Individual Reflection

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CYSE 368: Cybersecurity Internship

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This internship was the point where cybersecurity stopped feeling like "school" and started feeling like professional work. Over the semester, I had to operate in a real client-facing environment, work within a team under pressure, and produce deliverables that were meant to be useful beyond a classroom setting. It challenged me in ways I honestly did not expect at first, but it also gave me clarity about what I want to do in this field and confidence that I can actually do it.

A lot went right during the internship, and the most significant aspect was the team I worked with. My team was driven in a way that matched my own, and we were able to translate our cybersecurity knowledge into real cyber consultancy work. The resilience and teamwork we showed were genuinely admirable, especially because we were three people who had never met before the clinic. Over time, our collaboration improved noticeably, and we became more effective at communicating, dividing tasks, and producing cohesive results. I also had opportunities to network with company leaders and founders, and those moments mattered more than I expected because they made me feel like a real cybersecurity professional instead of just a student completing an assignment.

Another thing that went right was how the clinic pushed me to think beyond technical language and into practical consulting. Design thinking ended up being more useful than I anticipated. I had heard of it before, but applying it in the clinic made it real, especially techniques like "Yes, and," which helped me collaborate without immediately shutting ideas down. Using structured ways to define the problem and align on what success looks like made the work smoother, and it also helped me understand that cybersecurity consulting is not only about having knowledge—it is about making that knowledge usable for people who do not speak "cyber." Along with that, guest speakers and professional guidance added a lot of value. Hearing directly from

professionals about expectations, communication, and real-world risk considerations gave me a stronger sense of how to carry myself and how to communicate recommendations in a way that a small business can actually act on.

At the same time, several things went wrong or did not go as planned, and most of them came down to unexpected disruptions and process issues. One team member was out for a couple of weeks after a car accident and concussion, and that immediately impacted the whole project. It was nobody's fault, but we were missing a vital voice that mattered in our workflow, and the absence affected our pace, our planning, and our ability to get ahead on deliverables. On top of that, there were moments where role clarity became a problem. Another team member took it upon himself to do more than what was asked of him, and that overstepping created friction and confusion about ownership. We eventually fixed these issues and still delivered a good report and a good presentation, but the process was more stressful than it needed to be. The experience also showed me that even a strong team can struggle if roles, internal deadlines, and expectations are not defined early.

Personally, the clinic taught me some lessons that I know I will carry into the workplace. The first is that I need to ask questions early instead of waiting and hoping everything will "work itself out." When I do not ask early, I usually lose time later and create more pressure for myself. The second lesson is that I need to speak up when there is an issue. I have always struggled with shutting down ideas and taking the lead, especially around strong personalities, but I learned that staying quiet does not protect the team—it usually just delays a solution. The third lesson is empathy. The clinic reminded me that teams are made of real people with real situations, and even when I am stressed or frustrated, empathy keeps collaboration productive and prevents problems from becoming personal.

If I could do the project over, I would make a few clear changes. I would bring the team together sooner on deliverables and set internal deadlines earlier, because waiting until close to the final deadline forces everything into a rushed cycle of building and rebuilding. I would push for more meaningful meetings that have a clear agenda and end with action items, because "meeting to meet" does not move the work forward. I would also speak my mind more and not let uncertainty build up, especially when I can already tell something is going to cause issues later. I would ask more questions sooner to the TAs and professor when expectations are unclear, and I would properly define each team member's roles early on so responsibilities are protected and the team stays aligned. I learned that role definition is not about being controlling—it is about making sure the team is coordinated and the work quality stays consistent.

