Q&A with Theresa Payton

Theresa Payton
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Previously, we featured Theresa Payton, Former Chief Information Officer of the White House, in our Profiles in Confidence. Payton shared insight about the current state of information security, the lack of talent, and the importance of including more women, minorities, and veterans in the industry. We recently checked in with Theresa Payton again to hear what changes she has witnessed for women in security. She shares her thoughts with us:

Q: What is the current state of women in cybersecurity?

A: According to Womenscyberjutsu.org, women account for only 11% of information security profession. Overall, I think the industry can do more to help women understand the crucial role that cybersecurity professionals play that make a difference in our everyday lives. Unfortunately, ethical or unethical hackers are often pictured as men dressed in hoodies, and women cannot picture themselves in that role as a possible career choice. These kind of images tend to make women think they may have nothing in common with hackers. Studies show that women want to work in professions that help people, where they are making a difference. When you stop a hacker from stealing someone's identity, you made a difference. At the end of the day, the victims of hackers are people and women can make a tremendous difference in this field. This is something the industry needs to do a better job of showing women.

Q: How can organizations start hiring more women?

A: The industry tells us there is a talent shortage in cybersecurity. There is a perception that if a person doesn't have specific certifications after their name, a degree from a certain university, or a career path 'punch card', then they are not qualified candidates. Hiring managers that only look for the resume qualifications and are unwilling to recognize life experiences, creative problem solving, and a "go-getter" attitude as qualifications are going to miss out on the most successful cybersecurity professionals. Many times, women may be going through a career change and trying to enter the cyber industry yet they feel their certain certifications or work experiences are lacking. Yet they do possess fundamental critical thinking, problem solving and analytical skills that would enable them to be very successful in cybersecurity.

My biggest piece of advice to executives everywhere is to be creative, innovative, open, purposeful, and mindful about how a candidate looks beyond their appearance on paper. Hiring managers should look for women, minorities, and veterans who may not be the exact "type" of candidate they are looking for, but if they invest the time to be a coach and mentor, they can get them up to speed. This, in turn, creates loyal, creative, problem solvers who are more likely to stay at their organization.

Much of this starts with the executive suite making a concerted effort to take a stand and ask themselves and their organization why they don't have more women on their teams. I was recently at a global healthcare organization and the CISO said women account for almost 50% of his team. I asked him what he thought the key to success was and he said he focused on recruiting and retaining women and going outside of the health care industry and security business to get team members with different backgrounds.

Q: How can organizations attract and retain more women?

A: Organizations should run focus groups for women to give them a place to talk and grow. Providing a platform shouldn't be about men vs. women, it should give women a place to flourish and thrive by supporting one another.

If there's someone on my team that impresses me and I appreciate their work ethic, I ask them if they have any friends they would recommend. We also pay employees a referral bonus as they are our best recruiters. This is a great way to gain qualified, loyal employees.

For recruiting, women on cybersecurity teams should go to college campuses to attract other young women interested in the industry. Female college students love seeing women who are already in an exciting career field. The industry does not place enough emphasis on the importance of personal connections like this.

Organizations should make networking tools available to women, such as the Grace Hopper event or RSA Conference, to meet other female colleagues and share stories and growth.

Q: What can the industry do?

A: Last year, the RSA conference started a Security Scholars program that was open to both males and females. I noticed that they had a significantly higher percentage of females and minorities involved than I typically see at companies. I found this very impressive. When I asked about RSA's new focus, they said they were deliberate about making sure there was a good mix of not only genders, but different socioeconomic statuses as well.

As more security conferences look to create "hackathons" for middle and high school students, as well as scholar programs for college students, they must make sure they deliberately foster diversity.

Something very positive happening now at many conferences is women "get-togethers" such as social hours and dedicated tracks of networking. Again, we don't want to create a separation of men vs. women, but I highly recommend taking advantage of these events to gain valuable career growth and participate in networking.