Getting a Job in Information Security

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP
Associate Professor, Computer Information Systems
Norwich University, Northfield VT

A reader recently wrote to me asking for advice on how to get a job in information security now that he’s returning to the United States after 20 years abroad. Here’s what I wrote back to him.

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Welcome back!

I suggest that you prepare a professional resumé and determine your interests in what you want to do, where you are willing to live, and how little money you are willing to accept for work.

At that point, you should be ready to use various resources in finding a good job:

* Post your resumé on the big employment boards such as MONSTER.COM;

* Search the want-ads online and in appropriate paper publications looking for the kind of job you need (realizing that some of the jobs will have been filled by the time you see the ad in a weekly or monthly publication);

* If you are a member of professional societies such as the ISSA or (isc)^2, use their member boards to post your interest in work;

* Attend lots of professional conferences. Network with other attendees and with people in the trade show booths to get leads to interesting jobs;

* Identify organizations you are interested in working for and search their Web sites for suitable job openings and for the right contacts for applications;

* If there's a delay in finding a job, see if you can give interesting lectures in your areas of expertise at local (or larger) professional meetings;

* If you write well, submit articles to professional publications such as newsletters of local membership organizations (e.g., the local ISSA chapter) or for the national publications.

When you start getting interviewed, be prepared. You can start standing out from the crowd by knowing about the place you're going.

* Study everything you can find about the organization you will be visiting. What do they do / make / regulate / want? What's their history? Who are their executives? If the organization does research, what's the most exciting part? Have there been problems lately?<

* Learn about the location of the site you will be visiting. Is there anything particularly interesting about it? Some historical importance? News about controversy, achievements, notoriety, fame? What are the names of the key streets (assuming it's a city)? Where's the shopping district, the business district? What are the main residential areas?
Be prepared for the obvious questions (and some of the not-so-obvious ones) that managers like to spring on you to see how you think and how you express yourself:

* Why should they hire you for a particular job? Think very hard about how you can help meet your potential employer's needs. Where do your skills and interests complement their requirements?

* Why are you interested in this job opportunity (and the answer should be more than, "Duuhhhh, I need a job." What particularly sparks your interest? How do you see this job evolving?

* Have you ever been a criminal hacker? If so, what did you do? Do you still do it (NO)? Why did you stop? Why should the employer trust you / believe you when you assert that you won't be involved in criminal activities again?

* Have you ever posted anything in a USENET group that is now embarrassing to you? [Remember, the USENET archives are wide open to review.]

* What are your career plans? Do you intend to job hop or are you interested in a longer-term relationship? Do you see potential in the organization you're applying to or is it likely to be a dead-end job for you?

* What are your strengths -- and in particular, the strengths that make you an especially good candidate for this job? And what evidence can you provide to support your claims?

* What are your weaknesses -- and in particular, the weaknesses that will make your job harder? How do you plan to compensate for these weaknesses? What evidence is there that you can overcome them?

* How flexible are you (and your family, if any) about relocation? How often would you be willing to move? Are there places you would refuse to live?

* What do you expect as compensation? That could include salary, benefits, stock options, bonuses, and profit-sharing depending on the organization. In my experience, you should know both your own minimum limits and your optimum (reasonable, rational, justifiable, sensible) expectations before you enter a negotiation.

When you get a job offer,

* Above all, you must be absolutely truthful and complete in your job applications. In the security field, especially, any dishonesty during the application process is grounds for dismissal. Would _you_ trust a dishonest security specialist?

* Read the employment contract carefully. Engage an attorney to review the contract with your interests in mind.

* If you do a lot of writing, programming, or other creative work in your off hours, be especially careful about clauses granting the employer all rights to your intellectual output. The results of work during work hours and using employer equipment can reasonably be assigned to the employer; however, if you like writing children's storybooks or inventing anti-gravity hovercraft in
your off time, you might be irritated if the employer tries to seize the rights to your intellectual property.

Best of luck to you in your job search!

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M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP is Associate Professor in the Department of Computer Information Systems at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at <mkabay@norwich.edu>; Web site at <http://www.mekabay.com/index.htm>.

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