How Bartending Made Me a Better InfoSec Consultant

Agenda for the Talk

- **Why is this important? / WHO AM I TO EVEN TALK ?**
- **Starting off on the right foot**
- **Managing Expectations**
- **Owning Mistakes**
- **Closing out the project ALSO on the right foot**
- **Talking about transferrable skills**
- **How to get better at these things?**

Whoami?

- **Ben Burkhart / @benburkhart / Chicago, IL**

- **Pentester at Black Hills Information Security**
    - 2021 – Present
    - Previous: Senior Security Engineer @ Evolve Security 2017-2021

- **Cool Projects I've Worked On**
    - APT Compromise Incident Response
    - Fortune25 Office365 Cloud Security Audit
    - Recurring Adversarial Emulation Purple Team Testing
    - A Ton of Pentests

- **Things I Enjoy**
    - Iced Tea
    - Mechanical Keyboards
    - Running
    - Louise, the adopted retired racing greyhound

How did I even get here?

- **Background**
  - Flunked out of CS Degree @ UIUC (2004)
  - Pursued Photo Degree @ Columbia College Chicago (2007-2010)
  - Bartender / Server (2010 – 2017)
  - Evolve Security Academy Bootcamp (2017)
- **First Consulting Gig !**
  - Thrown into consulting
  - Working on pentests is sick!
  - So many cool tools! So many cool techniques!
  - Oh my god wait there's still so much talking to people
  - But … I quit bars because I was tired of talking to people
  - Wait, I have to write reports?
  - And DELIVER those reports on CALLS??

Why is this important?

Consulting and Bartending are both SERVICE jobs. Ultimately, our clients dictate and inform the work that we do.

- Deliverables are important
  - Bartending -> Food and Drink
  - Consulting -> Actionable Report
- **The experience along the way is JUST as important**
  - Recurring clients RULE
  - Clients that are so impressed with your work they tell their colleagues RULE
  - Building relationships with clients
  - It's a small world in infosec
- **We've all had bad experiences on BOTH sides of the equation**
  - What can we learn from those to always improve?
  - Being open to constructive criticism and feedback is **NECESSARY** (shoutout to my therapist)

The Realities of Consulting

- **There are TONS of resources for technical learning**
- **Cool hacks are cool, but clients don't care if you don't report on it**
- **If your reporting sucks, the impact of your sick hack is diminished**
- **If you're awful to work with, the client won't come back**
- **Testing Cadence**
  - Kickoff Call / ROE Call
  - TESTING (hacks and reporting happens here)
  - Delivering Report
  - Debrief / Readout Call

Bookends of Professional Interaction

- **The two most important interactions when you go out for drinks or dinner:**
  - Being initially greeted and welcomed into the space, etc
  - Paying your bill and being thanked for your visit as you leave the space

    Be aware of their body language and eye movements so that the check can be promptly presented. It is much better to anticipate the need for the check and drop it in a manner that doesn't make the guest feel rushed than to wait for the guest to ask for it. – Milk and Honey Service Manual

- **The two most important touchstones when you're conducting an assessment:**
  - Kickoff call with the client
  - Report readout and delivery

THE KICKOFF CALL

- **Your first opportunity to meet the client!**
  - Brief introductions around the horn
  - Getting to know who is essentially paying you
- **I'm a camera on person**
  - Seeing curated windows into people's lives is cool!
  - They are trusting you with access to their company secrets and crown jewels
  - The least you can do is show your face ☺
- **How do you make people you've never met before feel comfortable within the first 5 minutes of interaction?**

Setting, Managing (and Meeting) Expectations

Service Industry Examples

- First Date – Someone Shows Up Early, They Clearly Don't Really Know Each Other
- Solo Drinker / Diner – Reading a Book By Themselves
- Travelers From Out of Town – Interested in the neighborhood, open to recommendations

What are the business drivers behind the engagement?

- Compliance Drivers – Client Essentially Needs a Box Checked
- New Infrastructure – Audit and Assess Dev/Test Environments before Going Live
- Internal Organizational Factors – Leadership Concerned About Potential Breach
- New CISO – Willing to Allocate Funds for Extensive Testing and Invested in Remediation

Empathy and Understanding

How do we ADD VALUE ?

Anticipating and Understanding Client Needs

- Going above and beyond with deliverables
- Understanding the business context of the assessment
- How can we give shareholder leverage to impact change?

We are Business / Risk Assessment Analysts who Use Hacker Tools

- Always try and contextualize the work in the context of the business

Empathy and Understanding

Owning your mistakes

- **Being proactive when things go wrong**
  - If you knock over a server, reach out
  - If you don't hear back from the client, pick up the phone!
- Things **WILL** go wrong
  - How you handle those things speaks monuments
  - Clear communication with the client
  - Accepting ownership
- What can we learn from what went wrong so it doesn't happen again?

Closing Out an Engagement

- **Prompt Delivery of Report (earlier is always better!)**
  - Finishing a meal and having dessert then waiting for 20 min for the bill ☹

- **Report Readout!**
  - Call with the client to debrief
  - Go through the report, answer questions, be a resource
  - Follow up with deliverables like edits, updates, lists of affected hosts, etc

- **Don't be afraid to say "I don't know"**
  - But I'll find out and get back to you!

