Certification Assistant User Guide

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Overview

Certification Assistant helps your organization build and maintain a System Security Plan (SSP) and manage a Plan of Action and Milestones (POA&M) for NIST SP 800-171 and CMMC compliance. Certification Assistant organizes your work around individual control IDs (for example, 3.1.1). For each control, you record how the control is implemented, attach supporting evidence, and track your review progress. When you have a gap, you create a POA&M item to track remediation.

Certification Assistant is actively maintained and supported. It is a separate application from PolicyPro, so PolicyPro credentials do not grant access to Certification Assistant.

To access Certification Assistant application, you must have an Exostar's Managed Access Gateway (MAG) organization and user account, as well as a Phone One Time Password (OTP) without Proofing credential. Each assessment requires a separately obtained license.

Roles

Role	Description
CA Owner Admin	Automatically assigned to the first user who logs in to Certification Assistant for an organization. Can create assessments, bind license keys, and manage other users' roles.
User	Assigned to every subsequent user by default. Cannot create assessments or bind license keys. Contact your CA Owner Admin for a role change.

NOTE: This is your organization-level role. It is separate from the assessment-level permissions (Admin, Read/Write, Read-Only) described under Managing Assessment Users below, which control what a specific user can do within one specific assessment.

Step 1. Register for MAG Account

To access Certification Assistant, you must first receive an invitation from Exostar to access the application. Please note, if you are completing the organization registration, you are designated as your company's MAG Organization Administrator. For information on this role, please see the Admin Resources article via Myexostar.com.

Exostar offers a quarterly MAG Administration Webinar that provides information and instructions on administrative responsibilities for Organization Administrators and Application Administrators. Please see the MAG Webinars article for available dates and registration information.

To complete MAG account registration:

1. Click the **Accept Invitation** button, located in the email invitation from the Exostar system.
2. Your browser displays a **Get started with Exostar** dialogue box. Click the **Get Started** button.
3. On the **Complete the following information** page, review the data for accuracy and input any missing fields. Select your **Organization Headquarters Location** from the country drop-down menu. Click **Next**.

A confirmation message will display your account registration details, along with further instructions sent via email for account activation.

Step 2. Activate MAG User Account

Once your organization registration is approved, you receive an email titled: **Activate your Exostar Account**, prompting you to complete the MAG account set-up process. To activate your MAG user account:

1. You will receive an email invitation from Exostar Administrators that includes your **Organization Name**, **Organization ID** and **User ID**. Click the **Activate My Account** button in the email to open your preferred web browser.
2. Click the **Let's Get Started** button.

NOTE: The security questions option is no longer applicable or required.

3. Enter and re-enter a **Password** meeting the criteria listed on the screen. Click **Next**.
4. A confirmation message will display **Your account is now active**. Click **Continue** to open the MAG Dashboard.

Step 3. Purchase & Set-up Phone OTP

You must purchase and set-up a Phone-Based One Time Password (OTP) without Proofing credential. Please note, the following credentials are also acceptable:

- Phone-Based One-Time Password (OTP) with Proofing
- One Time Password Hardware Token with or without Proofing
- Federated Identity Service (FIS) Medium Level of Assurance (MLOA) Hardware or Software Certificates

To complete credential purchase, activation, and registration:

1. Login to your Exostar MAG account at https://portal.exostar.com.
2. On your MAG Dashboard in the **My 2FA Credentials** section, select the **Get 2FA** button to open Exostar's Web Store.
3. Select **Certification Assistant 2FA** from the drop-down menu. Select the radio button for the desired product. Click **Next**.
4. Review your **Primary Information** and **Billing Address**, make any necessary edits. Click **Next**.
5. Select payment method and input payment information. Click **Submit**.

NOTE: Once you successfully place your order (with full payment), you can select to activate your license key from the confirmation screen or use the license key provided in the purchase confirmation email.

6. From your MAG Dashboard, in the **My 2FA Credentials** section, under the **Have a license key?**, click **Enter it Here**.
7. Enter your license key. Click **Submit**.

