

CompTIA®



Spotlight on Success

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“Realize data is valuable and you need to protect it. Whether you call it the cloud or something else, it’s still computing. The same rules and fundamentals apply.”

Creating a Ship Shape Managed Security Program

When you’ve been certified to operate some of the U.S. government’s most secure communications gear, making the leap into the channel seems like a great move. That doesn’t mean the transition will be easy or as straightforward as most who enter the industry. In fact, after leaving the Navy, Ron Culler, Chief Technology Officer at Secure Designs, Inc. ended up altering his company’s IT services course to take on new opportunities in managed security.

Why the new focus? Culler explains the reasoning behind the decision and details Secure Design’s transition in this month’s CompTIA Spotlight on Success:

CompTIA: Did you ever picture yourself as an IT professional?

Ron: Actually, my goal in high school was to be a Navy fighter pilot. I went through ROTC in high school and knew I was going into the service. I really wanted to fly jet fighters. That required a college degree and an officer ranking, so I enrolled in the engineering program at NC State. Unfortunately, I spent all the money before school started and needing to take several extra math courses and hold down a job while going to school, so realizing that wasn’t going to work, I decided to go into the Navy right away and to specialize in electronics.

CompTIA: What did that involve?

Ron: My official title was a cryptologic maintenance technician in the Naval Security Group. That involved taking all the electronics courses right down to the chip level. We worked with vacuum tubes and transistors, chips, processors, receivers, transmitters and all types of things. The schooling took almost 2 years to complete and then they focused us specific career. For me, that meant three years being certified on two pieces of cryptologic equipment and the model 28 teletypewriter you see in many World War II movies. It was basically a printer with a keyboard, a paper tape punch and a paper tape reader. That’s how you sent and received messages. In one night, I could tear three of those things apart, perform the required maintenance and put them back together.

After three years, I re-upped and went back to school for six months to learn how to work on DEC (Digital Equipment Corporation) PDP (Programmed Data Processor) systems. I was stationed in Japan and got an opportunity to learn a lot about RF, antennas and receivers. We had access to a lot of R&D equipment, too. Then they shipped me to Scotland for three years. That’s where I actually took my first college class. I believe I completed four programming classes through correspondence, which was the full extent of my post-secondary education.

CompTIA: When did you leave the Navy?

Ron: When the Soviet Union fell apart. They paid me to get in and then paid me to get out.



I knew there were jobs available to me on the outside and the advancement opportunities in the Navy had ground to a halt. I got out in spring 1993, almost exactly 10 years from the day I went in. While I immediately started looking for a job in component level electronics, there just wasn't much available then. That's when a family friend suggested I take a Novell Netware boot camp course. One of their platinum reseller organizations in Greensboro, NC was offering it and, after completing the two week course, they hired me on as a network technician. That was my first civilian IT job.

CompTIA: What impact did your military experience have on your career?

Ron: We worked inside buildings with no windows and guys with guns standing out front. You had to be able to handle anything and everything that came up from an IT perspective. Getting someone into the facility without a clearance was really difficult so we became the "jack of all trades" for anything and everything. That really fit my personality and it's what I always wanted to do. There was nothing that intimidated us. When I got out, that experience was really helpful. Rank or position didn't intimidate me.

My first three years in the military, there were 23 stars in our command and we had more Navy captains (the highest rank before Admiral) than enlisted people. If I was talking to the CEO of an organization later on, I felt confident and knew how to handle myself. No matter what was thrown at us, we could always tackle it. The military helps you grow up. You learn about responsibility, authority, comradery and how to do the things needed to get the mission done.

CompTIA: How was your transition into civilian life?

Ron: After I went to work for the reseller, I stated acquiring all the Netware certifications I could. Every time you passed a test towards a certification, the company gave you a raise, so of course, I figured out how much I wanted to make and which accreditations I needed and got busy. After about a year, the company owner got into a sales discussion with another group out of Atlanta. That company needed some experience networking professionals for a job in Argentina, so they asked a few of us to go down there for the summer to help out, including my future business partner.

During our time in South America, we got to know the other company quite well and, when we returned, we told our employer the purchase wasn't going to work well for him. So he asked if we wanted it. He agreed to finance part of it and offered to consult and help out whenever he was needed.

So we became owners of LAN Technologies. At the time, it was a four-person organization and, as a Novell Platinum partner, we were on their advisory council and won many awards. LAN Technologies was their "go to" partner in the state of North Carolina and we did a number of beta installations.

In November 1998, Microsoft flew us and a number of other Novell Platinum partners to Redmond to find out why we weren't selling much Windows software. During that trip, my business partner and I decided we needed to make a change. While we often were called in to fix things for big companies as a Novell partner, they treated us as a small group and didn't trust us to manage bigger things. At that time, the primary source of our income was small businesses. We had customers who frequently would look for cheaper options and, though





they eventually came back, the writing was on the wall. Product sales and project work was not going to be sustainable long term.

So, I pitched my partner the idea of offering firewall security. He liked it so we discussed the opportunity with a couple of angel investors who had previously given us a little money to help the business grow. They bought in and we started the business using Check Point systems and some point-to-point circuits. In effect, we were the “ISP” and managed services provider for our customers. We handled their network needs as well as their firewall and in 2000 we changed the name of the company to Secure Designs, Inc. We sold off our service contracts for network maintenance. We had whittled them down a bit and then decided to sell them off to another group to focus solely on internet security. That was probably the single scariest thing: stepping away from known sources of revenue and customers that pay your bills. We started with a handful of new clients paying us for managed security serviced only. The company was designed to service the micro SMB, the very smallest business customers.

