Self-Assessment: Growing From Student to Security Professional

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Self-Assessment: My Evolution From a Student to a Professional

This year I was able to see a transformation in my professional approach. At the beginning of 2026 I was a student that could write code and use security tools as needed for assignments. Now I have completed two internships and am more comfortable with turning a disorganized problem into something that others can use. In this self-assessment I will outline my achievements and challenges from the year, leadership that I have provided, things that I am proud of, and goals for the future. I have seen the most growth when stepping into new situations, dealing with uncertainty and taking ownership of my tasks. As for future goals I would like to complete the Security+ exam and further my knowledge in security and be more comfortable with communicating to non-technical audiences.

Achievements and Challenges

Over the past year I am most pleased with the consistency I have shown. I have been on the Dean's list throughout my time at ODU. In order to achieve this, I have been putting effort into completing assignments and trying to learn the material as opposed to just completing the assignments. I applied this to my internships as well. During my internship at the Democratic Governors Association, I wrote Python scripts to clean large datasets which saved an estimated 20 hours of data entry work each month. I also created an offline version of one of their web applications to help improve performance of large files and a scraper that helped collect an entire database for the organization. At Markel I moved into application security where I helped implement automated security checks into a CI/CD pipeline and worked with developers to reduce the number of open critical issues by 35%.

There were challenges as well. Adapting to working in a corporate setting and building relationships with others was tough. I also experienced a lack of knowledge in some situations. I

have come to understand that this is part of being new to an environment. On the technical side I experienced some frustration with my Arizona lobbying project. The state's old lobby portal would timeout and my search technique only returned approximately 80% of the lobbyists. I recognized that my search technique was not working and switched to extracting IDs from PDF documents instead. I also added checkpointing and retry functionality to avoid losing hours of work if something went wrong. Dealing with issues like these helped me to pivot instead of getting stuck.

I also experienced differences between school and work. In school there is usually a defined answer and a rubric for what constitutes success. In the workplace there are not always clear answers and no one to hand you the steps. You must ask good questions and then try things out while remaining open to failure. This was uncomfortable at first but has helped me gain confidence in my ability to solve problems on my own. This has also made my academic experience more relevant because I can now see how concepts from my coursework are applied in the workplace.

Leadership

For me leadership can mean a few things. I would say most leadership that I have done has come from taking ownership of a piece of a project and being reliable. During my internship at Markel on the AI-enhanced Claude/Jira project I was responsible for the security aspects of the project. I worked by being meticulous in my tasks, reviewing code and communicating problems and my findings to developers so they could identify what needed to be changed and why. I also made sure the issues were clear and worked through the issues with the developers and QA by following up on them. I also created scenarios for AI misuse to test how the workflow could be abused which helped bring to light some risks that may not have been thought

of. I also try to lead by example in a small way. I make sure my work is complete and on time and I do not wait until problems arise to ask questions. I also try to prevent small problems from becoming larger problems. I have learned leadership does not always mean being the loudest person in the room. Sometimes it is simply being reliable and speaking up about issues you notice to make it easier for others to do their jobs.

What I am most proud of

I am most proud of my growth during my internship at the DGA and of the teammate I have become. I was nervous at first about whether or not I was the right person for the job. I quickly advanced into the position and started working independently as well as solving problems the team was having instead of waiting to be told what to do. An example of this is the Arizona pipeline which resulted in a master list of 1,393 unique lobbyist IDs. Overall, I am most proud of being someone that my team can rely on when there is work to be done. At Markel whenever a new task was given to me by a manager or mentor, I readily accepted it even when I was busy with other tasks already. I was happy to take on additional tasks. All of these tasks helped me learn something new. I also feel that being reliable is as important as any technical ability.

Future Goals and Areas for Growth

Short term goals include completing the Security+ exam in October 2026 and graduating in May 2027. Long term I would like to be a DevSecOps or application security engineer where I can use both security as well as code. I believe the issue I will face the most will be time due to having to balance classes, exam prep and a job search during my senior year. In order to face this challenge, I plan to create a weekly study schedule with practice exams and begin early in the job

search. I would be proud of completing Security+, maintaining a good GPA and having a full time offer in place upon graduation.

Areas for growth include cloud and infrastructure security because many pipelines use cloud and infrastructure. I plan to use more hands-on practice. I would also like to improve at writing and presenting findings to non-technical audiences. I plan to seek feedback on my reports as well as volunteer to present in class. I would also like some mentorship from people in application security and the opportunity to work on larger code bases because it will help me the most.

In order to achieve these goals, I have a few things in mind. I would like to continue adding to my ODU portfolio site projects and what I learned about them. I would also like to continue working on small projects on my own such as labs and scripts to keep my skills sharp during between semesters. I would also like to continue networking with professionals in the field. Every conversation I have had with a mentor has taught me something I could not learn from a textbook.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this year I have seen the most out of myself when overcoming the uncertainty that comes with being new and taking ownership of tasks even when first attempts fail. I need to continue to grow in the areas of communication, cloud security and certification. I feel good about where I am headed and I am excited to continue to grow, take on new challenges and become a professional that others can rely on.