



TECH STAR



Ed Morris: Validating Success in Technology

[By Akbar Ali]

As co-founder and lab director of Atlan Laboratories, Ed Morris is an expert in a very specialized and increasingly relevant field of the technology industry: IT security. Under his stewardship, Atlan has emerged as a competitive and comprehensive dealer in securing the behavior and operation of computer systems through four primary services: Pre-Validation Support, FIPS 140-2 Validation, Pipelined Validation, and Algorithm Testing. With high-profile clients like IBM, Microsoft, and Cisco Systems validating their products through Atlan Labs, Morris is casting a presence in the industry that's as impressive as it is vital.

For Morris, the decision to pursue a career in IT security was the natural result of his lifelong fascination with computers and technology.

"The intersection of security and technology especially appealed to me. Every development in technology changes the way we think about security," he reveals.

One of the most appealing aspects of his field of work is the fleeting nature of technological advances, forcing him to constantly update his reservoir of techie know-how in order to maintain his competitive edge.

"It's amazing to look back and reflect upon where things have gone in such a short time — gates, guards, and guns seem almost like an anachronism now," he says.

Growing up, computers were perceived as more of a peculiar hobby than as a viable line of work for Morris. Though computer technology was viewed as a major development back then, he believes that advances in computers since have made the technology considerably more difficult and complex, a fact that makes his current work both challenging and rewarding.

Straight out of college, Morris began working in IT security back in 1998 for a small lab called Sygnacom, which he describes as having a "very flat organizational hierarchy." Translation? "That meant that opportunities were there for the taking if you thought yourself up to the challenge," he says.

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. I like to keep abreast of different technologies at as low a level as I can; for example, writing and cross-compiling a Linux daemon as a pet project on a weekend, just to probe the possibilities of a new embedded device. It's easy to become removed from the nitty-gritty, but I think that getting your hands dirty helps maintain a deeper technological understanding.

Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?

A. Heh, well, I only really have MP3s that I stream from my desktop through my home LAN, but I've got a pretty even mix of Opera arias, pop music, and classic rock.

Q. What is the last magazine you read?

A. *The New Yorker*

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. Any non-serial show; half-hour sitcoms work best. Probably *The Office*. I just can't commit to any show requiring repeat viewing.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. I'd have to say my father.

Q. What makes you laugh?

A. I like zany humor, and people who can laugh at themselves. I like to laugh along.

Sygnacom focused its efforts on "a type of embedded security called Public Key Infrastructure, which is basically the transparent technology beneath," he says. Though the company was small, his time there taught Morris some very valuable lessons on how to operate a technology consulting company with minimal overhead.

"That was the most amazing part of the company. I was given responsibility well beyond my years, but I learned a great deal in a very short time," he recounts.

In 1999 Entrust bought out Sygnacom, which caused some major (and decidedly unwelcome) changes in the company environment. This prompted Morris to become an independent security specialist. He moved on to start his own IT security lab with his business partner Johnny Hsiung in McLean, Virginia. The duo has never looked back since.

Though he's only 32 years old, Morris has had a number of major accomplishments throughout the course of his career. Though his most obvious achievement thus far has been the founding and building of Atlan Labs, he asserts that, "For me, my technological accomplishments are my most memorable."

"Early in my career," he continues, "I bit off a bit more than I could chew when I offered my opinion on the feasibility of doing some vulnerability testing (today it would probably be called crypto-hacking). This specific project had the attention of the president, vice-president, and my manager, not to



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mention the customer, who believed their product to be immune to any such attacks. I spent a great deal of time learning as I set about the project, and ultimately I proved my original hypothesis false.

However, Morris, was not discouraged.

My manager gave me a long leash, and I applied myself full force to the project to the point where I would dream about ways to solve it," he says. "Ultimately, my stubbornness paid off, and I conducted a successful proof of concept attack. It caught the attention of the company's president, not to mention the customer. I was proudest of the fact that it required a cross-section of many different disciplines. Some months later, I saw a Ph.D. thesis in a reputable

journal. I had, in effect, achieved the same results, but in a much more efficient manner."

Morris also acknowledges the strong and sustained influence of many mentors he has had over the years, both from in and out of the industry.

"I've been lucky to work with people who gave me great advice on starting a company and who were willing to help me out when I most needed guidance. I think that having good mentors is one of the most important things anyone can do to develop a strong career path," he observes.

Establishing a successful career path in an ever-changing and tenuous industry is no

easy feat, but Morris believes that one key principle can transform the newbie techie into an industry powerhouse.

"I think that the most important thing that young professionals can do is to take every offer and every opportunity that presents itself. I ended up in a lot of meetings where I didn't belong and ended up signing on to some pretty difficult projects," he says, "but those were the sorts of opportunities that paved the way to better things."

And better things are what it's all about.

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