8. On the **Register Your Phone** page, select **Text Message** or **Voice Only**, select your **Country**, and enter your **Phone Number** (do not include parenthesis, dashes, etc.). Click **Continue**.
9. Enter the code you receive on your phone into the **Verification** field provided on the screen. Select **Continue** to complete the process.

Step 4. Access Certification Assistant

Once you complete the account activation process, you are redirected to the MAG dashboard. Certification Assistant is available from the **My Applications** section. To access the application:

1. Login to your MAG user account with **Email Address** or **User ID** and **Password**.
2. Locate the **Certification Assistant** tile, via the **My Applications** section of the MAG Dashboard. Click **Launch**.
3. Select the phone number to which you want to receive the OTP code. Choose the delivery method. Click **Send** to have the code sent to your phone.
4. You will receive the OTP code on your phone. Enter the code in the **OTP Code** field. Click **Next** to open the application.

NOTE: Once you receive the code, it will be valid for the next two minutes. If the code expires, click **Resend verification code**.

5. If you are the first user to access the Certification Assistant application, accept the **Certification Assistant Terms and Conditions**.

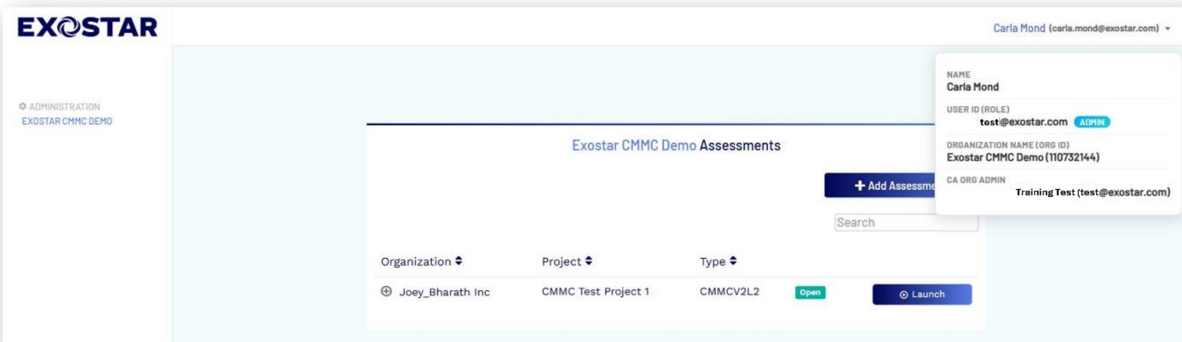
View Profile and Role

To view your profile information and role in the Certification Assistant application, click your name in the upper, righthand corner of the application. This panel displays the following information:

- Name
- User ID (Role)
- Organization Name (Org ID)
- CA Org Admin

Use this panel to find out who to contact if you need a different role or access to an assessment.

IMPORTANT! If you do not have a role, contact the CA Admin listed in your user panel. If you do not have permission to create a new assessment, the plus **(+) Assessment** button is disabled. Hover over the disabled button to display a message explaining you do not have permission to create an assessment and identifies your CA Owner Admin as the person to contact for a role change or access to an existing assessment.



Step 5. Create Assessment

To create an assessment:

1. Login to Certification Assistant via MAG.
2. On the Assessment Dashboard, click the **+Add Assessment** button.
3. If you have an encryption key enter the passphrase.

Certification Assistant now builds your new assessment. You are returned to the Account Dashboard, which shows **Building Assessment** until the process finishes.

IMPORTANT! If you have an encryption key, your passphrase cannot be recovered. Because you generate this passphrase yourself, Exostar cannot access it or reset it on your behalf. If you lose it, you lose access to that specific assessment permanently and need to create a new one. Download a copy of your passphrase and store it somewhere safe. Select the key icon in the upper right corner to save your passphrase to a file. You can also retrieve this passphrase later from Administration, Download Key, described below. This is how you share it with a partner you authorize on your assessment. If you have an encryption key, each time you open this assessment later, you are prompted to enter your encryption key passphrase before you can access it.

Assessment Homepage

The Assessment Dashboard is the home base for an assessment. The Assessment Navigation Panel links to every other area of the assessment.