CompTIA: How confident were you in making that leap?

Ron: We just knew security was something everyone would need. The internet was taking off and more and more people were getting internet connections in their businesses. We also wanted to make the move to a pure recurring revenue model, and knew we had the skill set to make it happen. It was a bit scary the way we did it, going cold turnkey by cutting off other sources of revenue. Occasionally an old client would ask us to come fix their network. They understood when we told them no, and they still used our managed security services.

CompTIA: How did you grow the managed security offering?

Ron: We focused heavily on small to mid-size businesses, typically those with less than 100 computers. Everybody told us we were insane, that the company would collapse, but, as stubborn as we were and as sure as we were about what we were doing, we pressed ahead. We did not have a huge sales force out knocking on doors, so we started looking for alternative methods for bringing customers in. That included approaching local ISPs, cable companies and DSL providers. If they didn't have a security offering themselves, they would refer business to us, and that went well for a while.

That's when we decided to take a private label approach. We built a program and started pitching the idea to providers, ISPs and cable companies. We were so confident with what we were doing told them that, if after six months, they didn't think it was the greatest thing in the world, we'd buy everything back that they hadn't sold. They looked at us like we were crazy.

Secure Designs customers include two cable companies, CLEC (competitive local exchange carrier) out of Texas and a distributor. We are the back end for their managed security offering and know how to sell to small businesses in those providers' markets. For us, it's just getting them (partners) to buy into selling security. Most understand that it is critical today, which was one of the roadblocks we had for many years. They may not know what it is, but they know they need security. We're managing over 8000 firewalls across the US and in five countries today, and turning on about 200-250 new firewall connections a month. We have more than 30 employees, which is a far cry from the four we started with.





CompTIA: How do you help other channel companies?

Ron: Our iVAR program is like a mini-private label offering, designed for an MSP that needed to offer secure internet solutions. We're moving into the IoT space right now with some organizations that provide intelligent services, analytics and controls. SecureConnect provides them with a secure connectivity solution so they can deploy their products to their end customers. We securely connect back to their headquarters so they can provide analytics and support.

Some of our MSP partners may not have enough people on staff or don't want to invest in data centers and back end systems. They sell managed security services and we do all the work on the back end. It's their customers and their business, and has their name on it.

CompTIA: What do solution providers need to do to convey confidence with their security offerings?

Ron: A couple things. First, you have to be confident in what you are doing. Some don't mind getting up in front of people and speaking. That can be intimidating, but if you can build up your own confidence, it will instill a sense of trust in the people you are talking to.

The second thing is to learn. There is so much information out there. Everything I have learned since leaving the Navy has been on my own. I use research and search through new technologies, and act like a sponge to absorb all I can. You have to do that if you're going to make recommendations. You need to understand it from a foundational level and be able to deliver solutions that fit your customers' needs. There are tons of resources available to help you do that, including the CompTIA IT Security, Managed Security and Cloud Communities.

CompTIA: What's in store for your team in 2016 (and beyond)?

Ron: Growth. That's the big thing. Having brought on a number of new partners last year, we're helping them ramp up their managed security offerings. Secure Designs went from adding about 100 firewalls per month to between 200 and 250 per month today. We could easily reach 500 or more by the end of 2016 and within three years we may be adding 2000-3000 each month. Our goal is to have 50000 firewalls under management in the next three years and we think that's a realistic, though somewhat conservative target.

CompTIA: Is that much opportunity in the security space?

Ron: There are more than 5 ½ million businesses in the US with less than 100 employees. That's a huge market and some of it is already being filled by VARs or solution providers, or by internal IT staff. But, as the security threats rise and technology usage increases, organizations have to say "is this something we can outsource?" Just like with an MSP. They often take workload and pressure of an organization's internal staff. We can do the same thing, helping providers take some of the pressure off their teams, allowing them to focus on more crucial things, like growing their business.

CompTIA: What advice do you have for those looking to become IT security experts?

Ron: Investigate. Learn. If you know what your market is or what your customer type is, figure out what their needs are. What their risks and fears are. If you understand what your





customer's business is, then it's easier to build security solutions that allow them to succeed. Security is not about selling the box with the best rebate or spiff, it's about knowing what you're doing, taking pride and having confidence in your solutions.

The reality is, security touches everything. It's easy for somebody to add in a layer of security. I would say most MSPs are already doing something, whether they call it a security practice or not. Usually around server, desktop, patch management, application management, anti-virus-malware suites, and firewalls. They are offering many of those services already and it's something they can easily expand.

CompTIA: Any other advice to share?

Ron: I'd remind MSPs that the fundamentals of security have not changed. What we do today follows the same principles we used to protect information 10 years ago, maybe even 20 years ago. We'll likely be doing the same basic things in the future. Realize data is valuable and you need to protect it. Whether you call it the cloud or something else, it's still computing. The same rules and fundamentals apply. Understand how that system interacts with a business and how that organization interacts with other businesses. That helps when you're designing security solutions.

