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**1) Introduction**

The Cybersecurity degree at Old Dominion University (ODU) requires for students seeking a degree to take an internship, co-op, apprenticeship, or practicum. I was nervous in the beginning and overwhelmed with the idea of finding a cybersecurity internship. I was nervous because I was not confident that I had what it took to get a position. Fortunately, ODU has a mountain of resources aim for the success of its students and alumni. One such resource is the Virginia Commonwealth STEM Industry Internship Program or CSIIP. CSIIP links local businesses that need skilled personnel and students in STEM that require experience. I applied to CSIIP, and in a couple of weeks, I had a few interviews with local businesses. I initially wished for a position in a government agency; still I was open to any chance to learn hands-on. One of the companies that were looking for interns was Dollar Tree headquarters in Chesapeake, Va. The initial interview was over the phone with the head of the IT department and the manager of the IS department. They were both very enthusiastic and professional. Besides, I felt at ease when they stated that they were a veteran-friendly company. They explained the position and assured me that lack of technical skills was not a problem as long as soft skills were well developed. It was easy for me to decide to take the position with Dollar Tree after that first phone interview, I felt confident, at ease, and overall welcomed.

# Three outcomes or objectives I had hoped to achieve in my internship were; to gain essential background knowledge and understanding of the context of programs essential to cybersecurity, learn about different career paths in cybersecurity, and build a network of contacts who will serve me as advisors or mentors. Most of all, I wished to overcome my insecurities and start feeling like a part of the cybersecurity community.

I write this final paper to document and share my experiences, goals, gains, changes of mind, disappointments, challenges, and recommendations. My wish is that my experience will help guide future cybersecurity students, especially female veterans. I cannot express enough how much I yearned for a female veteran in cybersecurity to have mentored me or at least reassured me. Nevertheless, I am appreciative that ODU requires students to work an internship, and I am appreciative that Dollar Tree for allowing me the opportunity to interview, work, and learn with their company.

**2) The Internship**

As mentioned previously, I first received notice from CSIIP that the Dollar Tree headquarters were looking for an intern position to fill. I first interviewed over the phone with the head of the IT department and the manager of the IS department. The phone interview consisted of explaining the position and the skills and knowledge they were looking for. The second part of the interview consisted of me asking questions and giving a brief history of employment and education. Both Dollar Tree supervisors and I felt comfortable and positive about our conversation. We all decided on an in-person interview at the headquarter located in the city of Chesapeake. I decided to do some research on the company.

The Dollar Tree is an American chain of discount variety stores that sell items for 1 dollar or less. Headquartered in Chesapeake, Va., it is a Fortune 500 company and operates 15, 115 stores throughout 48 states and Canada. The company began more than 60 years ago, when two men opened a variety store in Wards Corner, Norfolk, Va. The store was initially named K.R. Perry and a Ben Franklin; it was a highly successful concept of a single price point and became a national chain store. In 2008 the company earned a place in the Fortune 500, the only company to have done it one dollar at a time.

Dollar Tree is a customer-oriented, value-driven variety store operating at a one-dollar price point. Dollar Tree website states the importance of empowering associates to share in the company's opportunities, rewards, and successes; and to deal with others in an honest and considerate way. Corporate values are attitude, judgment, and commitment. Dollar Tree company is involved with charities and nonprofits in the community of Hampton Roads; through financial support and employee volunteering.

Orientation is held every Monday and lasts till Thursday of the same week. The headquartered facility is equipped with an auditorium, restaurant/ dining room, and a mock store. Orientation starts with the history of the company, ethos, and plans. Each day is a different topic, and different employees of different departments part take in the orientation. The last day of orientation is training and educating new employees on telecommunication systems, information systems, software, hardware, cybersecurity, IT help desk, and the company's policies that pertain to communication technologies. All new employees are assigned a company e-mail, a desk, a laptop, or a desktop or tablet (depending on department). Orientation is not rushed, and everyone is friendly. The new building is open and lets much natural light enter through its giant glass windows. The atmosphere is of high quality and calmness. The eatery is impressive with a giant salad bar and made to order menu. I was beyond impressed and could not wait to start officially. One detail that surprised me was that every single person working there addressed each other by the first name, with no Mr. or Ma'am. Even the CEO was on a first-name basis with all employees. The breakrooms, bathrooms, and conference rooms where all modern, open, and clean. I had never worked in a place so luxuries, where everyone seemed to be content. Fortunately, the high morale was not a show, and 99% of people that I interacted with were and are incredibly happy to be working there.

