Black Shard

RESEARCH REPORT

Essential Eight Maturity Level 3 in practice

Level 3 on all eight strategies, and the order to follow: identity and backups first, application control last, and every control read back from the system that enforces it.

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Executive summary

Essential Eight Maturity Level 3 across all eight strategies. Assessed on 24 September 2026, with each rating read back from the system that enforces it.

Level 3 is the top of the Essential Eight Maturity Model, aimed at adversaries who adapt their methods and will invest in a specific target. Reaching it is a matter of order and discipline more than budget: identity and backups first, administration next, application control last, and every control read back from the system that enforces it.

ASD launched ASD Essentials on 15 October 2026 as the Essential Eight's successor; ASD maps every strategy to an Essentials principle, so this record carries across as the transition baseline.

- Start with phishing-resistant sign-in and backups an administrator cannot delete: they are the fastest controls to put in and they stop the most damage.
- For a firm working toward Level 3: run application control in audit, then enforce once the audit is quiet.
- Measure each control on the live system, never from the policy document, and give each one a check that runs every day.

Method

The ASD Essential Eight Maturity Model rates each of eight mitigation strategies from Level 0 to Level 3. Overall maturity is the lowest level reached across all eight, so Level 3 means no strategy sits below it.

Assessed on 24 September 2026, with each rating read back from the system that enforces it. A rating is the configuration as the enforcing system reports it, with its mode and its assignment, never the policy document that describes it. Client environments are assessed separately, under their own engagements.

The same method is the one a reader applies at home: for each strategy, name what the control stops, find the system that enforces it, read the setting back from there, and give it a check that runs every day.

The record, strategy by strategy

THE EIGHT STRATEGIES ON OUR OWN ESTATE

Every strategy is held at Maturity Level 3. Source: Essential Eight Maturity Level 3, assessed 24 September 2026.

What each control stops, and where to read it back

A control counts when the system that enforces it says so. For each strategy, the attack it stops and the record a reader pulls from their own systems to prove the control is on.

STRATEGY	WHAT IT STOPS	READ IT BACK FROM
Application control	Unapproved programs, scripts and installers running at all	The enforcing policy, its mode and its assignment, with the block log
Patch applications	Exploitation of known flaws in browsers, office suites and services	The update policy and the daily vulnerability scan result
Configure Microsoft Office macro settings	A document that runs code when it is opened	The macro policy and the users it is assigned to
User application hardening	Office, browsers and scripts being used to launch the next stage	The rule set, its mode on each device, and the central block log
Restrict administrative privileges	A stolen daily account carrying administrator rights	The privileged role list, its activation records and the exceptions
Patch operating systems	Exploitation of the operating system and privilege escalation	The update schedule and the last applied patch on each device

STRATEGY	WHAT IT STOPS	READ IT BACK FROM
Multi-factor authentication	A stolen password being enough to sign in	The sign-in policy in enforcing mode, and every account excluded from it
Regular backups	Ransomware ending the business	The immutability lock on the backup copy and the last restore test

The read-back column is what an assessor asks for. A policy document on its own rates Level 0.

What each control costs

The controls do not cost the same. Multi-factor authentication, the macro policy and the backup immutability lock go in within days, because each is a policy applied to an estate that already has the accounts and the storage. Restricting administrative privileges takes longer, because every administrator needs a second identity and every task that used a standing role has to work with just-in-time activation.

Application control takes the longest. An allowlist has to admit every legitimate program before it can block the rest, so it runs in audit while the records are read, the publishers the firm trusts are added, and the software the firm builds is signed. Only then does it enforce.

What the controls stop

Each block is a program, a script or an action that tried to run and did not: an Office document trying to start a process, a script fetched from the internet, an unsigned tool copied onto a laptop, a stolen password presented without the key. Most are mundane. Their value is that the same rules stop the first step of an intrusion without anyone deciding to, at any time of day the attempt is made.

What to do

For a firm working toward Level 3, the order to follow:

1. Enforce phishing-resistant multi-factor authentication on every account and block legacy authentication.
2. Lock the off-site backup copy so no administrator can delete or shorten it, and test a restore every day.
3. Give administrators separate identities and make privileged roles something they activate for a task.
4. Block macros from the internet and turn on the attack surface reduction rules in block mode.
5. Patch on a written schedule, with critical updates on the shortest clock you can hold.
6. Run application control in audit, read the records, sign your own software, and enforce when the audit is quiet.
7. Read every control back from the system that enforces it, and give each a check that runs every day.

We run the same assessment for clients: all eight strategies rated against the ASD maturity model, read from the live systems, with a written report and an uplift plan sequenced by risk and effort. The uplift is delivered in the order above, with each control read back at the end. Scope and price are at blackshard.com.au/essential-eight-assessment.

Our record

Black Shard builds and defends the systems Australian organisations run on. The estate assessed here is the one we run every day, and it is held to the standard we ask of our suppliers.

The record is as held at 29 October 2026, the date this edition was revised.

- SMB1001:2026 Gold, issued by CyberCert, valid 16 Jun 2026 to 17 Jun 2027.
- Essential Eight Maturity Level 3, assessed September 2026.
- Prequalified supplier to Queensland councils under Local Buy arrangement LB308, ICT Solutions, Products, Services and New Technologies.
- Prequalified supplier under the NSW Government ICT Services Scheme (SCM0020).
- Holder of Victorian Fair Jobs Code pre-assessment certificate FJC-261023-11119, required for Victorian Government threshold and high-value procurement.
- Our CISO holds the Exemplar Global ISO/IEC 27001:2022 Lead Auditor credential.
- Professional indemnity, public liability, cyber and workers' compensation insurance, all current.
- More than 65,000 tests across our repositories, counted on 26 October 2026.
- More than 1,500 deploys and releases shipped since 1 January 2026.

> 24/7 incident line: 1800 370 270.

Sources

- Australian Signals Directorate, Essential Eight Maturity Model: https://www.cyber.gov.au/resources-business-and-government/essential-cyber-security/essential-eight
- Essential Eight Maturity Level 3, assessed 24 September 2026
- The running tally of our scale figures behind the record section, measured 26 October 2026 at 00:45 AEST, read at the 29 October 2026 edition