

More Than Skill Set

How Santander Prioritizes Attitude and Adaptability in Cybersecurity

As CISO of a major financial institution operating in a highly competitive talent market, Santander UK's Thomas Harvey sees attracting and retaining cybersecurity professionals as key part of the cybersecurity strategy. "I think there is a lack of innovation in the mindset of many organizations when addressing and recruiting for talent."

When Harvey looks at industry headlines about cybersecurity staff shortages, he sees beyond the numbers to a deeper issue. "I think it's a skills gap primarily," he explains, "but I think maybe the lens that organizations put on attracting the right resources is wrong." This perspective has shaped Santander's approach to cybersecurity talent—one that prioritizes adaptability, cultural fit, and creating meaningful pathways for professionals from diverse backgrounds.

Operating in a highly regulated financial environment hasn't narrowed Santander's vision for talent acquisition. Instead, it has inspired creative solutions that blend technical excellence with unconventional recruitment strategies. At the heart of this approach is a simple but powerful philosophy: attitude and application outweigh skill set.

Pathways to Cybersecurity Success

Santander's cybersecurity team reflects a tapestry of professional backgrounds that challenges industry stereotypes. "Cybersecurity is a highly complex field, that requires a range of skills, perspectives and problem-solving approaches. Therefore, we recruit talent from various backgrounds and industries, not only technical, whether that might be accounting, schoolteachers, military, behaviour experts, communications, and others," Harvey notes.

These aren't just isolated examples—they represent a deliberate strategy and demonstrate Santander's commitment to recognizing potential beyond traditional credentials. "The bank even participates in the Armed Forces Covenant, guaranteeing interviews for military veterans—recently resulting in a successful hire."



Thomas Harvey
CISO UK at Santander Group

Building the Talent Pipeline: Apprenticeships and Internal Mobility

While many organizations focus on experienced professionals and university graduates, Santander has found particular success with its apprenticeship program. "Our apprentice scheme in Santander UK works incredibly well, the program's structure combines hands-on experience with academic rigor," Harvey explains with evident pride.

Apprentices work at Santander while pursuing STEM-based degrees, rotating through various technology functions over a four-year period. This approach yields professionals with both theoretical knowledge and practical experience. "We currently have approximately 18 apprentices working in cybersecurity within the UK," Harvey notes. The return on this investment has been substantial. "We probably have a team currently where

"Attitude and application combined with skill set."

we have nine or ten apprentices, and we've got apprentices who've gone up to medium to senior management roles."

What makes these apprentices particularly valuable? "This combination of eagerness and adaptability creates a robust talent pipeline that continuously feeds Santander's cybersecurity operations," Harvey explains.

Internal mobility represents another key element of Santander's talent strategy. "We have a policy of internal first," Harvey explains. This approach has yielded impressive results, with over 10% of Santander UK's internal workforce receiving promotions last year.

Creating an Environment That Attracts and Retains Talent

The physical and cultural environment plays a significant role in Santander's talent strategy. The bank has invested in creating inspiring workspaces, including what Harvey describes as "one of the top-class Cyber Fusion Centre in Europe" at their global campus. In the UK, they've recently opened "a first-class Head Quarters office in Milton Keynes."

Beyond the physical environment, Santander cultivates a workplace culture designed to engage cybersecurity professionals. "In cyber, for me, I think it's always important to have a flat culture," Harvey emphasizes. "When I look at the Santander cyber teams versus other companies, I think we're less hierarchical. I think we give the new starters and the more junior analysts more access to senior personnel."

Moreover, the bank's "Santander Mundo" (Santander World) program enables employees to work in different countries for six-month assignments, broadening their perspectives and skill sets and creating opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration.

Innovative Training and Development Approaches

Recognizing that continuous learning is essential for cybersecurity professionals, Santander has implemented several innovative training approaches. Cyber training for its more than 200,000 employees across Group uses gamification and learn by doing techniques to promote the best online behaviours. And the competitive spirit extends beyond individual learning. "We also have cyber war games between the different countries, which are hugely competitive affairs where teams race to complete security tasks in record time," Harvey shares. These events combine skill development with team building and cross-border collaboration.

The bank's recently launched reverse mentoring scheme in Santander UK represents another innovative development approach. "Reverse mentoring is open to all employees and pairs them with a senior leader within the bank," Harvey explains. Over six months, junior staff share their perspectives on technology and workplace challenges while gaining insights from senior leadership. This two-way exchange benefits both parties and strengthens organizational connections.

External exposure complements internal development. Santander has a key role in promoting collaboration on cybersecurity with public and private organizations, participating on key organisations and initiatives across Europe, such as FS-ISAC Europe, World Economic Forum Cybercrime Atlas, Cyber Defence Alliance, UK Finance, National Cyber Security Centre, Quantum Safe Financial Forum, and others.

Balancing Technical Excellence with Cultural Fit

Santander's approach to professional development balances technical expertise with broader business understanding. The bank has aligned its job families and skill sets with the NIST framework, creating clear technical career paths for those who prefer advancement without moving into management. "Not everybody wants to be a manager or progress through a management pathway," Harvey observes. "People want to progress through a technical pathway and be recognized for it."

While supporting professional certifications—"cyber professionals are highly motivated by achieving as many professional accreditation"—Santander also invests in executive leadership courses at universities that teach "wider skills around resilience or personal leadership."

Addressing the Retention Challenge

Retention is an ongoing challenge in a competitive market with significant skills shortages. "I think it's important that people understand that primarily we want them to develop and grow within our organization, but if they're successful in an organization elsewhere, that's also success for us," Harvey explains. "It's shown how we've developed and grown that talent."

This pragmatic perspective reflects Santander's long-term vision for talent development. By creating a comprehensive value proposition—combining competitive compensation with development opportunities, workplace flexibility, and a collaborative culture—Santander continues to build a resilient cybersecurity function capable of protecting one of the world's largest financial institutions.

This Case Study is Just the Beginning – Download the 2025 Cybersecurity Workforce Research Report for More Insights!

This case study is part of the 2025 *Cybersecurity Workforce Research Report* published by SANS | GIAC. Informed by international survey results, the report delivers key insights on how HR and Cybersecurity Managers can collaborate to successfully build high-performing cybersecurity teams.

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