The IT department is one of the biggest departments in the building, taking up three full floors in the tower and one full floor in the legacy building. The IT floors in the tower take care of the company's whole cyber operation. While the IT department in the legacy building is divided between the IT help desk for customers and in-house IT help desk for Dollar Tree employees. I was introduced to the IS department, which consists of seven males and one female in a large lab with individual workspaces. Everyone was happy to meet me and excited for me to start. The interns that began after me also received the same friendly reception. The whole lab was eager to teach us and pass down information about the job. I noticed that all the techs were young, and many were still working on a degree or certificate. The techs explained the rotating schedule and gave us a tour of the whole establishment. Work, in general, was easy to grasp and help was always available. I was no longer afraid of my lack of knowledge since everyone was readily available to train us. My first impression was definitely wonderstruck.

**3) Management**

As I pointed out before, the environment was friendly and laid back. Morale was and is high, even in these difficult times, even with the buildings mostly empty due to COVID-19. The direct supervisor for the IS department is very confident about his techs. Usually, there is a morning meeting where the plans of the day are discussed, and an update of the previous day's accomplishments and goals are shared. I would describe management in general as the opposite of micromanaging. A few times a week, some conferences take the whole office outside of the lab to some meeting room, where again, goals, achievements, dates, and projects are discussed in a laid back-friendly manner. I can also attest that management genuinely cares about their employees, frequently asking about how work can be improved. The structure of command is apparent and organized; I personally never had an issue that my immediate supervisor could not fix with speed. I am amazed at the effectiveness of the company's attitude toward managing. I would have thought that giving a lot of freedom and abundance of convenience would create laziness, yet it is the opposite. Employees are content with their quality of life at work, and therefore they are more productive and communicate effectively.

**4) Duties**

My responsibilities in the office where many and varied in difficulty. However, nothing was ever extremely difficult or uncomfortable. Below is a list, with extra details on the duties that are not plain.

* + - 1. Check the print room for mail. Just the mail for our lab and techs, not for anyone else. I was also responsible for the packaging and addressing of computer equipment that had to be mailed to different distribution centers, individuals, and stores around the country.
      2. Set up workstations for new employees or employees that were moving floor or department due to promotions. This included removing all computer-related hardware from an old workstation and installing it in a new location. Alternatively, setting up an empty workstation with dual monitors, mouse, mouse pad, keyboard, phone, dock, wires, tower, and/or laptop for new employees.
      3. Installing updated or new equipment such as dual monitors or new laptops or tablets to employees that requested them.
      4. Check-in desktops, laptops, and monitors. Check-in consisted of opening and assembling equipment, tagging with a serial number, and inputting the equipment with serial numbers into an inventory software.
      5. Imaging laptops, desktops, and tablets.
      6. Collect computer equipment from all three buildings that were either broken, out of warranty, or too old for disposal.
      7. Track the trouble ticket in the service desk to troubleshoot and fix if capable.
      8. Prepare new hire laptop bags with extra mouse and travel adapter every Thursday and Friday for Monday orientation.
      9. Repair laptops and desktops. Repairs involved switching out defective laptop batteries, adding RAM, adjusting screens, and replacing damaged cords or docks. I would also reach out to Dell and discuss warranties and set up dates for a Dell tech to come into the office.
      10. Organize the equipment in the lab whenever a shipment arrived.
      11. Troubleshoot and refill all printers in all buildings
      12. Push and install special software for users.
      13. Help users create passwords for printer rooms.

