

WHAT IS YOUR CALLING?

A Discussion with Jeremy King, Founder & President of Benchmark Executive Search, On Why the Cybersecurity Sector Is Vitaly Important to Securing Our Future



Corporate cybersecurity attacks are growing in magnitude, complexity and frequency, and these massive security lapses left an expanding list of major businesses compromised, including Yahoo Inc., Banner Health, Department of Justice, Snapchat, Democratic National Committee and LinkedIn, to name just a few. Demand for cybersecurity executives to bolster defenses and hold down the corporate fort, it turns out, is picking up.

One of the leading professionals in this space is Jeremy King, president of Benchmark Executive Search. In the following interview he addresses why this sector has become so active today and how placing the right leadership can help defend against the increasingly destructive attacks on American industry. He touches on why its important to follow your 'calling' and gives constructive advice to the leaders of the future.

Mr. King is a proven executive search consultant with nearly 20 years of experience. He specializes at the intersection of VC/PE backed technology innovators, government contractors and federal mission needs matching them to senior cyber/national/corporate security executives and board members. He is also co-founder and board member of MissionLink, an exclusive CEO-only organization which fosters collaboration, access and opportunity for companies focused on defense and national security missions.

Prior to founding Benchmark, Mr. King was a managing partner at Austin McGregor Executive Search. He joined the firm in 2000, opened its Silicon Valley office in 2003, and bought out the founder with a partner in 2004. He then returned to the D.C.-area to expand the firm's East Coast high technology practice and launch its federal IT practice.

As a boutique search firm specializing in security (cyber, homeland, national, corporate), what perspective are you referring to about someone's calling?

It's a simple question, but have you ever personally asked it for yourself? The broad categories could include God, family and country. Most people may immediately think of a "calling" to the clergy. To serve God as a priest, pastor, preacher, minister or rabbi. But the calling is something bigger than yourself. Here are other perspectives to consider.

Others may think of a "calling" to serve our great nation. It is said there is no greater sacrifice than laying down your life to benefit a greater good. Napoleon said, "Money motivates neither the best people, nor the best in people. It can move the body and influence the mind, but cannot touch the heart or move the spirit; that's reserved for belief, principle, and morality. No amount of money will induce someone to lay down their life, but they will gladly do so for a bit of yellow ribbon."

After 9/11 there were countless very successful people who found their calling. Some were corporate executives, NFL players, entertainers, etc. Something triggered their goals to change. My closest friend recently tragically passed

away. His calling was to be an astronaut. So to achieve that dream, he was naturally accepted to the U.S. Naval Academy, graduated among the top of his class, flew F/A18's, and around when the movie came out, he was our country's Top Gun. He would always say our focus should be "Mission over Me." People like that can do anything they set their mind to. I wish more people thought that way.

Legendary headhunter Gerry Roche would ask candidates and colleagues what they wanted on their tombstone. That can certainly change your perspective and help move past your to-do list this week or your quarterly goals to help you internally search for what really matters. Many corporate executives are on exactly the path of their choosing. But far too many others are climbing the proverbial corporate ladder to please somebody else or prove somebody wrong. When I ask candidates what job they would have if they hit a big lottery, very few say I'm so passionate about what I'm doing I would keep it the same.

Legendary football coach Vince Lombardi explained it this way in his book about leadership. The root word of career is carrier (French for carrousel) which means around and around. He explained that living a life of purpose and just having a career are typically very different things. Find yours.

Legendary management consultant Peter Drucker said that letting fate drive your career decisions is a sound strategy. He said, “Most of us, if we live long enough, must change careers. If career planning means not being open to opportunity, it doesn’t work. Planning should tell you only which opportunities are the right ones for you and which are the wrong ones. I always fell into the right slots. I’ve never done anything I’ve planned except planning what additional skills I need for my work. But in a world built out of intangibles, which is the world of ideas and brands, stepping back and letting fate move you is a sound strategy. It makes you open to recognizing opportunities you might not have imagined possible.”

Do I have your attention yet?

Very interesting perspective. You say your firm’s mission is to help keep America safe. How does finding purpose and meaning in your career relate to your firm’s specialty in security?

