Empowering Career Changers in Cybersecurity

WiCyS' Blueprint for Inclusive Workforce Development

Lynn Dohm
Executive Director at WiCyS

"Cybersecurity has done a very good job of making it extremely convoluted and confusing to get into the industry," observes Rushmi Hasham, Director of Strategic Partnerships at Rogers Cybersecure Catalyst of Toronto Metropolitan University. "There's so many different pathways, and clarity is lacking."

This confusion persists despite a growing need for cybersecurity professionals. Traditional hiring models often exclude capable candidates by focusing on technical skills, limiting the number of potential prospects.

Rushmi Hasham
Director of Strategic Partnerships at Rogers Cybersecure Catalyst, TMU

Redefining Required Skills

"It's hard to be what you cannot see," explains Lynn Dohm, Executive Director of Women in CyberSecurity (WiCyS). "We don't have the participation that matters on cybersecurity teams." She and Hasham advocate for expanding hiring criteria to include human skills—communication, problem-solving, and adaptability—that often come from non-traditional backgrounds.

"We frame soft skills as power skills because, in cybersecurity, we're here to build teams," Dohm emphasizes.

Erik, a former resident worker supporting homeless populations, is now a threat researcher at eSentire and trained through the Catalyst program. "My previous experience helps me excel in cybersecurity by honing my ability to remain calm in a crisis and communicate effectively," he shares.

Similarly, Gina D'Addiamo shifted from a 16-year career as a labor and deliver nurse into cybersecurity after earning three certifications through the Catalyst program. With their amazing support, I secured a full-time role within a month of graduation."

Industry shifts are happening, albeit slowly. "The data and the workforce aren't reflecting it at this time," Dohm acknowledges, "but we're making progress in employers understanding the value of wide-ranging talent." This shift is crucial because, as she emphasizes, "there is no such thing as a good leader if you're not a welcoming leader."

Removing Barriers, Creating Pathways

The Catalyst has launched a six-month, part-time training model, already training over 700 individuals.

"We remove the burden and challenge of restrictive environments by creating an accessible space," Dohm explains. Christine Morency, who moved from physical therapy to cybersecurity, found success through WiCyS' Security Training Scholarship Program. "It provided the bridge I needed to embark on an exciting new career path that propelled my professional growth and income."

"It is hard to be what you cannot see."

North America's risk-averse hiring contrasts with Europe's willingness to train newcomers. "In Europe, jobs are posted that say, "zero years' experience in cyber, willingness to train"," Hasham notes. The Catalyst's model has proven successful, attracting 11 applicants for every available spot.

The Power of Mentorship

Mentoring plays a critical role in career progression. "An individual is five times more likely to get promoted when they have a mentor," Dohm reveals, "and a mentor is six times more likely to get promoted." This two-way benefit drives mentorship programs, including "reverse mentoring," where experienced professionals learn from younger counterparts. "Anyone over the age of 45 should have a mentor under the age of 30," Dohn suggests, ensuring continuous learning and adaptation."

Building Lasting Support Networks

Community-driven learning is a powerful tool. "Women with children woke up at 4:30 a.m. and join study groups," Hasham shares. "They taught each other, reinforcing both giving and learning." These networks thrive years after graduation.

Measuring Impact and Success

Success is measured through employment outcomes and industry-wide change. "We're looking at nine to 13 months before someone pivots into cyber," Hasham explains. "That's the win." The quality of placement is equally important as speed. "Our research shows that WiCyS members outperformed all other participants in all seven NICE categories," Dohm notes.

"Employers are paying attention and prioritizing hiring practices and meeting the community where it is," Dohm observes, marking a shift toward sustainable workforce development.

Building Tomorrow's Security Culture

The talent development approach must evolve with the cybersecurity landscape, particularly with the emergence of AI and new regulations. "We need to frame AI as a collaboration with cyber, not a threat" Hasham emphasizes. Instead, she sees AI as a tool enabling cybersecurity professionals to work more effectively.

Regulatory requirements will increasingly require professionals who can bridge technical requirements and business impact. "This long-term perspective is essential for building sustainable talent pipelines to meet tomorrow's challenges," Hasham emphasizes.

Dohm sees these challenges as an opportunity to create an environment where different perspectives are actively valued and integrated into decision-making processes.

Breaking barriers in cybersecurity is about more than filling job vacancies, it's about creating an industry that reflects, supports, and benefits from non-traditional perspectives.

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.

Download for More Insights