

Internship Reflection Paper

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Introduction

I actually found this internship through LinkedIn. I had been scrolling through postings looking for something that would let me apply my cybersecurity coursework in a real environment, and when I saw the IT/Client Services Intern role at NEXCOM, it felt like exactly what I was looking for. I have lived in the Hampton Roads area my whole life, so the idea of interning with a Navy command headquartered right here, in an environment adjacent to the Department of Defense, was genuinely exciting to me. It also lined up with something I have wanted for a while now, which is to eventually work toward a security clearance, so this felt like a meaningful first step.

For anyone unfamiliar with NEXCOM, it is worth explaining what the organization actually does. NEXCOM traces its roots back to the Navy Ship's Store Office, which was established in Brooklyn, New York in 1946. It was later renamed the Navy Exchange Service Command and moved its headquarters to Virginia Beach in 1993, which is where it remains today. NEXCOM's mission is to provide quality goods and services at a savings while supporting Navy quality of life programs for active duty military, retirees, reservists, veterans, Department of Defense civilians, and their families. It runs six business lines, including the Navy Exchange retail stores, the Ships Store Program, the Uniform Program Management Office, the Navy Clothing and Textile Research Facility, the Navy Lodge Program, and the Telecommunications Program Office, and employs more than 14,000 people worldwide. What stood out to me is that NEXCOM is funded mostly through its own earnings rather than taxpayer dollars, and it serves sailors and their families no matter where they are stationed, whether that is a base here in the U.S. or a ship overseas. Once I understood that, the IT support work I would be doing suddenly felt like it mattered a lot more, since it was directly enabling that mission.

Before I started, I signed a Memorandum of Agreement that laid out a few learning outcomes I hoped to walk away with. I wanted to improve my customer service and communication skills by helping users with technical problems over the phone, through email, and in person. I wanted real, hands on experience troubleshooting hardware, software, and network issues in an actual professional setting instead of just a classroom. I wanted to get comfortable using help desk tools, ticketing systems, and remote support software well enough to manage and document support requests efficiently. And I wanted to walk away with a stronger grasp of cybersecurity and IT best practices, things like password management, device security, and data protection procedures.

My first 50 hours did not include system access yet, so I spent that time simply observing my manager as he took calls and worked through tickets. I paid close attention to how he prioritized issues, talked with end users, and documented everything, since I knew those were habits I would need once I started handling tickets on my own. I also went through an intern orientation that included a department showcase, where every division at NEXCOM explained what they did

and how they supported Navy personnel and their families. That was actually one of the more eye opening parts of the first few weeks, because it made me realize that IT support here is not just about fixing individual problems. It is about keeping things running for people who genuinely depend on these systems every single day. We also did a team building activity where each intern made a poster about ourselves and presented it to the group, which pushed me out of my comfort zone a little but also helped me connect with interns from other departments early on. Looking back, my first impression of NEXCOM was that it is a large organization that genuinely takes its mission seriously and invests real effort into its interns, and that first stretch of just observing taught me more than I expected before I ever touched a ticket myself.

Management Environment

My direct supervisor at NEXCOM is Liz Colston, though most of my day to day training and guidance has come from my lead, Aaron. His teaching style is straightforward and to the point, which honestly worked really well for me. I sit close to him, so if I run into something I do not understand, I can just turn and ask. What I appreciate most is that even when I need help with something he has already walked me through before, he never gives me attitude about it or makes me feel like I should have remembered. He just helps, and that consistency made it a lot easier to ask questions without feeling embarrassed about it.

Our call center team is made up of about eight of us, and the general culture is that anyone on the floor is a resource if you get stuck. It is not a strict hierarchy where you can only go to one person. If Aaron is busy or on a call, someone else nearby can usually point me in the right direction. That kind of flexibility made the learning curve feel a lot less intimidating, especially in the beginning when everything was new.

As far as management style goes, the approach here is very much learn by doing. There was not a lot of formal, drawn out training before I was expected to start taking tickets. Once I had system access, I was jumping in and working through real issues almost immediately. At first that felt a little overwhelming, but looking back, I think it was actually the most effective way to learn help desk work. The more tickets I worked through, the more familiar the process became, and problems that felt confusing during my first week started to feel routine by the second or third. I do not think I would have learned nearly as fast if I had spent more time observing instead of doing.

In terms of team dynamics, I would say most of my coworkers keep to themselves and stay focused on their own ticket queue, which makes sense given how busy the call center can get. That said, I have managed to get close with two coworkers in particular, and having those relationships has made the environment feel a lot less isolating. Overall, I think the supervision structure at NEXCOM struck a good balance. I had enough guidance available when I needed it, but enough independence to actually build real skills instead of just watching someone else do the work.

