [0026] In some embodiments, an alert generated by the correlation/alert generator **206** comprises a summary of the satisfied use cases along with information indicating the data that triggered each particular use case. For example, such a summary may comprise a list of use cases and the number of time that they were satisfied by detected events. Such information allows security administrators or computer users to track suspect activity and take actions as are deemed necessary. A user dashboard **700** may display data related to the various use case groups **702.1 – 702.4** and corresponding counts **703** of satisfied use cases. The dashboard **700** may provide correlation data **704** arranged by user to highlight suspected cyber-attack activity directed against the monitored users and user groups. To illustrate trending behavior, the user dashboard **700** presents an indication of changes in the occurrence of activities that satisfy use cases. For example, in the illustrated user dashboard **700**, there is an indication of 15 occurrences of emails received from a new sending domain **706**. As shown at **708** in Figure 7, this number represents a 40% decrease in such deliveries since a last measuring period. Such changes permit users to identify and investigate changes in activity by use case in order to detect possible cyber-attacks. Exemplary embodiments of such a user dashboard **700** may also include inventory feed data and various alert indicators that serve to highlight the possibility that a cyber-attack may be underway.
- [0027] While the present invention has been illustrated by the description of exemplary embodiments thereof, and while the exemplary embodiments have been described in considerable detail, it is not the intention of the Applicant to restrict or in any way limit the scope of the invention to such detail. For Example, the specific uses cases illustrated are not intended to be limiting and one ordinarily skilled in the art will

understand that the use cases used by various implementations of the invention are dependent upon the specific systems being monitored. It is sought, therefore, to cover all such use cases as fall within the spirit and scope of the general inventive concepts, as described herein, and equivalents thereof. Additional advantages and modifications will readily appear to those skilled in the art. Moreover, elements described with one embodiment may be readily adapted for use with other embodiments. Therefore, the invention, in its broader aspects, is not limited to the specific details, the representative apparatus, and illustrative examples shown and described. Those skilled in the art will also find apparent various changes and modifications to those embodiments illustrated. Accordingly, departures may be made from such details without departing from the spirit or scope of the general inventive concepts.