

A Flight Plan for Cybersecurity Talent

United Airlines' Five Step Strategy for Investing in People

With nearly 400 cybersecurity professionals protecting one of the world's largest airlines, United Airlines faces a continuous challenge: attracting and retaining top cybersecurity talent in an increasingly competitive market. "Every type of adversary is interested in us in some form or fashion," explains Sean Mason, Managing Director of Cyber Defense.

When Mason joined United Airlines during the pandemic, many cybersecurity professionals sought opportunities elsewhere. Despite this, United remained committed to cybersecurity. "We had no intention of reducing the staff dedicated to the cybersecurity group," Mason explains. Rebuilding a strong cybersecurity team required a well-structured approach centered on five key elements cybersecurity professionals seek in their careers.

United's Five-Step Cybersecurity Talent Strategy

Step 1. A Challenging Environment

United's complex operational environment presents unique cybersecurity challenges, from protecting critical operational systems to defending against every adversary imaginable. "Cybersecurity folks don't look for the easy stuff," Mason notes. "They want to be challenged."

Step 2. Technical Excellence

United continuously evaluates and updates its technical stack. "We have a lot of fantastic technology," Mason says. By sunsetting outdated tools while introducing new solutions, United's team has the resources to tackle evolving threats.

Step 3. Continuous Education

United invests in formal and informal learning, including engineer-led discussions, vendor-led training, capture-the-flag exercises, industry conferences, structured learning platforms, training workshops, and advanced certifications. "I don't think I've ever gone into an interview and not been asked about training," Mason notes.

Step 4. Strong Leadership Support

United's cybersecurity initiatives benefit from executive and board-level commitment. "We have that in spades," Mason emphasizes. Vice President and CISO Deneen DeFiore highlights the importance of mentorship and continuous development. "The key is hiring the best talent and continually investing in their growth," she explains. Many of her mentees have gone on to become CISOs themselves.

Step 5. Competitive Package with Unique Benefits

United offers fully remote work and global travel benefits, making it an attractive option for cybersecurity professionals. "As long as you get your work done, I don't care if you're in LA or Chicago," Mason explains. The company also collaborates with HR to provide accelerated promotion paths and specialized development programs.

These five elements create a strong foundation, but Mason emphasizes another critical factor: the quality of the team itself.

"People want to work with other really great people. If you have the reputation that you're building programs and investing in your people, it becomes very easy to attract and retain talent."

By fostering an environment where cybersecurity professionals feel challenged, have access to cutting-edge technology, receive continuous learning opportunities, and benefit from strong leadership and competitive benefits, United creates a virtuous cycle where top talent attracts more top talent, strengthening the team's capabilities even further.



Sean Mason

Managing Director Cyber Defense
at United Airlines

Innovative Talent Development Programs

"We prioritize defining the skills, capabilities, and experience our team members need to succeed, creating tailored career action plans to guide their growth."

- Deenen DeFiore

Hiring Traits Over Credentials

United values talent and potential over traditional degrees.

"Many skilled individuals come from non-traditional backgrounds; they have the aptitude, adaptability and passion, and we tap into those overlooked talent pools," says DeFiore.

"We hire for traits; we can train the rest," Mason emphasizes.

A notable example is a flight attendant who shifted into cybersecurity after demonstrating interest and aptitude. "She started attending meetings and training sessions, joined our team, and she's been awesome ever since," Mason proudly shares.

Career Development

"Investing in talent development is critical to building a resilient and forward-looking security team."

- Deenen DeFiore

United creates non-traditional career paths through structured programs that provide hands-on learning, mentorship, and rotational experiences across key cybersecurity domains.

INNOVATE Program: Pairs individuals from varying backgrounds with senior mentors for hands-on learning.

Early Career Development Leadership Program (ECDLP): A two-year rotation through different technical domains.

Dedicated Cybersecurity Track (in development): Will provide exposure to SOC operations to application security, and other security domains.

Building a Sustainable Cybersecurity Workforce

Mentorship and Long-Term Development

United fosters mentorship initiatives, including a technology-focused track with 200+ participants and monthly leadership talks featuring C-suite executives.

"Investing in people creates a magnet for top talent."

Preparing for the Future

United stays ahead of evolving threats by investing in AI, cloud security, and other emerging fields. "You have to play the long game," Mason points out.

United Airline's cybersecurity talent strategy blends technology, continuous learning, leadership support, and an employee-centric culture to attract and retain top talent. "If we don't have the right people or we're not investing in the right people, none of this works," Mason concludes.

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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