

**Personal Narrative Essay: Understanding My Path**

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### **Abstract**

This is an account of how my time in the military, my collegiate experience, and my professional work as a technical support specialist influenced my development into the person that I am today and how it has impacted my career aspirations. The discipline and accountability that I developed while serving in the U.S. Navy were two essential skills to develop for my future. During my collegiate years, I was able to learn through persistence and perseverance that even at times when I would feel unsure or become overwhelmed by the tasks given to me; I could accomplish them. Lastly, my experience working as a technical support specialist improved my communication skills, increased my confidence in myself and enhanced my problem-solving abilities. These three different areas of learning have collectively helped guide me toward the field of cybersecurity and allow me to envision a possible future in law.

### **Introduction**

#### What My Career Path Looks Like Today

People generally get the impression that my career path has always been very clear-cut. However, I did not know what type of career I wanted until after all the events that happened along the way. Each event – such as military service, school, employment and everything else that occurred during the transition period – helped me determine the best fit for the life I wanted to lead. McAdams (2001) explains that people form identity by creating life stories that connect

important experiences and give them meaning over time. My career path included discipline, uncertainty, setbacks and personal growth. These elements allowed me to not only determine what I excel at, but what is most important to me.

Currently, I am pursuing my degree at Old Dominion University and employed in a Department of Defense support area. This job fits a great deal of my experience. I enjoy resolving problems, learning systems and assisting people when technology is not performing the way it should. Additionally, I have become increasingly interested in law. While this appears unrelated to cybersecurity, to me the two relate nicely together based upon reason, communication, responsibility and service. As I look back, I can now see that each segment of my journey prepared me for the next.

#### Discipline Learned Through Military Service

In terms of a significant influence on my personal development, my time in the Navy greatly influenced the direction that I took. Not only did serving in the Navy teach me far more than technical skills; it taught me how to maintain structure, accountability and purpose. In the Navy environment, people relied on systems functioning appropriately, and they also relied on you to perform your duties adequately. With that said, I learned to pay close attention to detail, stay composed under pressure and hold myself accountable.

In addition to teaching me what a strong work ethic looked like, the Navy instilled in me a lasting mindset. Regardless of whether I was feeling up to coming to class or getting out of bed in the morning; being on time and communicating effectively, along with completing assignments efficiently were expected behaviors. To this day, I carry those habits into both

school and work. When a problem arises, I naturally attempt to dissect the issue at hand, remain calm and proceed with taking the next appropriate step.

However, my time in the Navy also caused me to reflect on what I desired long-term. Although I enjoyed my time in the Navy (the training and structured nature) and was able to grow within the organization; I ultimately decided that I wanted to continue developing beyond my current role. That desire prompted me to seek higher education and begin contemplating my future more seriously.

#### Overcoming Academic Struggles:

My academic journey has not always been smooth sailing. There have been numerous instances where I struggled with maintaining motivation, confidence and consistency. Juggling multiple responsibilities simultaneously while attending school was not always easy; and there were times where I felt overwhelmed. The feelings of frustration created an opportunity for me to be more introspective.

Through my struggles, I learned that success is not solely based upon intellectual capabilities. Success involves having discipline, self-awareness and consistency. Prior to my time at ODU, I was required to identify areas where my habits needed improvement and where I needed to utilize my resources more intentionally regarding managing my time. This process was uncomfortable; however, it contributed significantly to my maturation. This process demonstrated to me that growth occurs frequently from confronting reality with regards to your own status quo and then choosing to continue progressing regardless of challenges faced.

#### A Major Turning Point:

### Transferring to Old Dominion University

Attending Old Dominion University presented itself as a pivotal moment in my educational journey. The change in environment provided me with a clean slate and a renewed sense of direction. Initially, I viewed school merely as something necessary to complete; whereas, after transferring to Old Dominion University; I began viewing schooling as an integral component of who I am continuing to evolve into. My studies in cyber security became meaningful due to its connection to technical experience previously acquired, which will provide me with a solid foundation for future possibilities. Furthermore, ODU taught me resiliency. Despite experiencing numerous periods of uncertainty, I continued progressing towards achieving my goals.