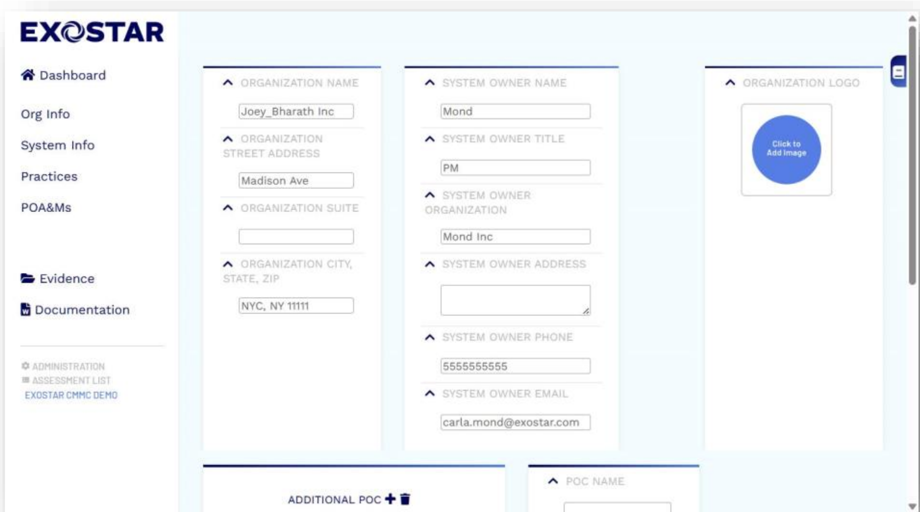
Navigation and Features

Tab	Description
Organization Info	Enter and manage your organization's information and points of contact.
System Info	Enter and manage your information system, leveraged systems, and environments of operation.
Practices	Do the bulk of your assessment work: implementation statements, evidence, and status, per control.
POA&Ms	Create, modify, review, and delete Plan of Action and Milestones items.
Evidence	Upload and manage supporting files for the assessment.
Documentation	Generate and download your final deliverables, including your SSP.

Organization Information

Organization Information holds the data about your organization and its points of contact. Everything you enter here is used to automatically populate your generated deliverables. To manage the Organization Information section:

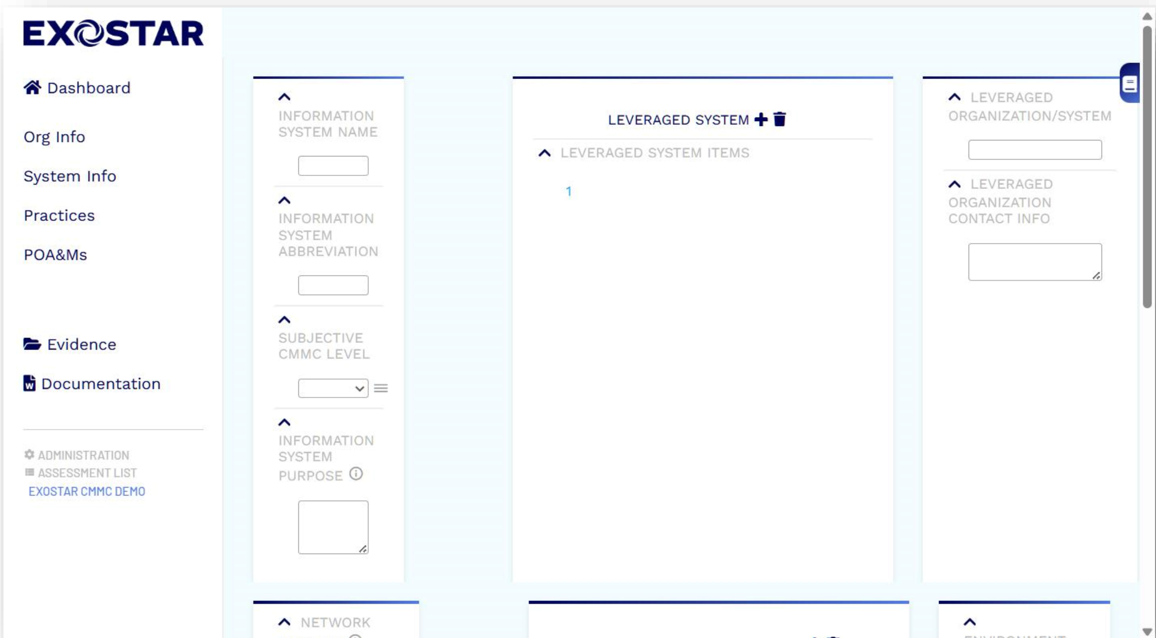
1. From the Assessment Navigation Panel, select **Org Info**.
2. Under **General Organization Information**, enter your **Organization Name**, **Organization Street Address**, **Organization Suite**, and **Organization City, State, ZIP**.
3. Under **System Owner Information**, enter the **System Owner Name**, **Title**, **Organization**, **Address**, **Phone**, and **Email**.
4. To add an **Additional POC**, select the plus icon in the Additional POC panel; to remove one, select the red trash icon.
5. Select a contact's name from the **Additional POC** panel to edit their **Name**, **POC Type**, **Title**, **Organization**, **Address**, **Phone**, and **Email** in the panel to the right.
6. To add your **Organization Logo**, select the box under Organization Logo and upload a file. Once confirmed, the logo displays in the panel and auto-populates in generated deliverables.



