

Research

Career Development in the Security Industry

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Background

The security industry is home to many passionate and smart practitioners. They work tirelessly to protect their organizations – addressing vulnerabilities and responding to incidents. But this industry has a catch... a lack of formal academic foundations and comprehensive, easily accessible continual learning makes it difficult for security practitioners to build competence and credibility. This problem is further amplified by a more volatile global risk environment, which increases work demands while limiting career development opportunities and the ability to more competently advise stakeholders.

This affects not only individual performance, but also the ability for security programs to identify increasing and more complex threats. *Could this mean that continual learning and career development are not moving at the pace of incident scale, complexity, and recurrence?*

Research Study: Career Development in the Security Industry

To help our industry offer better learning and career development solutions for practitioners, we designed and implemented a pilot survey. It was administered electronically from July 8 to August 30, 2020 to 93 security practitioners. This survey addressed multiple factors around learning and development, including:

- Practitioners' access to mentors and coaches, as they are pivotal relationships for career development.
- Evaluation of whether practitioners are developing generalist versus specialist knowledge around the competence and ability to effectively protect an organization's assets.
- Practitioners' individual approaches to continual learning.

We are grateful to the group of practitioners who participated in our pilot survey, and hope to grow participation annually. Our fervent goal is that this data collection will inform and, moreover, support educational leadership and enhancement among associations and other continual educational programs.



Career Index Score

In order to gauge the varied approaches to career development by our respondents, we combined individual responses into an index score (assigning a comprehensive score to each respondent — one that represents their answers to all the questions). These scores were used as the basis for our analysis. There were two questions, out of 21, that were discovered to be significant drivers of respondents' Career Index Scores:

- The question, "Do you engage in topical conversations with professionals in other industries at least monthly?" predicted 52% of the score (variance)
- The question, "Have you assessed your learning profile?" predicted 47% of the score (variance)

By only knowing a respondent's answer to one of these questions, we can predict roughly half of their overall Career Index Score. Our hypothesis to support this prediction is explained in the following sections.

Research Findings: Demographics & Career Development Approach

Demographics: Who participated in the survey

Based on the demographic data collected¹, the average respondent tended to be a male manager over the age of 38 with significant experience (mid to senior level). A majority of respondents are currently working in global security or consulting. Key demographics:

- 80% were male
- 79% had 11+ years of experience
- 72% were over age 38
- 59% were mid or senior level management
- 51% from global security or consulting roles

How does the average respondent approach career development?

The average respondent's approach to career development tells us that there is work ahead of us to motivate practitioners to evolve in their method and expertise when it comes to protecting assets. While there are signs of expanding beyond their current role, the majority of the data suggests they tend to NOT have a mentor or coach, and only dedicate 1-4 hours per week to continual learning. Specifically, the majority of respondents:

- Do NOT have a mentor or a coach
- ONLY dedicate 1-4 hrs to learning per week
- Engage in topical conversations inside and outside of their industry monthly
- Follow organizations outside their industry
- Maintain a journal and knowledge library
- Have assessed their learning profile

¹ Of the 93 responses collected, 71% were retained for the final analysis (66 total respondents). In order to gauge the varied approaches to career development by our respondents, we combined responses about individual practices into an index score. Please note: This data is less generalizable due to the sample size.



Research Findings: Detailed Analysis

Where did respondents' answers differ greatest?

Respondents differed the most on how much time they dedicate to continual learning on a weekly basis (standard deviation of .68).

If a respondent spent 5+ hours per week learning, then they were in the 66th percentile, and respondents with 9+ hours were in the 89th percentile.

Additional insights:

- 44% have mentors
- 50% maintain a professional journal
- 50% have assessed their learning profile
- 52% maintain a knowledge management library
- 65% were familiar with habit building techniques
- 80-89% engage in conversation inside and outside of their industry

Generalist vs Specialist Learning

A positive sign from this data is that practitioners are showing a dedication to learning that expands outside of their area of expertise. We believe this is a critical component necessary for practitioners to support stakeholders with creative solutions to the myriad of security challenges they face daily.

Topics of interest

The top two topics that respondents indicated a high interest in learning more about were:

- Threat / Risk Intelligence
- Incident Management

Comparing groups: Who had the highest career development scores?

