

Interview with Professor Alex Korb

Adjunct Professor at ODU

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Alexander Turnsek

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Professor Teresa Duvall

Josh Russell

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In my interview with Professor Korb, I asked a variety of questions. Some of these questions include how he entered the cybersecurity field and his current position, what skills and knowledge he believes are necessary for someone in cyber, and much more. To start the retelling of the interview and to provide my takeaways for each of the questions and the interview as a whole, I'll begin from the first question and provide a summary of his response.

The first question I asked was: how Professor Korb got into the cyber/IT field and into the position he now holds. He responded by mentioning that he had been a student at ODU's Graduate Program for International Studies (GPIS) since 2015, though according to him, he only properly became interested in cyber from 2016 onward in the aftermath of the 2016

Presidential Election. He mentioned that he had been studying meme culture and Internet culture earlier that fall term as part of a course on Globalization. The results of that election showed him that both meme and internet culture, as well as disinformation, would be more important to domestic and international politics than he realized at the time. He continued to study disinformation and meme culture until around 2019, when he started broadening his studies to cyber warfare more generally. Then he went on to recall that 2019 was also when he was introduced to Dr. Karahan, by Dr. Regina Karp with whom he had an assistantship at the time. He mentioned that they worked together on a cybersecurity panel for the 2020 Graduate Research Conference, and that Dr. Karahan was also his team's coach for the Cyber 9/12 Challenge at Washington, D.C., and again at Geneva, Switzerland. He particularly noted that since the COVID-19 lockdown began around that time, both of these conferences took place virtually. Before continuing his story from 2021-2023, where he worked with Dr. Karahan and with Dr. Hamdi Kavak at George Mason University on a project studying disinformation in Turkey. Finally, while he was finishing up his dissertation in 2024, he was offered a teaching position at ODU.

He wraps up his story by saying: "In short, I effectively taught myself cybersecurity and integrated that with political science the way Lucas Kello, Ben Buchanan, Thomas Rid, etc. do, and then I guess I sufficiently impressed Dr. Karahan enough for him to offer me a job. There was a lot of luck involved too, no doubt."

The second question I asked in the interview was: in his opinion, what would be the most important knowledge, skills, and abilities needed by someone in this field? Professor Korb responded by saying that it helps to have a commanding knowledge of both international relations and cybersecurity, so that you know what you're teaching. Though he particularly notes that there are two skills he would put above even that. The first skill he would put as the

most important, is the ability to critically think as this is vital for finding problems and figuring out solutions in the cybersecurity field. He also mentioned that there are really only a handful of scholars doing just that, including himself, so he believes he has to blaze a trail in that regard. The second skill he mentioned is the ability to break the subjects down and make them accessible to laymen. He specifically mentions that “if somebody with no background in political science or cybersecurity can understand what I’m talking about, then I know I’ve succeeded.”

The third question I asked in the interview was what were some of the 'soft' skills he has found to be most important in this job/position. Professor Korb mentioned that outside of critical thinking, the soft skills of empathy, creativity, and digital literacy are all very important. He notes that he is not out to get his students, or at least, he’s not consciously out to get his students. He just wants each and every one of them to succeed in his course, and he is prepared to lend whatever aid he can for them to do so. He notes that some days it's easy, but on others, he needs to find creative solutions tailored to individual students. He specifically notes, that digital literacy is very important to the position of a professor. He comments that he doesn't want to lead his students astray by giving them anything but the most credible sources, and if nothing else, he’s experienced in recognizing disinformation when he sees it.

Additionally he notes that self-discipline is another important factor to his position. He recalls that outside of answering student emails, someone could effectively let an asynchronous online course like his run on autopilot. So, he made a conscious effort to “be in the room,” or involved, as much as he could. He defines this effort as engaging with his students, addressing any concerns they had, and making it absolutely clear that he was always available, even if that wasn’t through a physical medium.

The fourth question I asked in the interview was: what technical skills he has found are the most important in his job/position. Professor Korb notes that writing and organizational skills are by far the most important that he's found in his position. He mentions that he needs to be able to organize and set course goals, and that he needs to be able to clearly and concisely convey information to his students. Beyond that, he notes that his course is not a very technical one. He specifically mentions that "I need to be able to use a computer, operate a Canvas page, and recognize AI writing (that last one in the interests of keeping my students honest...)."

The fifth question I asked in the interview was: what would be some good entry-level jobs for gaining experience to become a professor. He mentions that there is an element of luck to whether someone can secure an assistantship position or not, but he notes that a teaching assistantship is a good place to start. He goes on to mention that "even if you're mostly assigned to housekeeping (exam proctoring, makeup exams, etc.), you get to see how a course is taught, and you learn how to interact with students." He also mentions that a research assistantship also helps you build a working relationship with the faculty. He notes that these are few and far between, and to jump on these opportunities the moment they arrive.

The final question I asked in the interview was: If he was a department head, what qualities would he be looking for regarding new hire professors. Professor Korb noted that he would look for future ODU faculty to display compassion and attentiveness to their students similar to that which he's demonstrated or tried to demonstrate in his courses. He notes that it's easy for faculty to become wrapped up in their own research and then consider teaching to be a "side gig" of sorts. He continues on by saying that "Teaching is my passion – this is what I want to do, even if I'm doing it in a limited way relative to giving lectures on campus – and I hope future faculty are equally as passionate as I am."

Some of my takeaways from the interview was that there are quite a few different paths and choices that can guide someone's interest in cybersecurity and in other various fields. In the cybersecurity field, the skill to critically think is incredibly important. Most problems and breaches require out of the box thinking and most issues in cyber do not have a straightforward answer. The other necessary skill is proper communication skills, as being able to properly explain an idea or solution in simple terms for people not in the cyber field is almost always important. This skill allows the interconnection that cybersecurity/IT has on certain businesses and corporations. The soft skills mentioned also apply to most positions in cybersecurity, as empathy is needed to properly get along with coworkers and clients. Digital literacy and creativity are needed to properly create solutions and effectively communicate them. Self-discipline is also greatly needed and can be applied to any position, as there can be times where work may seem tiring or boring enough where temptation can lead you to get off track. For the fourth question, the main takeaways I can get goes back to communication skills. The key takeaways I could get for the last two questions are the idea of compassion and attentiveness in the workplace, and that starting as an intern is a great way to metaphorically "get your foot in the door".

Overall, this interview was a very eye opening experience. Professor Korb was very insightful and offered a lot of words of wisdom on various aspects of the field throughout the interview. I plan to take these lessons and ideas mentioned from his response to heart when I begin searching through jobs soon.