

Women in cybersecurity – creating new career pathways



Kairi Hodge didn't initially plan on a career in cybersecurity. However, after eight years working in national security for the federal government, the PwC Cyber and Forensics Manager found herself looking for a new challenge.

While initially unsure about how she would go making the leap without an IT background, “the more I looked into it, the more I realised how transferable my skills actually were and that the threat actors are the same.” Based on a recommendation from former colleagues, Kairi met with a number of PwC partners, finding herself inspired by the people she would be working with, and by the firm’s inclusive culture.

PwC recently hosted the second annual Cyber Security Challenge Australia (CySCA) Women in Cyber Mentoring Event in Melbourne, along with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), Telstra and the Australian Women in Security Network. As part of this initiative, Kairi has been working with the PM&C team for a number of months to look at how government and society more broadly can encourage more women into the cybersecurity field.

CySCA is an annual ‘hacking’ competition open to Australian university undergraduates and TAFE students. Sponsored by a combination of government, business and academic professionals, its aims to find the next generation of Australian cybersecurity talent. The Women in Cyber Mentoring Events evolved as a way to offer women participating in the CySCA an opportunity to learn more about the breadth and depth of cybersecurity careers.

A study commissioned by PM&C has shown that women leave the cybersecurity field at all stages in their career, resulting in fewer female cybersecurity leaders to act as role models for women entering the industry. Kairi’s work with PM&C seeks to address the imbalance by fostering greater collaboration between industry, government and academia.

“No one area is able to do it on their own,” Kairi says, “there needs to be a coordinated effort to get more women into cybersecurity.”

The PM&C study identified specific barriers to attracting women into the industry, including marketing and hiring practices as well as a lack of female role models. It also cited workplace culture, a lack of flexible working arrangements, and persistent discrimination as reasons why the industry has failed to retain women employees.

The Women in Cyber Mentoring Event provided an opportunity for participants to hear firsthand from women who have forged successful careers in cybersecurity, including Sandra Ragg, Head of the Office of the Prime Minister’s Cyber Security Special Advisor, Michelle Price from the Australian Cyber Security Growth Network, along with PwC’s own Cybersecurity and Privacy Partner, Megan Haas, and cyber specialist, Aadeeba Mou. While formerly part of the CySCA ‘hackathon’, the mentoring event was also open to students in related fields, and Kairi was particularly pleased that this year’s Melbourne event was able to draw in participants from the wider sector.

Another highlight was the ‘speed mentoring’ session which saw students spend five minutes with different potential mentors. “*They could then think about who they wanted to be their mentor, in terms of where they want their careers to go,*” Kairi explains, “*then they’ll be matched with someone as their mentor for the next 12 months.*”

For Kairi, one of the most consistent themes from the Women in Cyber Mentoring Event was the diversity of backgrounds among the women who have forged a career in the field – something reflected in her own career journey.

“*There’s no traditional path leading to cyber, so a lot of women think, ‘Oh, I haven’t done a degree in cybersecurity, so I can’t go forward into it’, but there’s actually a whole range of pathways into the field. So I’d really like to see more women appreciate that cybersecurity could be a career for them.*”