Personal Narrative Essay

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Abstract

Overcoming challenges and solving complex problems has always been somethings that brings me joy. Through several internships, I was able to learn what I wanted to do in my career. Because of the exposure to these three internships, I was able to start my professional career early while still studying towards my degree. I now have over two and a half years of professional experience, and I am finally graduating with my bachelor's degree. Through all challenges that I have experienced, I have been molded into a hard-working individual with a strong focus on my goals.

Keywords: Early career, internship, cybersecurity, cloud technologies, certifications, containers, cloud security, site reliability engineer

My journey into the field of cybersecurity was full of hard work and sacrifices. I was never the best academic individual throughout high school; however, I had large aspirations in terms of wanting to be successful. I initially applied to Old Dominion University unsure if I would even be accepted. To my luck, I was accepted, and my college career had started. I was initially in the school of business for enterprise cybersecurity. This major was a mixture of business classes and basic cybersecurity classes. Although I enjoyed the business classes such as financial accounting and managerial accounting, I realized that this was not what I wanted to focus on for courses. This led me to speaking with my advisor where we discussed my professional desires and changed to the school of cybersecurity to get more technical classes. This ultimately was the best decision I could have made and has created a cascade of many great events.

Going into the summer of 2020, I applied for my first internship in information technologygy (IT) at a company called CloudFit Software. This internship was at a cloud technologies company and to my luck, I was offered an intern position as a site reliability engineer. During this time, I really started to learn the ins and outs of what the IT industry was all about. I was tasked with creating indexes for one of their log ingesting tools. In addition to creating these index's, I would have to then create a multitude of dashboards to help with visualization of this data. My mentor at the time helped me really figure out what I wanted out of my early career. Little did I know at the time, this would be the most important first step of kicking off my entire career. I worked hard by showing up an hour before the full-time employees would arrive. I would even be the last one to leave, sometimes with an extra two hours tacked on to the end of my day. This was at the initial height of COVID-19 where no one would be coming into the office except for my mentor and a member or two of the 24-by-7

operations monitoring team. Having so few people in the office allowed for countless one on one conversations with my mentor.

After this internship concluded, I felt content and more excited than ever to continue my educational studies into cybersecurity. When it comes to school, I have never been the best student. I learn much better when I have the opportunity to work hands on. Additionally, I enjoy learning in a trial by error type of environment. This allows me to attempt my way through solving a problem while also being able to ask questions along the way. It is much more difficult for me to sit down and read through books or just by listening to a professor teach. As it will come to show through the rest of my internships discussed in this paper, I believe that practical hands-on experience is the best way to grow.

The following summer of 2021, I was immediately accepted back into CloudFit Software's internship program. This year's program was even more exciting as the group of interns was increased by seven more individuals compared to the previous year's total of three. Upon arriving on the first day, it was clear that it was going to be a summer of fun and growth. The intern group was comprised of highly intelligent and eager college students who had their eyes on growing. Previous to this summer, I was extremely hesitant on anything to do with programming as it seemed too complex for me to do. The mentors during this summer's program as well as the fellow interns made learning different software languages a cake walk. We were tasked with working on several coding projects that were to be used within the company's production environments and their marketed product. This led to many early mornings and late-night hours to learn and contribute to the team. Additionally, the company sponsored all of the interns to study for and take the Microsoft Azure Fundamentals certification. This also happened

to be the very first cloud certification that I would ever complete. Looking back into my career

growth, this was the summer that really defined my early career.

     After this internship concluded, I was in talks about potentially continuing with them

should they have the funds to keep me around. Being a smaller start-up company, they had not

yet built the capital to fund this possibility. Thankfully around this time, an internship position

opened up at the company my dad worked for, SeKON Enterprises, which allowed me to shift

my focus into the cybersecurity domain. When applying for SeKON Enterprises, it was made

known to me that I would be working on government projects and was required to apply for my

secret government clearance. This having been a dream of mine; I was quick to accept and start

the paperwork process. During this internship, I worked under an amazing mentor where I was

taught a wide variety of government cybersecurity management systems for maintaining systems

and their governing documentation. The main component of cybersecurity that I was introduced

to here was how to compose governing documents that dictate what systems requirements are, as

well as any changes that are being made to remediate vulnerabilities. I learned how complex and

granular these documents needed to be while also gaining an understanding that I this side of

cybersecurity was not what I wanted to pursue. This opportunity lasted from September of 2021

to March of 2022.

