Narrative Essay

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IDS493: Electronic Portfolio Project

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30 March 2024

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Reflecting on my journey toward a career in cybersecurity, I am reminded of the diverse experiences and pivotal moments that have shaped my decision. Throughout one's life, the stories that make up their narrative can develop and transform. This is a natural occurrence as one experiences different situations and events over time (McAdams, 2001). Each phase of my journey has been instrumental in bolstering my pursuit of this dynamic field. My extensive tenure in security as a member of the Air Force's Security Forces, followed by my transition into the civilian sector, has given me a unique perspective and a solid foundation of knowledge and skills. The ever-evolving nature of cybersecurity demands proficiency in multiple domains, including risk management, threat intelligence, and incident response. My experience has honed my ability to navigate complex security challenges and adapt to changing circumstances. I am eager to continue growing and contributing to this field, as I firmly believe cybersecurity is one of our time's most pressing and critical issues.

My Journey into Cybersecurity

While pursuing a career in cybersecurity after a full career in the military, I realized that my journey began during high school. My guidance counselor inquired about my plans, and I expressed an interest in computers. However, when choosing my classes, I decided to forgo computer courses and pursue my passion for art courses due to my love for drawing. During that period, I aspired to become either the next basketball star like Michael Jordan or a great comic book artist like Stan Lee. Despite my initial choice not to pursue computer courses, cybersecurity was always at the forefront of my mind. My military career provided me access to and experience with computer technology, further solidifying my interest in cybersecurity. Upon reflection on the chapters in my life (McAdams, 2001), I realized that my path had always led to

cybersecurity despite not initially pursuing computer courses. Throughout my journey, I have learned that remaining open to new opportunities is essential, even if they do not align with our initial plans.

Early Foundations in Security

My journey into cybersecurity began over two decades ago when I served in the Air Force's Security Forces. I gained foundational skills and knowledge to shape my career path. As I progressed through various security-related roles, I gained hands-on experience and earned certifications that proved invaluable to my future endeavors. One of the most significant milestones was attaining the Electric Security Systems (ESS) Certification, which gave me a fundamental understanding of operating and monitoring alarm systems. This certification paved the way for my future work in security technology. Additionally, as the Antiterrorism representative for my unit, I earned Antiterrorism Level II certification, where I delved into vulnerability assessment, risk management, and physical security - all of which are essential components of the contemporary cybersecurity landscape.

As my professional journey progressed, I transitioned into the Office of the Inspector General, where I expanded my understanding of compliance inspections and audits. This shift offered me a deeper insight into security's governance, regulatory, and compliance (GRC) aspects. This expertise has been instrumental in shaping my approach to cybersecurity policy and strategy, enabling me to develop robust frameworks that balance risk, compliance obligations, and business objectives. My experience in the Office of the Inspector General has been a defining moment in my professional journey, providing me with the knowledge, skills, and expertise necessary to navigate the complex world of cybersecurity policy and strategy. During my final deployment as the ESS program manager, I identified a significant technical knowledge

gap while working with the Intrusion Detection System (IDS). This realization has further fueled my pursuit of continued learning and growth in cybersecurity.

A Realization and a Turning Point

Upon approaching my military career's conclusion, I explored job opportunities aligned with my professional interests. During my tenure, I discovered an affinity for managing the base alarm program while deployed, as it provided me with a sense of fulfillment. My role was further augmented through collaboration with civilian contractors responsible for the alarms. Post-retirement, I submitted applications for employment at various companies that would allow me to continue working in a similar capacity. Unfortunately, I was not offered the position after interviewing with two of the organizations that were hiring at the time. Despite having the requisite experience, I was disqualified due to a lack of technical expertise. I also applied for other security-related positions that did not necessitate technical skills, but none of these resulted in an offer. I surmise that the absence of a degree was one of the reasons for my disqualification from these positions, as it put me at a disadvantage compared to other candidates who possessed one.

After gaining extensive experience in the security field, I realized that to excel in cybersecurity, I needed to expand my education and skillset. This realization became a turning point in my career trajectory. After retiring from the military, I decided to avoid roles solely focused on alarm and IDS systems. Instead, I chose to return to academic pursuits to complete my degree. Engaged in introspection, I was determined to pivot towards IT, recognizing it as a field that perfectly aligned with my aspiration to remain at the forefront of technological advancements. Initially, I was considering pursuing a degree in IT or computer science.

However, my wife encouraged me to delve into cybersecurity as I already possessed a security background from my military career and wanted to remain in the security industry.

My Cybersecurity Journey

During my academic journey, I encountered some challenges. One of the biggest hurdles was completing the precalculus math class, a prerequisite for most of my cybersecurity courses. The class was particularly challenging since I had not taken a math class at that level in over two and a half decades. Nonetheless, I was determined to complete the class and used every available tool, such as the video link in the textbook and YouTube. I also appreciated the tutoring sessions, which aided me in passing the class. Despite being proficient in math during my high school and college years, the tutoring proved essential in helping me pass the class and enroll in the necessary cybersecurity courses.

Most of the cybersecurity classes I completed were hands-on or practical applications, enabling me to apply my knowledge instead of relying solely on theoretical frameworks. The sequence of the courses I undertook proved invaluable in that it allowed me to obtain a comprehensive understanding of cybersecurity. Commencing with the theoretical and ethical classes facilitated the establishment of a foundation of the basics before proceeding to the practical courses that offered me hands-on experience. Of note, the courses' structure was such that the information overlapped, with specific concepts being taught in one class and then reinforced in another. For instance, while undertaking a networking and programming class, I encountered a particular terminology I did not comprehend. The same terminology emerged in a network security class I took the following summer, and the instructor expounded on the term in a manner that I understood. This well-ordered approach to the courses allowed me to navigate through the classes, commencing with the theoretical and ethical facets and progressing to

practical applications and technology, with hands-on experience aiding my cybersecurity journey.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my journey in the field of cybersecurity is a testament to the importance of resilience, adaptability, and continuous learning in shaping one's career path with passion and expertise. From my foundational experiences in the Air Force to the academic challenges I overcame while pursuing a degree in cybersecurity, each step has contributed to my personal and professional growth and equipped me with the skills needed to tackle the challenges of the future. As I embark on this new chapter, I am driven by a sense of purpose and determination to leverage my diverse skill set and expertise in addressing the ever-evolving threats to digital security. My goal remains steadfast: to make a meaningful contribution toward ensuring the safety and security of our digital world, driven by a commitment to excellence and an unrelenting pursuit of knowledge.

References:

McAdams, D.P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. Review of General Psychology, 5(2), 100-122.