"All the world's a stage …"

- **Being behind a bar is akin to being on a stage**
  - You're not necessarily the entertainment … but people notice when you do things
  - On your phone? Touching your face? How you hold yourself? Looking bored?
- **Presenting well in consulting is incredibly important**
  - Nice webcam, nice microphone, GOOD internet
  - Share your **WINDOW** with caution (not your whole screen, pls)
- **Visual indicators that you're listening**
  - Be an active listener! Nod your head! Smile! (don't force it)

  - OPTICS
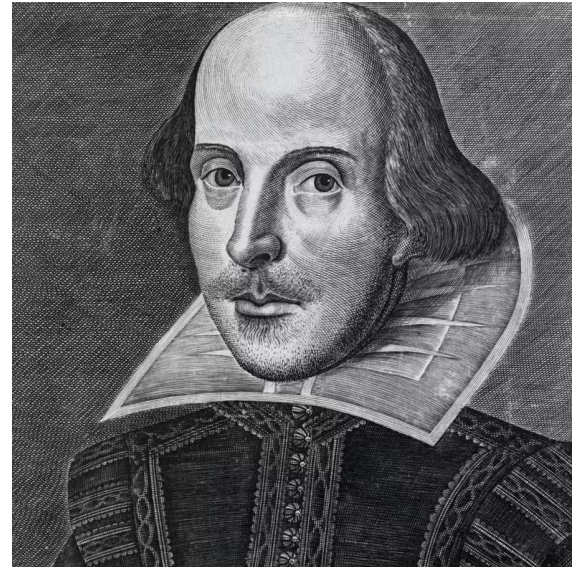
The Power of Narrative

Constructing Narratives Invites People to Become Part of the Story

- "Our special wine by the glass tonight is a nice dry red, its really tasty and $8."
- "Our wine by the glass tonight comes from a family-owned producer in Napa, California. Their vineyard was destroyed by wildfire last year, and this bottle is from their last remaining stock as they work towards rebuilding their family's legacy."

Narrative-Driven Technical Reporting

- How do we make technical reports digestible? Translating technical findings in a manner that can be easily understood and explained, even to non-technical clients, is the real value a strong consultant brings to an engagement
- Non-technical people will be reading your reports, will they be able to grasp a high-level understanding of what you wrote? What does it mean for THEIR BUSINESS?
  - *What levers can be pulled? –John Strand*

Accessibility for AS MANY Levels of Literacy as Possible

Assorted Adages

"The most important position in the WHOLE of the restaurant is the dishwasher."

- Don't be too proud to get your hands dirty and do grunt work
- If dishes don't get washed, it doesn't matter how many awards the chef has won or how innovative the menu is … no one is eating.

- Develop **healthy** coping mechanisms

- *Letter to a Young Bartender* – Jackson Cannon
  - You will not have to map your route to your destination. You will be guided. All of the people you work with from now on will be your guide to the destination you have chosen. If you are clear about what you want, are truthful when people ask you what you want, and make yourself humble and available to guidance, you will reach that destination.
  - **Observe -> Do -> Be Observed -> Put Yourself Out There**

What About Transferrable Skills ?

Roughly 60-65% of the job is performed using soft-skills and relatively basic concepts universal to MANY if not ALL other jobs:
- Communicating Effectively and Clearly
- Managing Time Efficiently
- SELF Management
- Working Hard

Remaining 35-40% of the job is technical capabilities:
- These can be learned!
- It's a challenge, but very possible

- **Learning these things is possible too!**
  - Pick up a part-time job at a local coffee shop! (jk)
  - Standup / improv classes
  - Find a good therapist ☺

Ben's Favorite to Make AND Drink

- **The Jungle Bird** – Aviary Bar @ Hilton Hotel, Kuala Lumpur (1978)
  - Pineapple makes it tropical / Campari helps balance out the sweetness
  - Traditionally made with 2oz blackstrap rum (not my fave)
    - Sub in a funky rum, add some Cynar to emulate the dark bitter of blackstrap
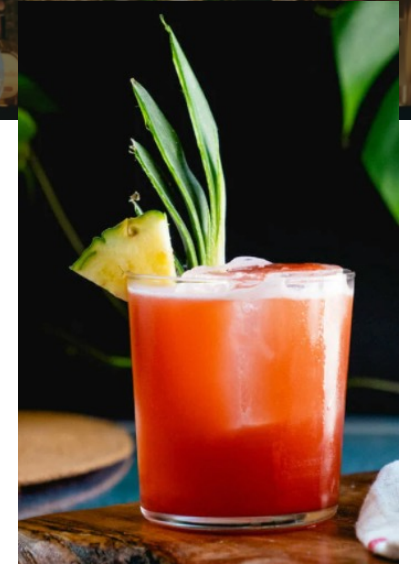
2oz Funky Rum (Plantation OFTD)

3/4oz Lime Juice

3/4oz Campari

3/4oz Small Hands Pineapple Gum Syrup

¼ oz Simple Syrup

¼ oz Cynar