     The reason for this opportunity coming to an abrupt end in March 2022 is because

CloudFit Software reached out to me about a full-time position as a site reliability engineer.

Initially, I was torn with making this decision about whether to stay at SeKON or to pursue the

full-time employment. But my mentor told me that this move back to CloudFit would be the best

thing that I could do for my career to get it going. So, on March 7th, 2022, I started made the leap

and started my first day of my professional career. I could not have been more excited for this opportunity.

At CloudFit Software, I was brought onto one of their Department of Defense (DoD) contracts. This happened to be the company's biggest contract that also required the most support. I was brought under the wing of an engineer who I had become close friends with over the course of my previous internships at CloudFit. He had me hit the ground running out of the gate on everything that I would need to know to be successful within this project. I worked hard to grow and gain an understanding of all things cloud technologies. The main emphasis that I had to retain was containerized technologies and Kubernetes. This role required traveling to the on-site location where I would complete 24-by-7 on-call rotations working in a secret compartmented information facility (SCIF). This high risk and high stress environment refined me into a hard-working individual with a desire to continuously grow my knowledge. I was tasked early on with owning and maintaining certain security processes which at the time, seemed way out of my league. However, through many hours of dedication and hard work, I became a big asset to the team. My opinion on tasks soon became valued and I became widely known as a hard worker that was dedicated to the success of the company's mission. Before long, I started experiencing hostility and toxicity in the workplace from some inexperienced team members. This coupled with the high stress of the job motivated me to move on to the next professional opportunity.

At this point, I found a new home at my current company, Pegasystems. This role was to my liking in the fact that my focus would be on the tasks that I have been working towards for all of my early career and education. This role would be that of a cloud security engineer. This meshed together my want for focusing on security and the love for cloud technologies.

Additionally, the work that I would get to do would be focused on the technical side of the house. While of course creating documentation for processes and procedures to ensure information is tracked. During my now two-and-a-half years at Pega (Pegasystems), I have worked on a wide range of technologies and in different environments. I have been enabled to utilize my knowledge of government systems and containerized technologies while also pushing for security and sustainability. The team that I work on is comprised of myself and two other individuals. We work hard to clean up bad processes and improve the companies cloud security posture in both the commercial and FedRAMP environments. Additionally, we complete countless tasks that need immediate remediation or have been escalated in priority by our senior director.

This role as well as the individuals that I work with have helped me grow into a more seasoned security professional. I have achieved two more certifications during the course of my career to include the CompTIA Security+ CE and the AWS Certified Cloud Practitioner. I am currently working towards achieving my CISSP certification while also preparing to apply for graduate school. The reason for achieving certifications and completing a master's degree is so that I have the knowledge and credentials to start my own cybersecurity company. This has been a goal of mine for many years and I believe that these steps will help me in achieving these dreams. I am currently wrapping up my bachelor's degree in cybersecurity. This will be complete in the summer of 2024.

I have had many goals in life and I have always wanted to achieve these goals at a young age. I do not want to leave any stone unturned when it comes to my professional career. Starting this company will allow me to do a multitude of things. The first being able to run a company that is dedicated to creating a safer world in cyberspace. It will work towards protecting

companies, the government, and individuals against malicious actors. Secondly, if I am able to grow this company successfully, I will be able to focus on my wife and growing family. At my core, this is my true goal, to provide my family with the means to enjoy a happy and adventurous life. I find pride in constant growth and achieving goals. However, the sweetest goal of them all is to give my family the world. I will continue to work towards my goals with determination as my career continues. I hope that all of the steps that I have taken and will continue to take will provide my family with all that they will ever need.