Major Work Duties, Assignments, and Projects

Once I had system access, my day to day responsibilities centered around working help desk tickets through the SDM ticketing system. Over the course of my internship, I completed 134 tickets covering a wide range of issues, including application errors, printer configuration problems, and Outlook issues. Each ticket required me to diagnose the problem, walk the end user through the fix, and document everything clearly enough that another technician could pick up where I left off if needed. That documentation piece might seem like a small detail, but it is actually essential to the business. NEXCOM supports users all over the world, and if a ticket gets escalated or reassigned, whoever picks it up next needs to understand exactly what has already been tried without having to start from scratch or bother the user again.

A big part of my work also involved using Remote Desktop Viewer to connect directly to end user machines and troubleshoot problems in real time. This was one of the more valuable skills I picked up, since it meant I could resolve issues remotely instead of needing someone physically present at the user's desk. Given how spread out NEXCOM's workforce is, remote support tools like this are not optional. They are the reason a small help desk team can actually support a large, dispersed organization efficiently.

I also gained hands on experience with Active Directory, which I used to manage user accounts. This gave me direct exposure to a tool that is fundamental to IT administration in basically any enterprise environment, and it made me appreciate how much of cybersecurity actually starts with something as basic as making sure the right people have the right access. When tickets came in that were outside the scope of what I could resolve at my level, I used the SDM to escalate them to the appropriate team. Knowing when to escalate, and doing it correctly, is just as important as knowing how to fix something yourself, since misrouted tickets waste time and slow down resolution for the end user.

Beyond the ticket queue, I had the opportunity to tour the Norfolk Navy Exchange and the Suffolk Distribution Center, which gave me a much clearer picture of the operations that the IT department supports behind the scenes. Seeing those facilities in person made the day to day ticket work feel a lot more connected to something bigger. It was not just fixing a printer or resetting a password, it was making sure the systems that keep those retail and distribution operations running actually stayed up and running for the people who depend on them.

Every one of these duties, from ticket documentation to remote troubleshooting to Active Directory management, plays a direct role in keeping NEXCOM's IT infrastructure functional for a workforce that is spread across the globe. Without reliable help desk support, the retail and logistics operations I saw firsthand during those tours would not be able to run as smoothly as they do.

Cybersecurity Skills and Knowledge

Going into this internship, I already had a foundation in cybersecurity concepts from my coursework and from earning my CompTIA Security+ certification. I understood things like the importance of password policies, basic network security principles, and general best practices around protecting data, but a lot of that knowledge existed for me on a theoretical level. I knew the definitions and the concepts, but I had not actually applied them in a live environment where real people and real systems were on the other end.

That changed pretty quickly once I started working tickets. A huge part of my day to day now touches on Identity and Access Management, whether that is provisioning or troubleshooting user accounts in Active Directory, handling Microsoft 365 security issues, or supporting users through multi factor authentication problems. Before this internship, IAM was something I had read about, but now I actually understand how much of cybersecurity in practice comes down to making sure the right person has the right access, and that access gets revoked or adjusted the moment it is not needed anymore. I also picked up practical skills I had not really worked with before, like VPN troubleshooting, endpoint security support, and general network troubleshooting for end users. These are not things you get much exposure to in a classroom setting, since they really only make sense once you are the one on the phone walking someone through a connection issue in real time.

I also learned a lot about security incident escalation, which is knowing when a problem in front of me is not just a routine fix but something that needs to be flagged and routed to the Security Operations team. That has sharpened my awareness around malware and phishing, since part of my role involves helping users recognize suspicious activity and knowing what to do when something does not look right. On top of that, every ticket I work involves some level of security policy compliance, whether that is verifying identity before making account changes or following procedures designed to protect data and systems from unauthorized access.

Honestly, this experience has changed my understanding of cybersecurity more than I expected it to. In school, cybersecurity often gets framed around big picture concepts, threats, vulnerabilities, frameworks, and controls. What this internship showed me is that a huge amount of real world security work happens at the help desk level, in small everyday interactions like resetting a password securely or verifying that the person asking for access actually should have it. Secure technical support is not a side note to cybersecurity, it is one of the front lines of it. That shift in perspective has made me appreciate how much operational security depends on

people doing the basic things consistently and correctly, not just having strong policies written down somewhere.