After conducting an analysis of scores by looking at demographic groups, we discovered that the following segments had the highest scores:

- Gender: Females
- Age: 43+
- Role: Company Owner / Stakeholder
- Industry: Consulting



Conclusions

Our findings highlight an opportunity for professional security organizations and working groups to enhance their programs and offerings. Specifically, these enhancements should center around the value of career building skills. The strongest influences behind this recommendation root from the fact that most respondents do not have a mentor and only dedicate four hours or less per week to their professional development.

The greatest predictors of an above average career development score were:

1. Having topical conversations with professionals in other industries
2. Assessing one's own learning profile

When we consider the impact of these two questions predicting most of one's score, we reach the following conclusion: **What these two items have in common is that they demonstrate humility.** A professional has to be humble to critically evaluate their learning profiles (strengths and weaknesses) and to seek learning opportunities from those outside their industry.

With this in mind, here's what we can do to support aspiring security practitioners that are early to mid-career.

Suggested actions:

Cross-Industry Collaboration – Our industry – especially industry associations – should incentivize consistent collaboration with practitioners from other fields. This closely relates to the concept of design thinking, where effective solutions are developed by groups consisting of people with diverse personal and professional experiences and backgrounds.

Continual Learning – It is critical for leaders in the industry who influence talent to help dedicate at least 5 hours of weekly continual learning within their talent pools.

Learning Profile Assessments – Leaders responsible for talent development should implement formal methods of learning profile assessment. Based on results of such assessments, leaders should carefully select and tailor continual learning for those in their charge, or talent pool.

Focus on Generalist Skills – Industry associations should place higher focus on the efficacy of generalist skills, as they help develop more well-rounded practitioners for our industry

Mentors and Coaches – Our industry should adopt consistent definitions and qualifications for mentors and coaches since they play a very positive role in career development and continual learning.

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Appendix

Supplemental material: Methodology

The survey was created with [Qualtrics XM](#) then distributed via email and LinkedIn. We collected 93 responses between July 8, 2020 and August 30, 2020. From these 93 total responses, we kept 66 of them for analysis because 27 were incomplete. The statistical analysis was conducted using [IBM SPSS Statistics](#).

Supplemental material: Survey Questions *Indicates those that make up the Career Index Score

1. Blank
2. Do you engage in topical conversations with industry peers at least monthly? (e.g. LinkedIn, meetups, etc.)
3. Do you engage in topical conversations with professionals in other industries at least monthly? (e.g. in your workplace, LinkedIn, meetups, etc.)
4. Do you maintain a journal to help retain useful information that you learn through experience, trainings, etc?
5. Select the answer that best fits your attitude: I have an interest in learning about...
6. Select the answer that best fits your attitude: I have an interest in learning about...
7. Please share what other fields you'd like to learn about.
8. *How many hours per week do you dedicate to continual learning?
9. *Do you maintain a personal knowledge management library? (e.g. Using software such as OneNote or Quip to maintain useful resources for reference when working on professional projects)
10. *Have you assessed your learning profile to help align and maximize your continual learning efforts? (e.g. Assessing where you are today in your education and where you want to be)
11. *Do you have a mentor? (a person who helps you with strategic decisions in your career)
12. Regarding your mentor, do you engage with this person at least monthly?
13. *Do you have a coach? (e.g. an industry peer who helps improve nuances of your professional skills, like communication, decision making, and output products)
14. Regarding your coach, do you engage with this person at least monthly?
15. *Do you follow at least 1 or 2 thinkers / organizations to help maintain awareness of topics outside of your industry? (e.g. A physical security specialist that follows thinkers in risk management and human resources)
16. *Are you familiar with habit-building techniques such as how changes in the environment can support good habits and disrupt bad habits?
17. What is your gender?
18. What is your age?
19. What aspect of the industry is your focus?
20. How many years of professional experience do you have?
21. Which of the following best describes your role?

*Notes: Question 7 yielded insignificant results, therefore it was not a focus in our analysis. Similarly, the results from questions 5 & 6 will be highly dependent on the sample used, therefore we did not expand on this in detail in our analysis. For anyone that wants to review the (anonymous) raw data itself (original state before the data was cleaned), they can refer to [this file](#).