System Information

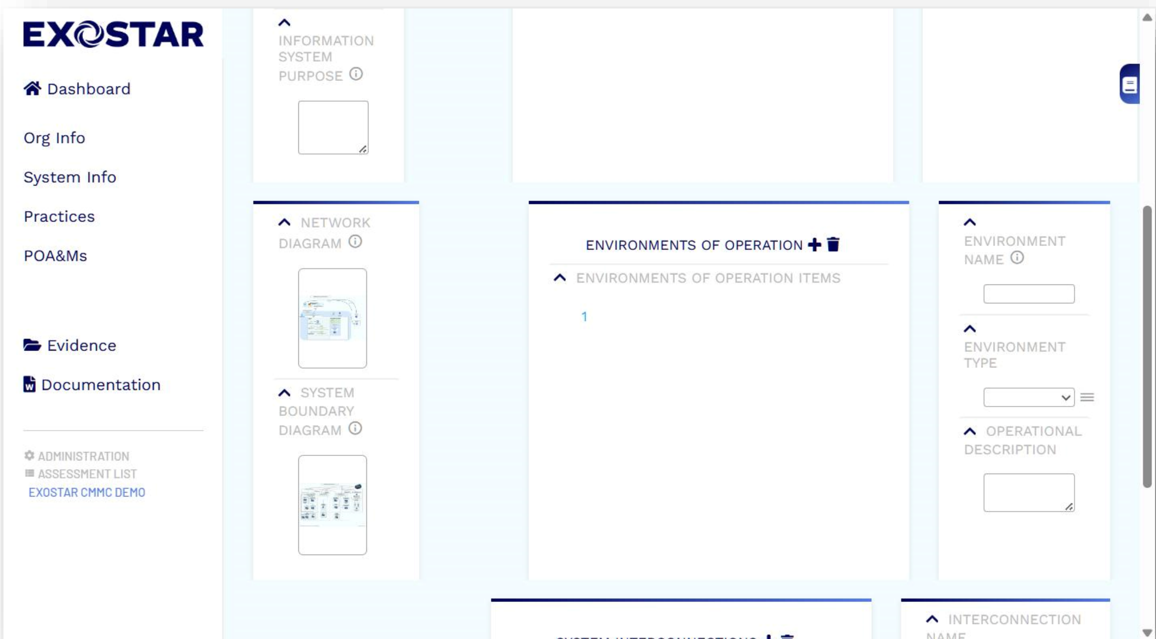
System Information holds data about your information system, any systems you leverage, and your environment of operation.