ODU Curriculum

Looking back at my coursework, I think ODU prepared me better than I expected, though not always in ways that were obvious until I was actually doing the work. A good example is CYSE 280, Windows System Management and Security, which I have actually been taking during the same summer term as this internship. Learning about file auditing, account permissions, and Windows security concepts in class while simultaneously managing real user accounts in Active Directory at NEXCOM made both experiences reinforce each other. Something that felt abstract in a lecture would suddenly click when I ran into the same concept on a ticket a few days later, and vice versa.

My Linux coursework, specifically CS 252 and CYSE 270, also turned out to be more useful than I initially expected. I did not think I would be using command line skills much in a help desk role, but being comfortable navigating systems without relying entirely on a graphical interface made me faster and more confident when troubleshooting, especially when a fix required digging a little deeper than the surface level issue a user reported. Similarly, IT 315, Intro to Networks and Security, which I am also taking this summer, has lined up well with the VPN and network troubleshooting I do on tickets. Concepts like connectivity issues and network configuration make a lot more sense to me now that I am seeing them play out with real users on the other end.

Classes like CYSE 200T and CYSE 201S, which focus on cybersecurity's relationship to technology and society, ended up being more relevant than I expected too. Those courses framed cybersecurity as something that affects real people, not just systems, and that mindset has genuinely shaped how I approach tickets. When I am helping someone through a phishing concern or walking them through why a security policy exists, I am not just following a script, I actually understand the reasoning behind it because of those classes.

That said, there were definitely gaps. ODU's coursework, at least up to this point in my degree, has not covered practical, day to day tools like SDM ticketing systems, Remote Desktop Viewer, or the specific Microsoft 365 administrative tasks I now handle regularly. Those were things I had to learn entirely on the job, since a classroom setting really cannot replicate the pace or specificity of enterprise help desk tools. I also had no real exposure to Identity and Access Management as its own practical skill set before this internship, even though I had touched on access control concepts in theory. Actually provisioning accounts, troubleshooting MFA, and thinking through who should and should not have access to something was a skill I built almost entirely through hands on repetition at NEXCOM rather than through my degree program.

Overall, I would say ODU gave me the conceptual foundation and technical comfort level I needed to not feel completely lost walking into this internship, but the specific tools and the practical, fast paced nature of enterprise IT support were things only the internship itself could really teach me.

Fulfillment of Learning Outcomes

Looking back at the four learning outcomes I outlined in my Memorandum of Agreement, I feel confident saying this internship fulfilled every single one of them, though some came together faster than others.

My first outcome was to improve my customer service and communication skills by assisting users with technical problems through phone, email, and in person support. This one started developing almost immediately, even before I had full system access. Watching Aaron and my manager handle calls early on taught me how to communicate clearly and stay patient with users who were frustrated or confused. Once I started taking my own tickets, I got real practice explaining technical problems in a way that made sense to someone who might not be technical at all, which is a completely different skill than just knowing how to fix the issue yourself.

My second outcome was to develop hands on experience troubleshooting and resolving common hardware, software, and network issues in a real professional environment. Completing 134 tickets covering application errors, printer configuration problems, and Outlook issues gave me exactly that. There is a big difference between reading about troubleshooting steps in a textbook and actually sitting with a live ticket, figuring out what is actually going on, and resolving it correctly the first time. This outcome is probably the one where I saw the most obvious, measurable growth over the course of the internship.

My third outcome was to gain proficiency with help desk tools, ticketing systems, and remote support software. Using SDM to document and escalate tickets, and using Remote Desktop Viewer to connect into user machines and troubleshoot in real time, gave me exactly the kind of practical tool proficiency I was hoping for. By the end of the internship, these tools felt second nature to me in a way they definitely did not during my first week.

My fourth outcome was to strengthen my understanding of cybersecurity and IT best practices, including password management, device security, and data protection procedures. This outcome ended up going even further than I originally expected. I did not just reinforce concepts I already knew, I actually built new practical skills in Identity and Access Management, Active Directory administration, MFA support, and security incident escalation. What started as a goal to strengthen existing knowledge turned into learning several new skill areas altogether.

If I am being honest, the internship did more than just fulfill these four outcomes individually. It also gave me things I did not originally write into my MOA, like mentorship from a systems

engineer, direct conversations with senior IT and security leadership, and a much clearer sense of where I want to go professionally. So while every original outcome was met, the internship ended up exceeding what I initially expected to walk away with.

Most Motivating or Exciting Aspects

The most exciting part of this internship for me was reaching the point where I no longer needed to lean on my manager or Aaron to walk me through every ticket. Getting to a place where I could troubleshoot independently, navigate the tools and systems on my own, and actually bring issues to resolution without needing someone standing over my shoulder was one of the most rewarding milestones of the entire experience. It is one thing to be told you are learning, but actually feeling that shift happen in real time, going from constantly asking questions to confidently working through problems myself, was genuinely motivating.