Looking back at my Memorandum of Agreement objectives, I genuinely believe each objective was fully fulfilled. My teamwork improved because I had to work through real team dynamics, including different personalities, changes in availability, and deadline pressure. I learned how to collaborate more effectively, how to communicate when something is off, and how to keep a team moving even when the conditions are not ideal. My risk management learning grew significantly as well. I started the clinic with only a basic understanding, but by the end, I felt confident enough in my risk and governance knowledge to consider myself legitimately knowledgeable. More importantly, I learned how to apply risk concepts practically, including how to communicate risk without hiding behind jargon. I also gained practical cybersecurity experience for the first time in a way that felt professional. Doing real assessments and producing real deliverables made me feel like I was finally using what I have been learning instead of just studying it. Finally, I built positive relationships and networked in a way I had not done throughout most of my college career. This clinic gave me the chance to network with vice

presidents, company founders, and top cybersecurity professionals, and it made me realize how much I had been limiting myself by not networking earlier.

The most motivating and exciting parts of the internship were the moments where the work felt real and tangible. Going out into the streets and conducting cybersecurity assessments for real small businesses was easily one of the best parts, because it made the work feel meaningful and high-stakes in a good way. Meeting with leaders like the VP of Marathon IT, Mike Wallace, and Eric Garza of SBN Solutions also stood out, because those interactions made me feel like a real cybersecurity professional and not just a student. Those moments made me want to take the work more seriously, communicate better, and grow faster.

The most challenging aspects of the internship were mainly related to confidence and team dynamics. Early on, I was working with a team I did not feel fully confident in, and the personality differences intimidated me. One person was extroverted and strong at networking but took a smaller role, another seemed to want a bigger role than he could handle, and then there was me, an introvert with low confidence for no real reason. I have always had challenges in team settings, especially when it comes to taking the lead or shutting down ideas, and this clinic forced me to confront that weakness. Another major challenge was presenting. Because there was limited practice time and late adjustments, I struggled early with confidence during delivery. At the same time, I was proud that by the end, I was told I had massively improved and seemed much more confident when presenting. That improvement meant a lot because it was visible growth, not just a feeling.

For future interns, my strongest recommendations are about mindset, communication, and professionalism. Interns should think outside technical jargon and learn how to speak in a way that clients actually understand. They should put themselves in the client's shoes, because small

businesses often have limited time and resources and need realistic steps. They should not assume anything and should ask questions early, because assumptions create mistakes later. They should pick an established method of communication and stick with it, because inconsistent communication creates confusion. They should also speak their mind respectfully, value their time, and set internal deadlines so they do not end up trapped in last-minute chaos.

In terms of preparation, I think interns benefit most from entering with a foundation in the CIA Triad and basic familiarity with NIST concepts, because those frameworks help translate cybersecurity into structured thinking. Interns also need a professional mindset, curiosity, and the comfort of asking questions. Writing ability matters more than people assume, so having experience writing organized reports (even if it is not perfect APA) is important. Presentation and public speaking practice also helps, because the clinic demands that you explain your work clearly, not just complete it.

My main takeaway from the internship is that I feel one step closer to becoming a proper cybersecurity professional. I became better at communication and teamwork, and I gained clarity about what I want to do in cybersecurity. Before the clinic, I was not sure what path I wanted within the field, but now I know I am most interested in governance and risk management, and I am specifically looking more into GRC, risk analyst, and compliance roles. I am also proud of my growth, especially because I had to learn, adjust, and improve under pressure rather than in a controlled environment.

Because I graduate this weekend, the clinic feels like a strong ending to my time at ODU. It gave me real-world experience at the exact moment I needed it most, and it pushed me to grow in areas that will matter immediately after graduation. Moving forward, I plan to continue building my governance and risk skills, put more effort into networking, pursue Security+, and talk about

this internship in interviews as proof that I can adapt quickly, work with a team, and develop professionally in a real consulting environment.

As for recommended changes to the course, I strongly believe the guest speakers and the street consulting should stay the same because they were some of the most valuable and motivating parts of the clinic. If anything should change, it is the report template. The template felt too loose, and my team lost points even though we followed the template and the draft comments, which suggests expectations could be more structured and clearer. If I could add something, it would be more presentation practice, including an example presentation early on. I think a stronger emphasis on rehearsal and delivery would reduce anxiety, improve professionalism, and make the final presentations more consistent across teams.