GOING SOLO:
THRIVING AS A SINGLE PROFESSIONAL IN CYBERSECURITY

Kat Fitzgerald   evilkat@rnbwmail.com

github.com/rnbwkat/presents
rnbwkat@infosec.exchange
rnbwkat.bsky.social
linkedin.com/in/katfitzgerald/
youtube.com/@rnbwkatandtequila
(first episode being recorded soon)

theunfrostedfiles.com
sashatheflamingo.xyz

1

WHOAMI

Bsides Global Steerco, Lead BSidesChicago, CFP Chair BSidesPGH, BSidesSEA SpkrOps

Many years in Security (don't ask)

Based in Chicago, IL and a natural creature of winter, you can typically find me sipping Grand Mayan Extra Añejo whilst simultaneously defending my systems using OSS, magic spells and Dancing Flamingos

   (Currently working on move to Portugal!)

Honeypots, Refrigerators and IoT (Internet of Threats) are a few of my favorite things!

2

DISCLAIMER

- *The views and opinions expressed in this presentation are my own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any current or previous employer.*

3

SETTING THE SCENE

The Hotel Room Moment

- Another conference, another city, another hotel room with one bed
- Professionally connected to thousands, personally eating at the bar alone
- *"We talk about work-life balance, but what about work-life integration when your life IS just work?"*

The Reality Check

- "52% of tech professionals aged 30–49 are single—and almost none of our policies reflect that reality"
- This isn't a niche experience - it's the norm we've been ignoring

4

THE INVISIBLE WORKFORCE

The Always-Available Assumption

- "Can you take the weekend deployment?" - Single = flexible, right?

- Late-night incident response becomes your specialty by default

- The unspoken expectation that you're the one who can travel, relocate, work holidays

- **Personal anecdote**: Times you've been voluntold because "you don't have family obligations"

5

THE INVISIBLE WORKFORCE (2)

The Networking Paradox

- Industry events built around "spouse tracks" and family-friendly activities

- Happy hours where conversations drift to kids, mortgages, vacation planning with partners

- Professional relationships that stop at the conference badge

- The quiet exclusion from informal networks that happen over family BBQs and playdates

Benefits and Policies That Don't Fit

- Relocation packages designed for household moves, not individual transitions

- PTO policies that favor "family emergencies" over personal mental health days

- Salary negotiations where single income carries different weight

6

THE HIDDEN COSTS

Emotional Labor and Burnout

- Being the team's emotional rock because "you don't have stress at home"
- Carrying institutional knowledge because you're seen as stable/permanent
- The compounding effect of professional stress with no built-in support system
- Imposter syndrome when success feels hollow without someone to share it with

7

HIDDEN COSTS (2)

The Care Crisis
- Who checks on you during that week-long flu?
- Emergency contacts that are friends, not family - and the awkwardness that creates
- Planning for your own future, retirement, health crises with no safety net
- The financial reality of single-income cybersecurity living

8

IDENTITY FUSION AND THE MOTION TRAP

- When your professional identity becomes your entire identity
- The blurred lines between networking and socializing
- Losing track of who you are outside of your security clearance
- The honest question: Are you choosing this pace, or is this pace choosing you?
- *Personal reflection: "I'm later in my career now, speaking at conferences by choice, traveling solo by choice - but sometimes I wonder if I pack my calendar with talks and trips partly because at least it fills the void?"*
- The difference between running toward opportunities and running from stillness
- When constant motion becomes another form of avoiding yourself

9

STRATEGIES FOR THRIVING, NOT JUST SURVIVING

Building Your Own Support Network

- Intentional friendship maintenance - treating personal relationships with the same priority as professional ones
- Creating accountability partnerships with other professionals (not just for work)
- Finding or creating communities that center on adult friendships, not family units
- Practical tip: The "birthday protocol" - systems for making sure important days don't pass unnoticed

10

PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARY SETTING

- How to pushback on the "always available" assumption without career damage
- Scripts for declining travel/overtime that don't reveal personal details
- Negotiating for what YOU need: flexible PTO, remote work, professional development budget
- Making your career moves strategic, not reactive to loneliness

11

SELF-ADVOCACY IN THE WORKPLACE

- Asking for mentorship and sponsorship explicitly
- Building visibility for your contributions beyond just being "reliable"
- Creating your own informal networks through knowledge sharing, not just availability
- Practical framework: The "plus-one principle" - always bringing someone else up with you

12

PERSONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Financial planning for one income, one retirement, one healthcare crisis
- Creating rituals and celebrations that don't require external validation
- Developing interests and skills that exist completely outside cybersecurity
- The Sunday Night Protocol: Preparing mentally for the week ahead when there's no one to debrief with

13

THE SUPERPOWERS THEY DON'T TALK ABOUT

Advantages of the Single Cybersecurity Professional - Celebrate These!

- Deep dive mastery: Ability to immerse completely in complex problems without divided attention - this is where breakthrough solutions come from
- Career agility: Lightning-fast pivots, certifications, and strategic moves that others can't make
- Diverse networks: Building intentional relationships across industries, roles, and geographies
- Self-reliance translated to professional excellence: Problem-solving skills that make you invaluable
- The perspective advantage: Seeing systems and problems others miss because you're not anchored to conventional patterns
- You've earned this brilliance - own it fully

14

INNOVATION THROUGH INDEPENDENCE

- How solitude creates space for creative problem-solving that changes the game
- The power of quick decision-making without committee consensus at home
- Building deep expertise in areas others don't have bandwidth to explore
- Examples of breakthrough moments that came from having uninterrupted thinking time
- **This isn't consolation prize success - this is choosing your own excellence!!**

15

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Success isn't just salary and title when you're building a life, not just supporting one
- The importance of measuring career satisfaction differently
- Personal reflection: What thriving actually looks like vs. what you thought it would look like
- You're not alone in being alone - the statistics on single professionals in tech
- Permission to prioritize your own needs, celebrations, and boundaries
- The ripple effect of one person living authentically in their singleness

16

infosec.exchange/@sashatheflamingo
@sashatheflamingo.bsky.social
sashatheflamingo.xyz !!!!!!

Thank You!!

linkedin.com/in/katfitzgerald
github.com/rnbwkat/presents

infosec.exchange@rnbwkat
rnbwkat.bsky.social

17