Another highlight was getting the opportunity to sit down and talk with two of the most senior leaders at NEXCOM, the Director of IT and the Director of Security Operations. Having lengthy conversations with them about their own career paths and what they personally look for when hiring gave me a much clearer picture of what growth in this field actually looks like. It was not just generic career advice, it was specific, honest insight from people who have already built the kind of career I am hoping to build. It meant a lot when the Director of IT later spoke positively about me to my manager, since that kind of feedback made me feel like the effort I was putting in was actually being noticed.

Building a relationship with a systems engineer at NEXCOM was another one of the more meaningful parts of my experience. He took the time to answer my questions, explain concepts beyond my current role, and offer career advice I know I will carry forward. Having that kind of mentorship inside the organization, someone who was willing to invest in me without it being part of his job description, made the internship feel much more personal than just a checklist of tasks to complete.

Touring the Norfolk Navy Exchange and the Suffolk Distribution Center was exciting in a different way, since it gave me a firsthand look at the operations my IT work was actually supporting. It made the day to day ticket work feel connected to something much bigger than just fixing a printer or resetting a password.

Beyond the technical and professional growth, the internship also gave me a genuinely enjoyable experience outside of the work itself. Completing the DiSC assessment and learning that I was an Si style helped me understand my own communication style better. NEXCOM brought in a photographer for professional headshots and hosted a wellness week that included an ice cream social and a line dancing event, which made the environment feel like it was truly invested in its people, not just their output. On top of that, bonding with the other interns, to the point where we

started planning a beach trip together, made this feel less like a temporary job and more like a genuine community I was part of, even if only for a summer.

Most Discouraging Aspects

If I am being honest, the most discouraging part of this internship has been the repetitive nature of help desk work. A large portion of my tickets involve password resets, and while I understand why that is such a common issue, doing the same type of ticket over and over can start to feel monotonous. It also gave me a lot more empathy for my coworkers. Watching how low energy some of the team can be by the end of the day makes a lot more sense once you realize how repetitive this work actually is day after day.

Another frustrating part was the lack of a formal playbook or documented process for a lot of the tasks I needed to learn. Instead of having something written down that I could reference on my own, I often had to ask a coworker directly, which was not a problem when someone was available, but it did make me feel a little more dependent than I wanted to be, especially early on. Having a clear, written resource to fall back on would have made the learning curve smoother and would have let me solve some problems independently instead of needing to interrupt someone else's work.

The team dynamic was also something I found discouraging at times. As I mentioned earlier, most of my coworkers keep to themselves, and there is not a lot of conversation happening throughout the day beyond what is necessary for work. Coming from a customer service background, I am used to a more social, engaged environment, so the quiet, heads down atmosphere took some getting used to and occasionally felt a little isolating.

The onboarding process itself was also a source of frustration, at least in the beginning. It took an unexpectedly long time during my first week to actually get computer and system access, which meant I spent that initial stretch observing rather than doing. While I did learn from watching, I was eager to start working and it was frustrating to feel like I was losing time before I could really contribute.

Lastly, on a more personal note, it has been discouraging knowing that this internship ends in August. I actually left my previous job to take this opportunity, so there is a real sense of pressure and uncertainty tied to the internship's end date, especially since I do not yet know what comes next after it wraps up.

Most Challenging Aspects

The most challenging part of this internship, without question, has been not having a formal playbook to rely on. Most of what I know now, I learned by doing and by asking questions, and while that method works, it did not come naturally to me at first. I am not someone who loves asking the same person multiple questions, even when I know they are willing to help, and having to constantly ask instead of being able to reference something written down made the learning process feel more uncomfortable than it probably needed to be.

That discomfort was not really about the people I was asking. Aaron, for example, never made me feel bad about needing help, even when it was something he had already shown me before. The challenge was more internal. It was pushing past my own hesitation to speak up and admit I did not know how to do something, over and over again, ticket after ticket. In a lot of ways, this internship forced me to get more comfortable being uncomfortable, since the only way to actually learn the job was to keep asking, even when it felt easier to just try to figure it out quietly on my own.

On a more technical level, installing printers turned out to be one of the specific tasks I found most difficult to master. It sounds simple on the surface, but printer issues rarely have one straightforward cause. Between driver conflicts, network configuration problems, and inconsistent setups across different machines, a printer ticket that looked routine on paper could turn into one of the more time consuming and frustrating tickets I worked. Without a documented process to walk through, I had to piece together my understanding of printer installation through trial and error and repeated questions, which made it a good example of exactly the kind of challenge I described above. It was not a single hard concept to learn, it was the accumulation of small variables that made every printer ticket feel a little different from the last.