1. From the Assessment Navigation Panel, select **System Info**.
2. Under **Information System**, enter your system's **Name**, **Abbreviation**, and **Purpose**. This information also populates the dropdown for inherited controls elsewhere in the assessment.
1. Under **Leveraged Systems**, select the plus icon to add a system you leverage (Office 365, AWS, Azure, etc.). Select a system from the list to edit its name and contact info in the panel to the right, or the trash icon to delete it.



2. Under **Environments of Operation**, select the plus icon to add an environment (headquarters, specific office, data center, etc.). Select an environment from the list to edit its **Name**, **Environment Type**, and **Operational Description**, or the trash icon to delete it.
3. Select the box under **Network Diagram** to upload a technical diagram identifying your important network components.

4. Select the box under **System Boundary Diagram** to upload a less technical diagram that clearly identifies where CUI/CDI is, and is not, stored, transmitted, or processed. Both diagrams display in your generated documentation once uploaded.



Working with Practices

The Practices area is where you do the bulk of your assessment work. Each practice shows its domain, control ID, and formal description from the SSP, along with a space for internal notes visible only to your team.

Enter your implementation statement describing how your organization meets the control. Pasting formatted text from a Microsoft Word document into this field now preserves the original formatting, so you no longer need to manually fix spacing, bullets, or font sizes after pasting.

Select an implementation status for the control:

Status	Meaning
Implemented	The control is fully implemented.
Partially Implemented	The control is implemented in part.
Alternative Implementation	The control is met using an alternative approach.
Not Applicable	The control does not apply to your system or environment.
Inherited	The control is inherited from another system.
Not Implemented	The control is not yet implemented. Selecting this shows a button to create or view an associated POA&M.

Use Task Progress, available from the top of a practice view, to see a summary of completion for that practice, including who is assigned. Use Jump To, also at the top of a practice view, to move quickly to any other practice in the assessment.

Evidence

The Evidence tab is your file library for the assessment. Add, delete, review, and download files here.

IMPORTANT! Upload each file once, then associate it, instead of re-uploading duplicates. If the same file supports more than one practice or POA&M, upload it a single time in **Evidence**, then use the **Associate** button to link that one file to every practice or POA&M it supports. Re-uploading the same file separately for each practice creates duplicate copies and makes your evidence library harder to maintain.

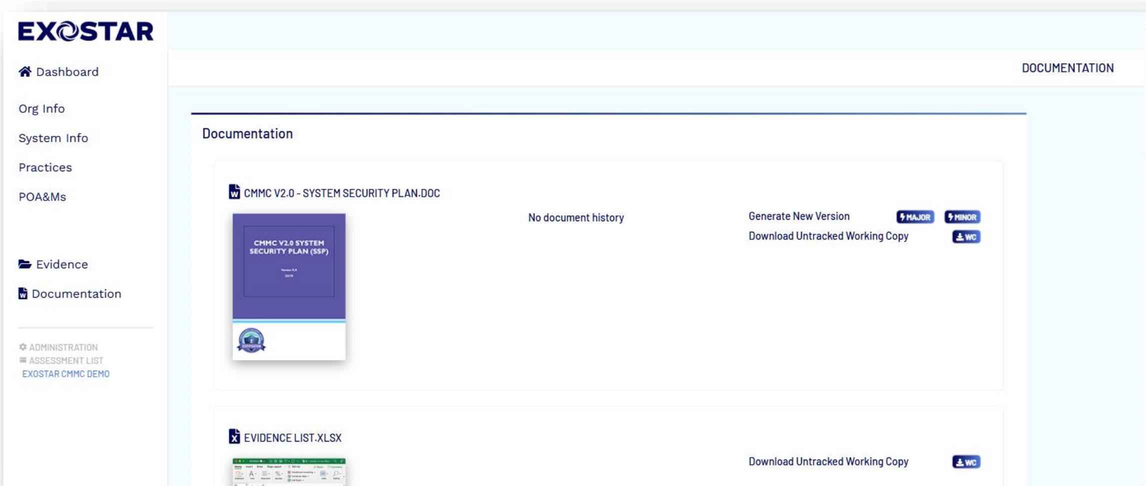
Each file's entry shows which practices or POA&Ms it is associated with. Opening the Evidence tab directly from the Practices tab now shows a simplified view without a Task Progress or Jump To control, since those controls do not apply once you are working directly with your file library.

