

Personal Narrative Essay

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to outline how I have chosen to become a cybersecurity professional based upon all the various academic, professional, and personal experiences I have had during my life thus far. This is accomplished through examining the concept of narrative identity by McAdams, the story models described by Smith, and the concept of agency in forming one's identity by Nguyen; and how those concepts relate to the roles I've played in customer service, technical coursework and hands on experience in IT which has allowed me to evolve into a person who wants to be a cybersecurity professional. I reflect on the entire journey from when I first began working to now, where I am studying advanced subjects related to cybersecurity; how significant events, learning across multiple disciplines, and self-reflection all lead me to where I am today and where I see myself going in terms of both my academic goals and my professional goals for a career in cybersecurity.

Keywords: cybersecurity, narrative identity, interdisciplinary learning, career development, self-reflection

My Path to Cybersecurity: A Narrative Identity

My path to cybersecurity has been far from linear and has consisted of many life experiences, which ultimately helped identify both my skills and interests and what my career goal would be. According to McAdams (2006), narrative identity is defined as the "internalized story" people develop to make sense of their lives. Upon reviewing my academic and professional background, it is evident that each experience that made up my story led to the development of the professional identity I now have. Through a review of some of the customer service, interdisciplinary courses, lab environments, and professional positions, I will gain insight into how these experiences influenced my decision to enter the cybersecurity industry. This paper will tell the story of how I developed clarity and focus on the field of information technology using the models created by McAdams, Smith, and Nguyen.

Early Experiences: Discovering Skills Through Customer Service

Working at Edible Arrangements in a field unrelated to servers, networks, and cybersecurity frameworks provided me with many opportunities to develop important skills in IT support. In customer service, I learned to speak to the public, resolve their problems efficiently, and remain composed under pressure. At the same time, the skills I developed were providing an invisible foundation of experience on which the IT support skills that are now so important to me would grow.

While working in customer service, I continually had to assist other employees in resolving minor technical issues related to the use of the point-of-sale system, printers, etc., at the store location. I liked solving problems, whether they were big or small. As Smith (2014) points out, we all have "progress stories" about ourselves; stories that demonstrate our development and movement in a meaningful way. Reflecting on my time working in customer

service is where I can see the beginning of my progress story, developing my problem-solving and communication skills that would ultimately lead me into the world of technology.

Building a Technical Foundation at Tidewater Community College

Upon realizing how much I enjoyed the performance of technical tasks, I decided to register for Tidewater Community College's Associate of Applied Science degree program in Cyber Security. This was the first significant transition in my story; at this juncture, I had a way to pursue an interest-based academic program which would provide me with opportunities to enter a legitimate profession.

I completed coursework covering networking, computer systems administration, digital forensic science, and information security while enrolled in the AAS Cyber Security Program at TCC. One of the most influential aspects of my time at TCC was participating in the hands-on Windows Server 2016 lab environment. In these labs, I created virtual machines, developed and configured a domain, added Windows 10 client computers, and managed Active Directory user accounts. The labs necessitated inter-disciplinary knowledge (networking, operating systems, and cyber security).

According to Nguyen (2020), "personal identity is influenced by the sense of agency which means that individuals have the ability to be proactive in creating their own future." Choosing to pursue Cyber Security at TCC was a prime example of agency; I was no longer wandering from role to role; I was making intentional decisions regarding my career based on my passion for and ability to succeed within the field.

Advancing My Identity Through Studies at Old Dominion University

When I completed my associate degree, attending Old Dominion University allowed me to expand my knowledge in academics. The Cyber Security Program at Old Dominion University exposed me to a lot of additional knowledge areas that included Ethical Hacking, Risk Management, Network Defense, and Cyber Security Policy. All these areas of study provided me with an understanding of what is involved in Cyber Security beyond just computer science — it includes Human Behavior, Organizational Structure, and National Security.

I believe one of the greatest aspects of the Cyber Security program at Old Dominion University is its Interdisciplinary nature. Cyber Security draws on Psychology, Law, Business, and Technology. By studying how attackers think, by studying how Organizations protect their Data, and by studying how Laws govern Digital Environments, I came to view the field as both dynamic and significant. In doing so, this broader scope of knowledge has solidified my commitment to this Profession.

In addition, as I continued to attend Old Dominion University, My Narrative Identity became clear. I am no longer just someone who "Likes Technology," I have become someone who is committed to Understanding How to Protect Digital Systems and Prevent Cyber Threats.

A Turning Point at Amazon: Seeing Technology at Scale

While I was attending school, I also worked as an FC Associate L1 at an Amazon Fulfillment Center in Suffolk, VA. The non-IT nature of my work as an asana FC Associate did not diminish its influence upon my perceptions of the technological effect upon operational processes. Amazon has become increasingly reliant upon automated systems, scanning technologies, networked equipment, and computerized tracking and monitoring systems. Any type

of failure in these areas can have a detrimental effect on an operation's ability to operate at a productive level.

My responsibilities as a quality check and pack flow manager necessitated the need to be able to communicate, think quickly, and understand how all the different systems interacted with each other. Through this experience, I began to see the very real effects of system failure, as well as the real threats posed by cybersecurity risks. McAdams (2006) describes a turning point scene as a specific moment in time where an individual will take what they have experienced and use it to help them understand their own future directions. For me, Amazon was that turning point; it was the moment I realized that Cyber Security is not simply about protecting computers; it is about protecting business, workers, and total infrastructures.

Strengthening My Skills Through Certifications and Hands-On Practice

I also pursued certifications, like CompTIA A+, Microsoft 365 Fundamentals; taking certification courses allowed me to study for exams, which built my confidence and provided a solid base of structured knowledge necessary for both IT support and systems administration.

Nguyen (2020), stated "the most important factor to how we identify ourselves is who we imagine our future selves to be." I used certifications to create an image of myself as a Cyber Security Professional, someone who was competent, had knowledge and could make contributions to real-world IT settings; this image of my future self has motivated me to continue developing my skillset as I progress through my degree program.

Conclusion: Understanding My Journey and Moving Forward

I look at this journey as one where the chapters of my life to date all fit into a complete and cohesive story of a journey to becoming a Cyber Security professional. Each step in my journey from Customer Service roles to the technical education at TCC to the Interdisciplinary Education at Old Dominion University, and the turning point at Amazon has shaped the Professional Identity I have today. The way in which I can connect all these steps to a "story" is due to Smith's (2014) ideas about "Progress Stories" and McAdams' (2001) theory of "Narrative Identity". Also, Nguyen (2015) reminded me that I am an active participant in creating the next part of my life.

My educational experience here at Old Dominion continues, and I will also be seeking Information Technology Certifications; I go into this time with confidence in that I know that my previous life experiences have provided me with the background to become a Cyber Security professional. I now realize what direction my story is heading, and I am excited for the next chapter.

Reference

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