Looking back, I think both of these challenges ended up being some of the more valuable parts of the experience, even though they did not feel that way in the moment. Learning to ask questions without letting my own discomfort get in the way, and learning to troubleshoot a genuinely inconsistent, finicky issue like printer installation, are both skills that go beyond help desk work. They are things I know I will need in any future role, especially one where getting something wrong could have real security implications. This internship pushed me to build those muscles earlier than I probably would have otherwise.

Recommendations for Future Interns

If I could go back and give myself advice before starting this internship, the first thing I would say is to get comfortable asking questions right away, even if it feels uncomfortable at first. This role does not come with a formal playbook, so a lot of the learning happens through doing and through asking the people around you. The sooner you accept that asking questions is not a weakness but actually the fastest way to learn, the smoother your first few weeks will go.

I would also tell future interns to expect a jump right in style of learning. There is not a lot of extended observation time before you are handling real tickets, and honestly, that ends up being the best way to build real competence. The more tickets you work through, the more familiar and comfortable the process becomes, so try not to be intimidated by the pace early on. It feels overwhelming at first, but it gets easier faster than you would expect.

Something I would stress even more is to keep an open mind and not be afraid to actually go talk to people, not just your direct supervisor or lead, but anyone in the building. Some of the most valuable moments of my internship came from conversations I almost talked myself out of having, like sitting down with senior leaders or building a relationship with a systems engineer who did not have to spend time teaching me anything. Most people at NEXCOM turned out to be genuinely willing teachers if you just ask, whether that is for help with a technical issue or for honest career advice. Do not assume someone is too busy or too senior to talk to you. The worst they can say is no, and more often than not, people are happy to share what they know.

As far as preparation goes, I would recommend brushing up on Active Directory basics, general networking concepts, and Windows system administration before starting, since those come up constantly. It is also worth reviewing basic customer service and communication skills, since a huge part of this job is explaining technical problems to people who are not technical themselves. Beyond the technical prep, my biggest piece of advice is to go in expecting a learning curve, stay patient with yourself through the repetitive parts of the job, and take advantage of every opportunity to connect with people around you. The technical skills will come with repetition, but the relationships and mentorship you build along the way are what will actually shape where you go next.

Conclusion

Looking back on this internship as a whole, my biggest takeaway is that I am capable of a lot more than I gave myself credit for at the beginning. I started this experience without system access, sitting quietly and observing, unsure of how quickly I would actually be able to contribute. By the end, I was independently resolving tickets, using enterprise tools I had never touched before, and holding real conversations with senior leaders about my own career path.

That growth did not happen because the work was easy. It happened because I pushed through the discomfort of asking questions, worked through repetitive and sometimes frustrating tickets, and stayed open to learning from anyone willing to teach me.

This internship is going to influence the rest of my time at ODU in a very direct way. I now have hands on context for concepts I am still learning in class, and I know that context is going to make my remaining coursework land differently. When I sit in a class covering Active Directory, network security, or Windows administration, I am no longer just learning it for a grade. I am connecting it to real tickets I have already worked and real problems I have already solved. That kind of grounding makes we want to be even more intentional about which classes and certifications I prioritize as I finish my degree, since I now have a clearer sense of what actually translates into real world skill versus what is purely theoretical.

Professionally, this internship has done more to shape my direction than I expected it to. Working hands on with Identity and Access Management, even at a help desk level, confirmed something I had only suspected before, which is that IAM is genuinely the direction I want to take my career. Provisioning access, troubleshooting MFA, and thinking through who should and should not have access to a system is work I find genuinely engaging, not just something I am good at. The conversations I had with NEXCOM's Director of IT and Director of Security Operations reinforced that this kind of growth is possible, and gave me a much clearer picture of what I need to keep building toward as I move closer to graduating in December 2026.

This experience has also strengthened my interest in eventually working for a defense contractor, since NEXCOM gave me a firsthand look at what it means to support a mission driven, DoD adjacent organization. I now have a much better sense of what that kind of environment actually feels like day to day, and it has only made me more motivated to pursue opportunities with organizations like Booz Allen Hamilton, Leidos, SAIC, or ManTech once I graduate. Overall, I am leaving this internship with more than just technical experience. I am leaving with a clearer professional identity, real mentorship relationships, and a genuine sense of direction for where I want to go next.