### Building Confidence Through Employment

Simultaneously with obtaining my degree; I obtained experience in providing technical support. Experience gained while employed assisted me in gaining growth through various avenues that classroom instruction alone could not produce. Problems associated with support work arise immediately; users require assistance; systems must function; and there is typically no time available to consider every possible step when attempting to resolve issues. In addition to handling trouble tickets; deploying computer hardware; using Active Directory; utilizing System Center Configuration Manager; and resolving problems impacting employees' daily activities; experience gained in a technical support environment taught me that technical expertise constitutes only one aspect of providing effective technical support. Communication plays an equally vital role as does remaining professional despite employees' frustrations regarding issues experienced. These experiences fostered increased confidence within me as they illustrated my capacity for resolving problems while simultaneously supporting employees.

### Technical Support Experience Fosters Interest in Cybersecurity:

Experiencing systems operating in actual work environments further reinforced my interest in cybersecurity. The realization that cybersecurity affects operational effectiveness; trustworthiness; and the safety/efficacy with which employees accomplish their respective job functions contributed substantially to making my educational pursuits appear more pertinent.

### Extending Interests Beyond Cybersecurity:

While cybersecurity continues to represent an important element of my career trajectory; I began realizing that my interests extend considerably beyond strictly technical roles. Specifically, I found myself particularly attracted to aspects of work/school requiring critical thinking; written communication; logical analysis; and facilitating employees navigating challenging circumstances. Ultimately, these attractions contributed to my developing an interest in law.

There are several factors contributing to my attraction to law; however, it is primarily related to the opportunity to leverage what I have learned throughout the course of my career thus far (cybersecurity). Learning how to systematically evaluate detailed information; assess potential consequences resulting from specific actions; and methodically address complex problems are all attributes garnered from my prior work in cybersecurity. Additionally, experience gained through working in a technical support environment enabled me to develop enhanced communication skills and facilitated my ability to remain calm under pressure. Lastly, educational experiences gained through overcoming academic challenges taught me persistence and accountability – all qualities inherent in law.

I find particularly appealing the concept that a career in law enables me to apply logic (inherent in cybersecurity); combined with service (as evidenced through my previous work experience). In a world continually experiencing interrelated technological advancements; data protection concerns; cybersecurity threats; and evolving policies; I strongly believe that my collective experience provides unique insight into addressing meaningful problems while positively affecting individuals.

#### Perceptions of Self-Identity:

As I reflect on my identity today; I do not view myself as being defined solely by one moniker. For instance, I am not solely identified as a student; nor am I solely identified as a veteran or technical support specialist. Rather, I view myself as an individual whose identity has evolved via responsibility; adversity; and reflection. As McAdams (2018) notes, narrative identity helps connect a person's past, present, and future into a more coherent sense of self. The Navy taught me discipline. Schooling taught me perseverance. And working taught me communication skills and practical problem-solving abilities. Collectively, these three experiences have given me greater clarity and purpose because of them.

Furthermore, the experiences collectively have given me a greater appreciation for adaptability. In contrast to when I previously believed that success equated attaining a predetermined goal at some definitive point(s) in time; I now understand that development often transpires because of changes occurring in our lives and adapting accordingly.

### **Conclusion**

Moving Forward

As I prepare for graduation; I am proud of what I have accomplished and aware of what is yet ahead of me. My journey has not been without struggle; but it has been invaluable. Each experience whether it was in the military or academia, it provided me with valuable lessons regarding discipline, resilience and purpose. Consequently, I have a greater sense of clarity regarding what I desire from a profession and what type of individual I wish to continue evolving into. My future could possibly continue to grow in areas such as Cybersecurity, Law School, or some combination of those two. The most important thing for me is that I'm continuing my purpose. I know my previous experiences were not just a series of random events. Instead, they reflect the kind of life story McAdams (2001) describes, where people interpret past events in ways that shape future direction. I believe they represent several chapters in the same story that will continue to evolve and develop who I am. That's where I get my confidence. I'm still developing myself, however, I now have a greater understanding of which direction I want to go, and I'm prepared for whatever happens next.

## References

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