

Built by Experience: A Personal Narrative

Davis Plude

Old Dominion University

IDS 493 ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIO PROJECT

Dr. Gordon Phan

July 28th, 2025

Abstract

This Narrative explores my journey through the IT and Networking industry, focusing on how real world experiences shaped my career over the past three or so years. Rather than focusing heavily on higher education classroom learning, this essay shows the importance of hands-on experience and lessons that can only be learned in the field. This essay also goes over how and why I got into the IT field and what factors are going to keep me in it for a while as well as what factors are pushing me out.

How I got into the IT field

My journey into the IT field started in high school when I applied and got accepted into the Advanced Technology Center. In my junior year I started the first of a two year Cisco network engineering program. Prior to getting accepted into ATC I was pretty set on joining the United States Army and becoming a helicopter pilot. I went to the ATC open house in my freshman year and went around to all the different classes and decided on my top three choices, the first of which being the Cisco networking engineering class. This was top of my list mainly because I found the countless racks interesting and I was told it was the hardest class to get into. Fast forward back to my junior year I was hooked on my first day when I got into my class and found all the switches and routers laid out across the desks for us to start working on. That first year was mainly of learning the completely foreign Cisco Internetwork Operating System (IOS) and learning the very basics of routing and network topographies. About half way through the year I helped my teacher start reworking the class room which involved running new ethernet wiring throughout the ceiling and down to the now rearranged desks.

The second year was when the real work started. I took the ten hour general industry OSHA class at the beginning of the year and started studying for the CompTIA Network+ exam. After passing the CompTIA Network+ exam on my first attempt, I shifted my focus to the class's major challenge: studying for the Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) certification. In April of 2023 my teacher came to a few of us studying for the CCNA and asked if we would be interested in taking CompTIA's Security+ exam because 4 vouchers were expiring and needed to be used up. We studied hard for the week leading up to vouchers expiring and believe it or not all passed Security+. After that we continued the grind for the CCNA and in June of that year I

took and failed the CCNA on my first attempt. I took that failure and continued to study for my second attempt which I took on the last day of classes my senior year and passed.

During my senior year of high school I also attended TCC for dual enrollment and took the high school graduation required English and Government along with 4 other classes for my cybersecurity degree. In 2022 when I started my associates degree there was no option to take a strictly networking focused degree. I continued those classes throughout my senior year and graduated high school in June of 2023 with an advanced diploma, six industry certifications, and the first year of my associates degree.

My First Job

I applied for a Managed Information System Technician Position at the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel District in June of 2023 and started working on July 15th. This was my first taste of working in a real IT position supporting all of the IT infrastructure for the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel (CBBT) or as I called it “the bridge.” I was getting trained via fire hose as they called it trying to learn everything I could possibly learn about how the bridge did business. I did everything from managing critical radio systems along with the Statewide Agencies Radio System (STARS), to full stack software development, IT infrastructure management, network engineering, cybersecurity, and worked closely with Supervisory Control And Data Acquisition (SCADA) systems. I worked in an on-call position and can remember a few good calls at two or three o'clock in the morning driving all the way out to the bridge just to flip a power switch or plug in a cable. I also gained some memorable experience working overnight shifts from 9 PM to 6 AM in December 2024, pulling fiber cable through both the Thimble Shoals and Chesapeake Tunnels. The conditions were harsh: bitter cold, pouring rain on multiple nights, and long hours of waiting during weather delays. Since one of the tunnel lanes had to be closed for our work, we

could only work during clear weather, with traffic being flagged in both directions. The result was a series of exhausting, sleepless nights but an experience I won't forget. I ultimately decided to take another offer in June of 2025 and left the bridge after almost 2 years of memories and thankfulness to my manager who took the chance of hiring someone out of high school to fill his position.

Transitioning From TCC to ODU

Back tracking a bit to August of 2023 I had been working for about a month when I continued my associates degree for the fall semester. I continued on as a full time employee at the bridge and a full time student at TCC till I graduated with my associates in cybersecurity in May of 2024. That summer I applied to ODU and started picking classes for the fall semester of 2024 when I started my first classes. Now I just want to say something for the record, my entire life I was told by the teachers of one school that the next school would be much much harder. In elementary school you are told middle school will be hard just wait and see, and in middle school you are told high school would be hard and it almost never is. I was told by a TCC professor that ODU would be different, and that he wasn't kidding that we were in for a rude awakening when we got to ODU, and in my experience it is the same. Transitioning from TCC to ODU was just as easy as elementary school to middle school and middle school to high school.

I continued my classes working towards my cybersecurity degree and am now in my final semester of ODU in July of 2025 and am set to graduate with my bachelors in cybersecurity this semester.

New Job and What's Next

I started a new job working on a government contract as Network Engineer in June of 2025 and have been delighted to use all of those hard learnt Cisco skills that I memorized in highschool.

Cisco command line will always be the greatest command line interface of any of the major networking devices. So, what's next for me? After spending three and a half years earning my cybersecurity degree, I've found myself feeling unexpectedly unfulfilled. Working in the same field I've been studying has led to a sense of monotony, and at times, it feels like I haven't truly learned much, just completed course after course, jumping through hoops for a piece of paper and I just don't think cybersecurity is for me. I really enjoy what I do now as a Network Engineer but I've never been someone who settles for "good enough." Since earning my Amateur Radio License back in February 2019, I've had a long-standing dream of designing and building radios. Lately, that dream has been getting louder. To make it a reality, I'll need to dive into RF engineering, which essentially means learning electrical engineering. That's why I've decided to pursue a master's degree in Electrical Engineering, starting in the spring of 2026. It's a big step, but one I'm genuinely excited about and after everything, I think I've earned a semester off to recharge before the next challenge begins.