Tracing My Path Through Cybersecurity, Software Development, and Privacy Engineering

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Introduction: Making Sense of My Story

When reflecting on my experience of entering such areas as cybersecurity, software development, and privacy engineering, I am more likely to think about how my experience is coherent with what McAdams (2013) explains as narrative identity and the personal narrative that we create to establish our identity and the identity we are becoming. It was not a straight line on my path. Instead, it was a gradual process inspired by curiosity, sudden opportunities, and the places that were brought about by them in their formation. According to Nguyen (2019), our stories have meaning when we comprehend how the contexts in which we are affect our choices. In my case, such environments were college classes, coding bootcamps, and later fast-paced environments within companies like Meta and TikTok.

The ensuing pages explore the events that have led me from being inquisitive about technology to a position where I am a privacy engineer and my work is at the perimeter of security, software, and human behavior.

Early Curiosity: Discovering the World Behind the Screen

Before I had the titles and the technical vocabulary, I was intrigued by the mechanisms of digital systems. I was such an individual that I wanted to know not only how to operate some technology, but why the technology acted in particular manners. According to Smith (2017), individuals usually invest in academic or professional fields when they make sense of them within their sense of meaning. That was true for me. Cybersecurity immediately appealed to me, the thought of securing systems and thinking in a way that an attacker can read and finding vulnerabilities seemed both difficult and natural.

I was only unacquainted with particulars in the field, but I had an inkling of my own intuitions in it; in attending to detail, in perseverance, and an interest in knowing how things disintegrate.

Beginning My Academic Journey in Cybersecurity

I made my first significant move in 2020 by joining the course of the Associate of Applied Science in Cybersecurity at Tidewater Community College. I thought I was going to learn about technical labs and configurations- and that was something that was within the curriculum- but I was shocked by how much writing was involved in the coursework. The theoretical discussions and essays challenged me in ways that I had not expected initially. However, those struggles made me mature, and it is a concept that is close to the theory of McAdams (2013), which states that identity can develop when our expectations clash with new realities.

I discovered myself doing things outside the classroom to find out these tools, learn skills, and teach myself things that were way beyond what was required. Independent learning became one of my academic identities. By graduation in 2022, I was already determined to be an information security professional.

CodePath and the Unexpected Pull Toward Software Development

Like a shift in my story was the summer of 2022. I was taking the Python/software development course in CodePath, and I was assuming that the course was going to be an easy addition to my cybersecurity skills. Instead, I soon found myself really enjoying programming. The construction of code was an empowering and creative process, and I was made to sink into it even more than I anticipated.

I proceeded to another CodePath program, which majored in Java and backend. It led to a position as a Test Automation Engineer, and later, this job would change what I planned to make my career. Nguyen (2019) emphasizes that life narratives are refined with the new possibilities that increase our sense of direction. The transition to software development was such a moment in my case.

Although I continued to be passionate about cybersecurity, I was now aware that development skills could help me further build my technical base- and that in the end, this would help me begin a career in privacy engineering.

Growing at Meta: From Automation to Privacy Engineering

In late 2022, I was recruited by Meta (under Solvd Inc.) to work as a Test Automation Engineer. Even though my position implied that my duties were to include work related to testing frameworks and automation scripts, my duties slowly turned to work pertaining to privacy. I was looking at regulatory guarantees and audit evidence, as well as looking at the way that microservices processed sensitive information. I would check database settings, code interpretation based on the compliance questions, and various cross-functional engineering groups.

It was my first proper exposure to privacy engineering, and it had an easy, natural fit to anything I was interested in: secure system design, technical analysis, and problem-solving on real-world risk. The fact that I felt comfortable working between the engineering and the regulatory parts of the work was what shocked me the most. There is no privacy engineering that I had sought intentionally, but it suited me, and as time passed, it started molding my thinking as I related it to my career.

Advancing at TikTok: Building Structure in a Fast-Paced Environment

In 2024, I joined TikTok as a Senior Privacy Specialist via Solvd Inc. This position played a key role in further involving me in privacy by enabling me to own a massive compliance system that incorporated over 150 features. I converted technical requirements to complex regulations, audited engineering evidence, and checked system support to privacy expectations.

Future employment in cybersecurity requires not just technical prowess but also communication ability, policy awareness, and human behaviour sensitivity, again highlighting the fact that cybersecurity is not solely technical. Privacy engineering is at the intersection of law, ethics, and engineering, and TikTok has never made it as evident as before. According to Smith (2017), an identity is easier to pinpoint when individuals become aware of trends in their interactions. In retrospect, it was clear that the trend was heading this way: all positions that I assumed implicitly led me to privacy, before I made the conscious claiming of it as my occupational identity.

Returning to Academia: Reinforcing My Foundations at ODU

I returned to school in 2024 and enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity program at Old Dominion University. At the time of enrolment, I was working full-time in the field of privacy engineering. Although I had experience working in the industry, being back in the classroom this time around changed my approach to the material. Ideas that were once considered abstract are now directly related to the job I performed at Meta and TikTok.

I was still crammed with the writing approach in other courses, but that kind of design provided me with better chances to explain the sense of a technical decision. And to support this idea, as Nguyen (2019) notes, narratives are better enacted when we can back up our experiences

with a current goal. The bachelor's degree I had was also able to bridge the gap between the less formal and more formal foundation of the knowledge of professional preparation that I had acquired in the informal environment.

Where I Stand Now: Embracing a Professional Identity in Privacy Engineering

I have recently acquired another job, that is, as the Privacy Engineer in a company which I cannot name yet. And such a turn of events can be compared to the resolution of all the plot lines that have been tested so far in my story: the topic of cybersecurity, software creation, and privacy compliance, as well as an interest in the intersection of law and human behavior with technology.

All my professional life experiences have made me understand what kind of professional I have become: I secure systems, interpret regulations, collaborate with a team, and create solutions that bring a balance between innovation and accountability. It is the interest that has guided my path, and once again, the environment and the possibilities that made me emphasize the profession that has become my name.

Conclusion

McAdams (2013) defines narrative identity as a narrative history that changes as we write about our lives to make sense out of them. Reflectively, I can see the flow in my story, as I developed interest in the field, my studies, my experience in coding, and the highest roles in privacy engineering. I never really knew where I was going, yet every experience built up another component to my growing identity. I currently identify myself as a privacy-oriented engineer who is knowledgeable in both technical, ethical, and regulatory fields. My life is still developing, yet the path is more defined than ever before.

References

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