Deciding to focus my firm on security brought purpose and meaning to my own career. It is my hope that hundreds / thousands of people (entry level to board) listen to their own calling. A calling to serve their country, but not just by joining the government or military. In my experience, the best way today to protect our country’s economic superiority is to protect our collective creativity and innovative ideas. Our intellectual property is being assaulted by nation states, bad actors conducting corporate espionage, and from hackers looking to enrich themselves and / or wreak havoc. Our companies (Fortune 1000 to mid-market to startups) are being robbed blind and its time we looked at this epidemic in a new way. Companies need smart, motivated, experienced problem solvers to figure out a better way to secure our defenses and find a better way to outmaneuver the adversary. Executive positions that will continue to be in high demand include CISOs, CDOs and CSOs. I predict CROs (chief risk officers) will be the hottest search in the next five years and there will also likely be completely new positions created. These could include: VP insider threat, VP external threat and VP crisis management.

Why is cyber such a persistent and pervasive issue?

The cyber question given its preeminence in the present national dialog is being asked but not enough companies

are getting on top of it. The reasons are many. First, it’s a complex issue to tackle; the need for integration of strategy, policy, technology, human capital, compliance, and legal considerations is daunting. Second, every company must prioritize where to spend money. Do you add more sales reps to drive revenue? Hire more talent to deliver to current customers? Make an investment in training programs for the current executives / employees, or do you use that budget to recruit and hire new executives? Decisions with a clear ROI are easier calls to make than giving millions more to your security shop on “what if” scenarios. Third, the need for top cyber talent will continue trending upward, especially in light of world events, from terrorism to cyber-attacks on corporate infrastructure and networks. My favorite quote is from retired Army Gen. Keith Alexander, the CEO of IronNet Cybersecurity and former director of the NSA, and commander, U.S. Cyber Command, who told me that, “the value of theft of intellectual property from American industry represents the single greatest transfer of wealth in history and the probability of significantly disruptive and destructive attacks is rapidly increasing.”

In your 20 years as an executive search consultant, what trends stand out the most?

I have worked with, and had the pleasure of getting to know, many thousands of senior executives and hundreds of senior government officials. One trend that has remained consistent is the high majority choose the jobs that are available to them instead of holding out for what they really want. My old search mentor would tell candidates that you can’t accept the perfect job unless it is offered to you. I would recommend making the effort and taking the time to get more data, gather perspective, rule out what you don’t want to do, then choose wisely. I also encourage other headhunters to truly listen to their candidates’ desires, not just placing a candidate because it completes the search. Everyone will be better off if there is true alignment. Everybody wins.

Another trend is the transition of government officials to the private sector. Over the past 10 years, most leaders have chosen a commercial company as opposed to staying in their comfort zone of government contracting. We are now seeing the biggest transfer of U.S. Government talent

in history to the private sector and I predict it will only increase. In my opinion, no longer can U.S. citizens count on the U.S. Government to protect everyone and every company. Many inherent governmental functions, including aspects of warfare, will be outsourced to a more efficient and reliable partner – the private sector. A few examples include SIGINT as a service, HUMINT as a service, security / training as a service. And the best and brightest from government will continue to join the innovators with the solutions and capabilities to solve hard problems, including protecting our country. With cyber and IoT increasing the threat vectors and lowering barriers of entry for attacks, the U.S. Government can no longer protect all of corporate America's secrets, IP, new innovations and new disruptive business models. When Hurricane Katrina hit, our government (DHS/FEMA) did its best to come to the rescue. When the cyber hurricane hits, the cavalry won't be coming. You and your company are on your own.

What advice would you give to our future leaders?

Know thyself. Learn what your strengths are, your management style or what you aspire it to be, and what component of a team you can do better than anyone else. Ask yourself what job or skill would make you jump out of bed every morning? What mission / vision of a company

can you truly get behind? What type of leader would you follow into a burning building? Your values define you and nothing is more important than your character. Strive to be a trusted, committed professional of character.

I would recommend that you aggressively seek a mentor. Someone who is where you want to go, and who is willing to guide, teach and challenge you along the way. You should find your path and become a deeply knowledgeable pro in your area of expertise thru continuous learning / education / research / best practices. Then go beyond that platform to become a "thought leader" who brings new knowledge to your field of endeavor and evangelize important new thoughts / ideas / practices to your peers.

If you or someone you know is at the beginning of their career, challenge them that in addition of dreaming to become a fighter pilot, general, admiral, Navy SEAL or CEO, have them consider becoming a cyber warrior. While we still need the best of the best in each of these roles, securing our country's way of life, freedoms, democracy, and leadership position may be in jeopardy unless our future leaders' can solve, or at least mitigate, the cyber problem. Regardless of your path, find your calling. Be passionate about what you do and make every day count.