I realize many of my duties were not specific to cybersecurity and leaned more towards the help desk. Still, I learned a lot and valued my duties. In a CompTIA article titled, Getting into Cybersecurity: Why it is Great to Start at the Help Desk, it explains that "The help desk, too many, is a steppingstone to a different path" (Marshall). Many of the techs in the lab started at entry-level positions at the help desk. 99% of the Techs at Dollar Tree use this IT/IS position as a steppingstone for bigger and better cybersecurity positions inside and outside of the company. "The goal is to protect end-users and to have an open line of communication with the people who are most impacted by cyber-criminals is crucial" (Marshall). The Techs in the IS department at Dollar Tree are only seven. Still, all seven Techs are familiar and have a friendly rapport with all the non-IT employees in the company of over 5,000 people, which comes in handy when there are new policies to rolled out. Communicating why and how the new policies are meant to protect the employees, and the overall company is crucial for productivity because sometimes security posture kills productivity. Overall, what I took away from the article and my duties was "knowing how a company runs from different viewpoints is extremely important" because knowing what is essential to the end-user should direct security procedure development.

**5) Skills and Knowledge**

I consider myself a hard worker with excellent communication skills and basic knowledge of computers as well as computer usage policies. I believe my level of knowledge in computers and the internet, which is not massively technical, resulted in a better relationship with non-technical employees who required help. Being capable of having the skills to explain and show in simple steps how or why something was not working as expected to a layperson made me popular and successful as an intern. I have to confess cybersecurity is a lot more involved with the human element then I previously thought. I learned that I love to teach and explain using a few technical terms, if possible, to educate in the hope of helping users.

**6) Academics**

Before I commenced my internship with Dollar Tree, I had my doubts about my level of technical knowledge, yet, I surprised myself by the ease I could follow technical conversations in the lab and how fast I grasped a process. Many of the articles and readings I have been required to read have given me a better insight into real-world issues and strategies. I must confess I made many connections to what I was taught at ODU and what I was doing at Dollar Tree. I think the most lasting connection involved company internet security policy and what users could or could not do and how it affected workstation setup and privileges. I was especially excited about working inside Active Directory since I had just taken a class about it.

**7) Goals**

# Earlier, I had listed the three outcomes or objectives I had hoped to fulfill in the course of the internship. The objectives included gaining essential background knowledge and understanding of the context of programs that are essential to a cybersecurity professional, build a network of contacts who will serve me as advisors or mentors, and explore and focus on a career path. Below are my results, starting with those fulfilled.

# First, gain essential background knowledge and understanding; I did not gain all the knowledge and understanding. Even so, I did gain some knowledge and understanding. Enough to see a greater picture of the duties and responsibilities of cybersecurity professionals and the challenges they run into in the day-to-day. For example, security vs. productivity, security vs. convenience, a lapse in communication, or poor planning, and definitely unforeseen events such as a pandemic.

# Second, explore and focus on a career path. I began my internship with an idea of what being a cybersecurity specialist represented and the many different career paths one can take. I finished my internship with discoveries of even more career paths one can take, yet I am less anxious about the countless possibilities. The techs did help me focus on a plan if not a career, I am extremely grateful for them.

# Lastly, build a network of contacts who will serve me as advisors or mentors. I fulfilled half of this objective. I unquestionably networked and build my list of professional contacts. Nevertheless, I am sad to say I did not find a mentor. According to a CompTIA article, IT Certifications and Mentorship: Keys to Career Success, mentorship is vital for all individuals but more so to individuals new to IT. Mentoring can help an individual find their way and get connected to the same demographics. For me, the mentor I am still in search of is a Hispanic female veteran. It may seem too particular and demanding of me. Nevertheless, how am I supposed to believe in success for myself (Hispanic female veteran) if I do not see anyone similar to me prospering? IT is a male-dominated environment, and it is hard to imagine success and easier to doubt yourself.

# 8) Motivations

The most motivating or exciting aspect of the internship was workplace quality of life. Spending most of my life working fast food or retail, followed by five years working for the United States Navy, quality of work-life was not even a thought on my mind. Being able to go back to school and working on a degree has been the best decision I have made for my professional career. The internship has giving me a glance of my future and it looks promising. It is not only about a sure and hefty paycheck or working for a prestigious company or building. I want to love what I do day-in and day-out. If I love my job, my chances to succeed professionally propagate. Still, a healthy work environment is vital. It is not only about the upkeep of an office space but the effect it has on the employees, positive or negative. From my observations Dollar Tree took into consideration the health and positive attitude a building can have on its inhabitants and designed their headquarters with that in mind.

