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IT CAREER EXPERT

Does job security for security technology jobs exist?

Jon Boroshok

01 Sep 2004

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Information Security professionals and Systems Administrators work in a growing field, yet they're impacted by the financial realities of today's business world. Experienced and certified IS pros and SysAdmins have an opportunity to keep their jobs and move up if they can balance the right mix of expertise, specialization, accreditations and broad general knowledge.

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Industry experts differ on what makes an IS pro or SysAdmin marketable and valuable, but agree on areas of growth. Expertise in application testing, code review, mobile/wireless security, IP communications for rich media, spam and spyware, remote access, voice and data (including VOIP), and Linux goes a long way in today's market place.

The challenge to job security and prosperity in these areas comes from current hiring and business practices. Many companies are still looking to reduce costs and maximize efficiency, operating quarter to quarter, often without a clear understanding about the long-term financial impact of security or the lack of it.

While some companies understand the need to invest in security professionals and protect critical data, networks, and privacy security strictly as overhead without revenue contribution. That lack of a clear ROI often leads to budget cuts, downsizing, and administrators as a commodity. Many have jumped on the IT outsourcing bandwagon, although security areas haven't been in as others.

Whether trying to avoid having their jobs outsourced or looking to become the outsourcer, versatility and the ability to learn an technologies quickly is essential to remaining valuable to an employer.

Bob Blakley, Chief Scientist of Security and Privacy for IBM Tivoli in Austin, Texas feels that it is very rare for an organization t security. "It makes people nervous," he said. "You'll be held responsible if something goes wrong."

Blakley sees a big demand in keeping up with the accelerated pace of development. "Security expertise is in short supply," said Blakley. He stressed the need for formal training such as Microsoft certification or becoming a CISSP.

"Systems Administrators become a commodity when they themselves do not grow," says Michael R. Higgins, Chief Security Officer at Global Solutions, LLC in Edison, NJ. "Those who look at their job description and perform their assigned duties without ever seeking new experiences and knowledge will find themselves a commodity and perhaps replaced down the line."

"Proficiency in technical communications is important, especially in security, where things are complicated," says Blakley. He suggests Systems Administrators and security professions to make their skills apparent so others can value them. He suggests developing expertise particularly in open-source development activities in security technology.

Another value-add is an ability to put things into a business context, and fully understand the deployment environment. "Customer service is the most valuable thing to bring to the table," says Dario Zamarian, ServGate's VP of Products and Corporate Strategy for ServiceNow in San Jose, CA. He believes that there are multiple ways to do security, and an essential professional can understand and recommend what needs to be applied. True value is when customer and vendor come together.

Mark Giglietti, CEO of PrecisionIT in Belmont, MA, agrees. "Going in and just fixing and deploying is less important than the ability to communicate," he said. Systems administrators and security tech professionals must be able to perform cost-benefit analysis to make and justify recommendations, and be able to speak with management.

Experts and hiring managers differ in what they value. Dow Williamson is the director of communications for (ISC)2 of Vienna, an international organization dedicated to training, qualifying and certifying information security professionals. He stressed that a common body of knowledge and a compendium of industry-best practices is essential for today's information security professionals. "Neutral needs to be matched-up with vendor specific certifications," said Williamson.

Williamson says that a strong academic background, such as a Masters degree in Information Security will continue to be in high demand. He will continue to value professional certification. (ISC)2's flagship certifications are the Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP) and the Certified Information Systems Security Certified Practitioner (SSCP). Practitioners succeeding in meeting the standards of knowledge and requirements for certification are acknowledged as professionals in the field of information security. Many companies and government agencies value CISSP and SSCP certifications in recognition of the skill and experience that supports the certifications.

While certifications may give an IS professional an edge for being kept instead of downsized, their value depends on the company. Alex Rosenbaum of NetMacros in Reston, VA believes that education is as important as experience because it shows an ability to learn.

Rosenbaum says an IS professional must be able to understand underlying concepts and why the technology is being applied. He cautioned against focusing on a single vendor or application. An ability to design solutions is essential.

Trench time and true operational experience is often valued higher than education or certifications. "A CISSP is excellent, but it's not enough," says Nick Brigman, Vice President of Product Strategy for Red Siren of Pittsburgh, PA. He places a high value on military and training, highly regards a GIAC Security Expert (GSE) from The SANS Institute.

Red Siren looks for job candidates with a deep, diverse background and a clean record. Brigman explained that this is especially true today as organizations are looking into backgrounds of their own employees and vendors.

This economy offers little job security, but it does hold many opportunities for strategically prepared SysAdmins and IS Pros. Security professionals grow in importance, and professionals that combine the right mix of best industry practices, specializations, broad knowledge, certifications and credentials won't just survive, they may even prosper.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jon Boroshok is an accomplished strategist and freelance writer in Groton, Mass. His articles and columns have appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, Crain Communications, ZDNet, CMP Publications, and TechLiving magazine.

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