Documentation

The Documentation tab holds your generated documentation history.

IMPORTANT! This is where you get your SSP. Go to Documentation, then select SSP, to download your System Security Plan. Do not use Import/Export under Administration; that function does not produce your SSP.

Select any document's title to download it. Generated System Security Plan documents now use consistent fonts, sizes, and bullet formatting throughout, so you should no longer need to manually fix formatting after exporting your SSP.



POA&Ms

Use the POA&Ms area to create, modify, review, and delete every Plan of Action item associated with your assessment. This area also appears automatically if you mark a practice Not Implemented and select View POA&M.

The POAM panel controls which items appear in the panels beside it. Select the blue plus icon to create a new POA&M, or the red trash icon to delete one. Each POA&M has a title, a point of contact, a deficiency description, and a progress status.

Milestones work the same way. Select a POA&M to see its milestones, then select a milestone to view or edit its title, planned actions, status, and scheduled completion date.

Administration

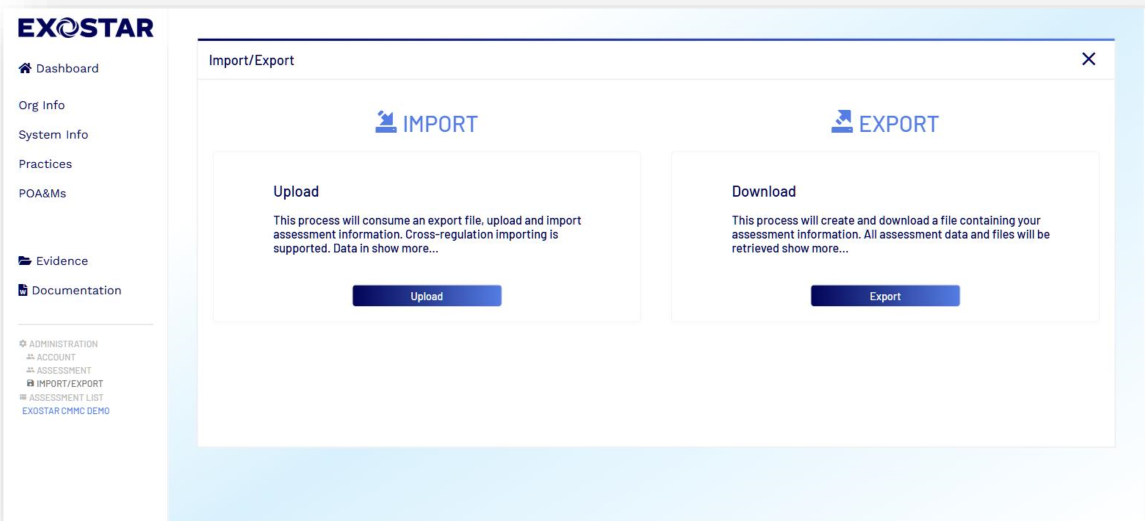
Available in the lower left panel of an open assessment.

Control	Description
Account	Invite a partner from another organization to your Certification Assistant account. See Inviting a Partner under Managing Assessment Users below.
Assessment	Authorize an invited partner on this specific assessment and assign their permission level.
Download Key	For users with an encryption key, download this assessment's encryption key passphrase, to keep a copy or to share with an authorized partner.
Import/Export	Import or export assessment data.
Assessment List	Return to your Account Dashboard, where you can view your assessments and, if you work across more than one client account, switch tenants.

