

Security Consulting and the Future

By: Lisbeth

Disclaimer: This is an article written from the perspective of a security consultant/private investigator working discretely for multiple firms. As such, it has been necessary for the majority of the information here contained to be altered, redacted, and/or to some degree fabricated. However, as the author, I have done my best despite these modifications to give perspective on the world that I've already been a part of and which will, soon, be a reality for everyone.

Security consulting is a blanket term used by my employers and I, mainly because there is no professional title other than "Fixer." I don't think of myself as a fixer; I prefer to call myself a jack-of-all-trades. Security industries love my type: a leather man with random useful tools. Whenever we take on a contract, the uniqueness of the problem always requires an even more unique solution. The majority of these are intel collection jobs, at which the NSA is the overspending champion.

Clients generally hire our firms for one of the following three reasons:

1. They have no existing department for this sort of job, and outsourcing is easier than creating one.
2. They have too little time to handle it in-house but plenty of money to get someone to the job for them. (Applies mostly to government clients)
3. The nature of the contract is legally questionable. (Applies mostly to corporate clients with competitors to beat)

There was this one contract I took once, a job for a pharmaceutical company. They wanted to know if a certain professor was involved with a special project for producing cloned organs (that is, organs grown with stem cells and prototype cloned blood). My handler at the time had nicknamed the case "Frankenstein." Always get a handler with a good sense of humour; it makes for a great working relationship.

I spent a week trying my usual methods for info gathering, or "skip tracing," as it's called in the trade, but was getting nowhere, so I decided to try falsifying a Facebook profile. I used a random profile picture from Google images, requested friends at random, and let the profile build itself.

Whenever I'm fabricating an identity, I always remember what a certain private investigator would tell me when we were working cases together: "The Devil is in the details...." A Facebook profile is the perfect cover identity for something like this because it provides unlimited potential for customization within a fixed framework. Anyone who's played RPG tabletop games will understand intuitively how to build a character this way and make it come to life.

After a day of letting the profile simmer and friend requests go through, I had myself a legitimate-looking profile. I then started adding friends and family members of the P.O.I.'s inner circle. Two more days pass and I finally get a glimpse of my target's wall.

After about an hour of reading every post, viewing every picture, and watching every video he had on his account, I had enough information to build a profile of him. I had found some posts that were of interest, with the other people involved being pharmaceutical associates with similar interests. Fortunately, the topic of organ cloning is a niche passion. After "friending" these associates as well, more information came in and I finally got an answer.

I went back to my handler with a DVD-R of all my case information and printed pictures of particularly interesting items from his profile. The client was satisfied with my results and paid us over \$5,000, which was divided the 4 of us workers. I got the largest share because I had run the case.

This whole situation could have been something out of a cyberpunk novella or a 90's movie starring Keanu Reeves, but for me it was just another week at work. It's hard to believe, how closely the modern world already resembles these works of fiction. This resemblance extends beyond the corporate side of things as well, and sometimes there are risks involved...

While I was working for a PI agency in New York, my new handler at the time kept me busy with cases. I was also involved with a few hacker groups running low-profile operations, which interested me because there were often trades involved. One of these trades I took part in involved a drug trafficking ring on Hansa Market and a certain politician. Exciting stuff. However, right in the middle of trading information, my handler suddenly went silent. There's nothing more terrifying than trying to reach your handler and getting no response. You start to wonder if he was maybe caught doing something questionable or killed for crossing the wrong people. After more than 24 hours of nothing, I sent him a final message:

"Phoenix, 12 hours."

It's absolutely vital that you establish a unique vocabulary with your case handler or manager, one that you can use to quickly explain a situation without giving it away to third parties. Phoenix was a code word that meant "I haven't heard from you. I will destroy all evidence of our communications if I don't hear from you in the next X hours. I hope you're okay." 12 hours passed, and so I took my burner phone, printed evidence, burned discs, and some hardware and destroyed it. The majority was paper, which I burned. Anything electronic was thoroughly dismantled, had any memory I could reach wiped with a strong magnet, and then destroyed.

There are very serious risks involved in this trade, as you are acting as a hired criminal of sorts. You know that the customer has information or a vice of some sort that your employer needs to get a hold of, and it's your job to get at it more quickly and cheaply than anyone else, even if you sometimes need to use extralegal methods to do so. And so you have to be sure you take every precaution you can, no matter how paranoid or overly dramatic they may seem. If you believe your burner phone has been compromised, destroy it. If you think you're going to be raided and have your equipment seized, destroy it. If you still have an overstock of questionably legal documents laying around your room, destroy it. There is absolutely no excuse to not take these precautions... other than laziness.

Do I enjoy working in this industry? Not really. It can get very stressful, and there are some times I worry a black van is going to show up outside my door, unannounced. This job turns you into a recluse, and your anxiety levels go through the roof. It's nowhere near as glamorous as the movies make it out to be, but at least it pays enough for a drink at your local bar. For all its dangers, to me this industry is the last freedom our country offers. With more and more independent businesses paying higher taxes year after year, Americans are being forced to become wage slaves. What security consulting offers you is a chance to run your own life again. Despite the internet having been around for more than a couple decades now, Cybersecurity is still in its infancy, and it needs more intelligent and dedicated people to bring in economic stimulation and innovation.

Another thing about this industry, and I believe this will become more apparent in the future, is the growing demand for these sorts of services and their influence over peoples' daily lives. The American dream is dead, the cause of death being severe corporate consolidation and the diminishing of the middle class. Soon, Megacities (places like New York City, Tokyo, or London) will become host to a seedier career path, where the boundary between legal and illegal no longer matters, only staying alive. Mike Pondsmith, writer for the RPG game Cyberpunk 2020 and co-creator of CD Project Red's Cyberpunk 2077, once summarized it like this: "Cyberpunk isn't about saving humanity, it's about saving yourself..." That statement will certainly resonate with our children, in this future where no one will know the meaning of legal, honest work.

What do I predict for the future? Nothing good. It might be nice for lainons, because we'll finally get to see the future we'd fantasized about for so long. This initial attraction will soon wear off, however, as we come to realize that we are this future's workhorses. While some of us might get lucky, becoming developers, businessmen, lawyers, or even politicians, the rest will be struggling in these working-class jobs, trying as best we can to feel free. What we'll have to remember, then, is that there's absolutely no shame in doing what you have to in order to survive. You have to make money in order to eat, sleep, and keep the lights on. The only alternative is to not live at all.

I do not believe this future can be prevented, as we're already too far gone in too many vital places. Perhaps some day a Mr. Robot will come along and save us all with bad-security exploits and a Raspberry Pi in a Smart™ thermostat, but we can't count on somebody else to solve our problems. We're going to have to create our own solutions.

Final Author's Note:

I'd like to ends this article with an apology, in case my writing seems dramatic, over-the-top, or poorly written. I'm not a story teller. All I do is collect pieces of stories and give them to others. However, due to privacy concerns, I had to write this article myself.