**9) Disappointments**

The most discouraging aspects of the internship to me was the lack of females in the department and my failure to find a mentor. None of my disappointments were directly created by the company. I acknowledge that the lack of women in the tech world is an issue that starts way before corporations, organizations, and businesses choose to hire men over women. The issue starts at home and then is followed by school. I cannot blame businesses for hiring more men than women when there is a shortage of women techs in general. I am hopeful society has taken notice about this issue and even though change is slow it is also sure.

**10) Challenges**

I cannot think of a challenging aspect of the internship. Personally, the challenges came at the very end of my time as an intern and they had to do with the closings of schools and daycare due to COVID-19. My husband works out of town, and my son's daycare closed. Therefore, I could not stay the last two weeks of my internship, and unfortunately, I could not bring myself to ask for a more permanent position when I could not make it into the office because I had to stay at home with a child. Dollar Tree does have remote positions and most of their employees are working from home. However, I did not think it was responsible to start a job and split my time between school, parenting and an employer, it would not have been fair to any party.

**11) Recommendations**

My recommendations for future interns in Dollar Tree are listed below.

* + - 1. Be prepared to walk a lot.
      2. Buy good comfortable shoes.
      3. Buy business casual office attire that is not too expensive.
      4. Refresh your knowledge on basic computer components. Build a desktop on your own at home.
      5. Sharpen your soft skills.
      6. Ask a lot of questions.
      7. Volunteer for projects or jobs.
      8. Ask to follow along.
      9. Do not be ashamed of what you do not know.
      10. Enjoy what you do.
      11. Be humble just because you are working on a bachelor's degree does not mean you cannot fetch mail.
      12. Keep busy. Do not slack.
      13. Just because the atmosphere is laid backed and friendly does not mean you should forget that you are in a business environment.
      14. Before the internship, become familiar with the company's history and values.

**Conclusion**

My main 'take away' thoughts from my experience as an intern are listed below.

* + - 1. Do not to let the vast technical aspect of IT and cybersecurity scare you away from a career in those areas. Not everyone in tech is an engineer or coder, there are a lot of different roles.
      2. Many individuals have begun at a help desk job with little to no knowledge on computers and security and are now considered experts in the field.
      3. There is so much potential and opportunity in IT and cybersecurity.
      4. Interdisciplinary courses and approaches to cybersecurity are effective for success, and ODU's cybersecurity curriculum is accurate.
      5. More veterans and women are needed in the field. As a society, we need to support females and veterans to find their place and be successful in the tech world.
      6. Both a degree and certifications are vital for success and marketing yourself.

Dollar Tree has influenced my perspective on career and workplace satisfaction. Dollar Tree has set the bar high for me. I know now that I will be able to move up within a company or transfer to better positions from one company to another if I prepare myself well. My goal more than ever is to finish my bachelor's, continue to a master's degree, and become certified along the way. I also learn to put value in soft skills which are transferable and are equally important or more important than technical skills. The internship at Dollar Tree also helped me accept that the process of learning is never done and looking at issues from different angles using different disciplines should be the norm.

The internship at Dollar Tree has also made me reconsider my time and education strategy. Because I want to continue towards a master's degree, I do not want to find a full-time job that might interfere with school. Still, I do not want to lose real-world experience by not working. My goal now is to find another internship in a different sector, to have a different outlook at cybersecurity.

I still do not have a full picture or idea of my future professional path. I enjoyed the laid-back atmosphere of retail; however, I want to make a difference either by working for a nonprofit, or with local government, or for veterans' affairs; I want to give back. When I first got out of the military, this area was not my first choice, and I had decided to leave the area once I had earned my degree. Fortunately, now after two years of school and many experiences with veteran resources and the community, I no longer see the Hampton Roads area with the same eyes. I want to stay and share in the prospect and triumph of this area with its sizeable veteran community and also broad first-generation demographics. I see my future here and I wish to put down roots in the area. I have learned and changed more in the last two semesters because of my internship experience. Then I would have imagined. I am grateful for the chance of working with Dollar Tree and especially grateful to ODU for requiring an internship.

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