Import/Export

Import/Export lets you upload or download your assessment's data outside of Certification Assistant's normal workflow. It does not generate your SSP; for that, please see the Documentation section. To import/export:

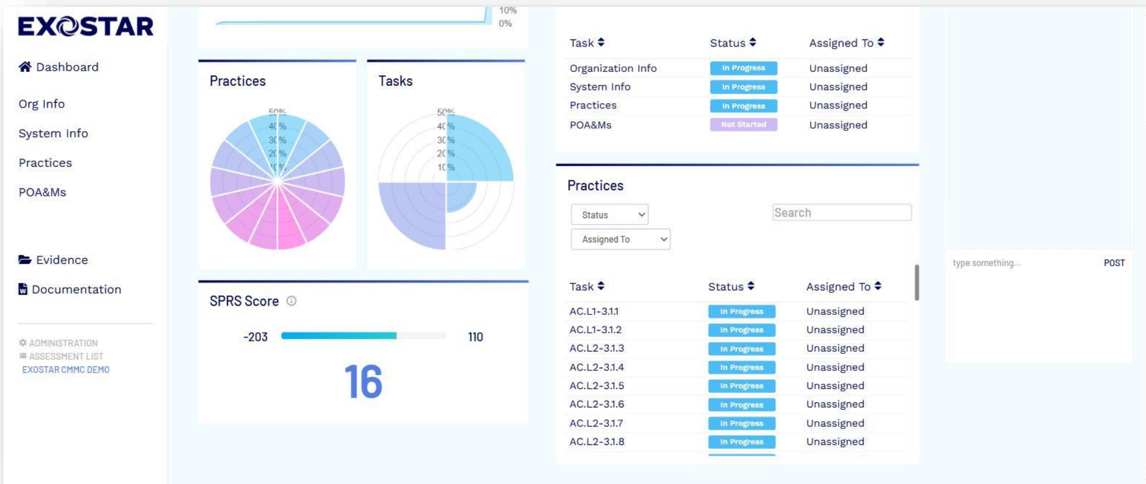
1. Select **Upload** to consume an export file and import assessment information into Certification Assistant. Cross-regulation importing is supported.
2. Select **Export** to create and download a file containing all of your assessment's data and files.



Progress Panels

Visual progress graphs summarize how far along you are in the assessment. The Task Status panel breaks this down by area, for example Organization Info, System Info, Practices, and POA&Ms. Select any task title to navigate directly to that section.

The SPRS Score panel shows your current score, on a scale of -203 to 110, reflecting your organization's level of NIST SP 800-171 compliance based on your assessment so far. This is the score you submit to the Department of Defense.



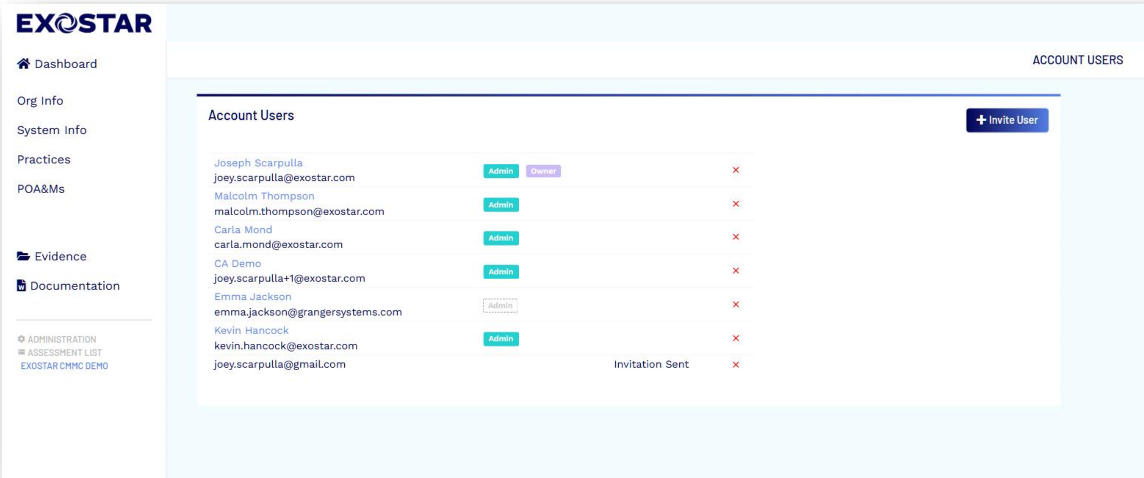
Managing Assessment Users

To invite a user in your organization to access Certification Assistant, you must complete this process via MAG, whereas, you must initiate an invitation for an external user via the Certification Assistant application. To invite an internal user, please see the instructions outlines on the [MAG Organization Administrator] article on Myexostar.com.

Invite External Partner / External Organization

To invite an external partner:

1. Launch Certification Assistant. Open your Assessment.
2. Select **Account** under the **Administration** section.
3. Select **+ Invite User**.
4. Enter the partner's **Email Address**.
5. Click the **Send** button. Confirm by selecting **Send Invitation** in the pop-up.
6. Select **Refresh** on your browser to repopulate the account users list. The partner's status displays as **Invitation Sent**.



Invite one partner at a time. If the partner does not already have an Exostar account, they receive an email with a registration link and must register before they can accept your invitation. The partner must accept your invitation before you can authorize them on your assessment.

Authorizing a Partner on Your Assessment (Client Steps)

Once the partner has accepted your invitation:

1. Select **Assessment** under the **Administration** section.
2. Select the partner's name from **Unassociated Account Users** and move them to **Authorized Users**.

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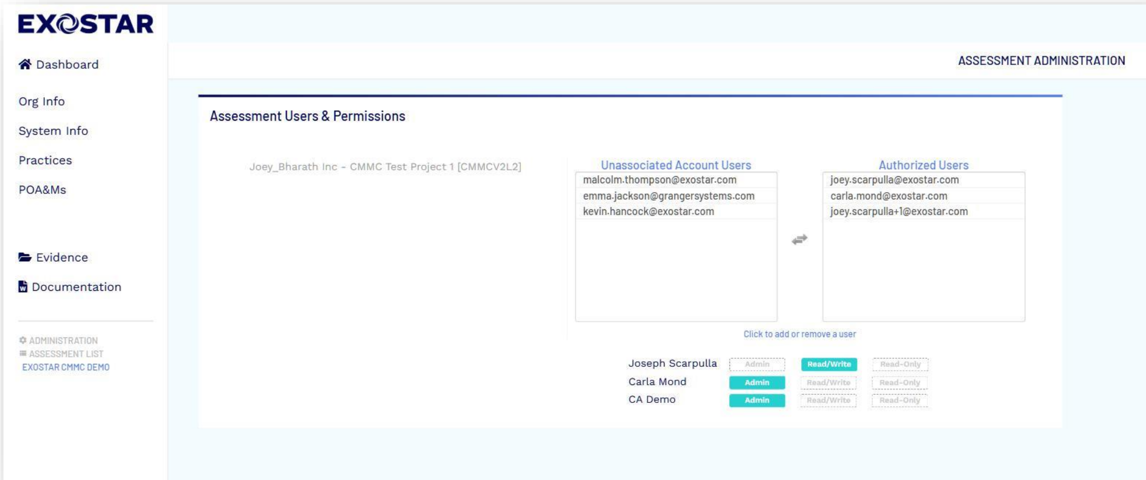
3. Select **Refresh** on your browser. Assign the partner's permission level.



Permission	Description
Admin	Full access to the assessment, including the ability to import templates.
Read/Write	Can view and edit the assessment. Cannot import templates.
Read-Only	Can view the assessment only.

IMPORTANT! Authorizing a partner is not enough on its own. If you have an encryption key, you must also separately give the partner your assessment's encryption key passphrase, via **Download Key** under **Administration**. Without it, the partner cannot open the assessment even if they are authorized.

Working Across Multiple Client Accounts

If you work on assessments for more than one client, select the client's tenant from the **Select Tenant** dropdown when you launch Certification Assistant, then select **Load**.

If you are already working inside an assessment, select the double arrow icon in the lower left panel, then select **Switch Tenant**, to move to a different client's assessment.

If your organization manages assessments on behalf of multiple client organizations, a partner you authorize on one client's assessment appears as an authorized user only on that specific assessment, not across every assessment your organization manages.

Additional Resources

These external resources provide authoritative background on the frameworks Certification Assistant helps you assess against:

- DoD CMMC Program Office
- Cyber AB (the CMMC Accreditation Body)
- NIST SP 800-171 Rev. 2
- Exostar Certification Assistant product page

