

Heather ([00:11](#)):

Welcome to the Hurricane Labs podcast. I'm Heather, and today we're going to continue our talk about diversity in InfoSec. If you haven't had a chance yet, be sure to check out part one of the series. And before we dive in, I do want to reiterate that we'll be tackling this talk from our own perspectives and they are not representative of everyone's experiences. This chat does reflect our own personal ideologies opinions and anecdotes. As always, we do welcome conversations about our content. So you can reach out to us on Twitter [@hurricanelabs](#), or to me directly [@curious_words](#). We'll go ahead and continue our talk with Roxy, Meredith, Aysha, and Ryan. One of the issues we wanted to address next was about perceptions of underrepresented people and how those perceptions can lead to issues like the ones faced recently by the EC Council with their survey. Aysha, could you go ahead and talk to us a little bit about your experiences with this issue?

Aysha ([01:13](#)):

Yeah, for sure. When I had started my last position, we had a meeting, a standing meeting every Tuesday at 8:00 AM. And I for one am a very shy person. I, well, I wouldn't say shy. It takes me a while to warm up. I come from a military family, so we moved all the time and it's just in my personality type to assess the scene, assess the situation before putting myself out there. I'm not the person that's like, "Hey, I'm Aisha, what's going on." I wait to see how everybody moves and then I insert myself where I think I fit. So I had maybe been at this job, I want to say it was probably my first quarter, so maybe two to three months. And we had our morning meetings where everybody just kind of went around the table and talked about, you know, what was going on for that week, what they had accomplished, what was coming up for the week coming, you know, four week ahead. And I had a meeting request on my calendar from like the boss boss of the department. And I'm thinking that, okay, this is like my check-in, my 90 day review type of thing, and I get into the meeting and we discussed nothing of my performance, nothing of how it was doing in the job or, you know, thoughts and feelings, no 'good jobs', none of that, the whole conversation was tailored to how my coworkers felt that I wasn't very friendly. And just wanting to know if there was something, you know, if there was something wrong because I was so quiet and I wasn't, you know, standing on top of the table with donuts and coffee at 8:00 AM, handing them out to everybody. I, you know, came into these meetings and sat day out and I would chat with my coworkers to the left and right of me. And then from that point on, I put on, I developed a whole nother persona for work where, you know, I'm friendly, I'm this talkable person. I make sure that, you know, let me stop at Dunkin' before this meeting, so I have something in my hand, I have a conversation piece to talk about. It was the whole entire time that I was at that job from that point on, I was uncomfortable because I was always trying to uphold the standard of, you know, the, the friendly, friendly girl. When that's really not to say I'm not friendly, but I'm very much an introvert. I'm very much to myself. And it just made for a very uncomfortable and like an inauthentic experience.

Roxy ([03:38](#)):

That's something that I've seen as well, be expected of people, underrepresented people, especially if you're a woman of color. It's like my friends that are—see I'm most people just assume I'm white, so I don't, I don't usually get this experience, but I've heard from other people, like there's more expectations on them to be social and be bubbly and be talkative and like have lunch with the team and stuff like that. And it's like, that's extra work. That's extra work on top of the work you already do. I've had jobs where I had to go into my car and have time by myself and eat lunch by myself just to make it through the day. And nobody made comments about me not eating lunch with my coworkers, you know, just because you're underrepresented, you have to work extra hard and be more social and be

more present at work. I've just seen this way too often. And it just doesn't it. And, and the things in the reviews, you know, getting a review that has nothing to do with your technical ability, I've seen that happen too. And it's like, okay, is that because there's because you're so technically sound that they have nothing to put except that you don't eat lunch with your coworkers? They just have to put something in order to not give you a promotion. You know, that's what it starts to look like. So, yeah, I've seen that in so many ways with so many different people. So many of my friends in tech.

Meredith ([05:38](#)):

The point you made about crafting another persona really struck with me. I went to a school where we were essentially taught to create a persona. And I went there for 16 years of my life. And it was really hard to get out of being in that craftily created persona where you're not seen as a threat, you're seen as, you know, a nice, quiet woman who plans to settle down, get married, have children not work that entire, you know, 1950s housewife attitude, wellbeing well-educated and not being seen as a threat, but being brilliant and making sure not to scare anybody with any of the knowledge that you had. And I think the first time that I've ever managed to properly speak up with any sort of technical ability post-college has been at Hurricane Labs because nobody cares what you look like or who you are. They just care if you have the ideas or the willingness to learn or the passion to do whatever it is you want to do to help the customer.

Roxy ([06:57](#)):

And I think that energy that's spent on having to have a particular persona or having to walk those fine lines between being intimidating versus actually contributing, but you don't want to contribute too much and be too intimidating. You know, that's just a lot of energy that is just wasted because it could be spent on actually doing things and doing work and not having to walk these fine lines. You know.

Meredith ([07:31](#)):

I agree. It's absolutely exhausting. And back when I was in college, I did a lot of the cybersecurity competitions. And more often than not, I was either one of two or three females. Normally two of two were on the team with me, but once we got to the national competition, I was the only female and one of two non white people in a group of, I believe it was 88 competitors in total. And then looking at everybody, they had brought in for the sponsors as well as, you know, the professionals running this one woman walked up to me and said, you know, it's really nice to see you here. You're a unicorn. You're not supposed to exist. You're not supposed to be here. And I was one of those. Wow. We really like just, wow.

Ryan ([08:24](#)):

At the last place that I worked at there was a lady who worked at the front desk, you know, where all the employees and also guests and whoever would show up. And she worked with a team of other ladies at the front desk in rotation. And I remember her because she was one of the few black people who worked there. And every time I walked in, it didn't matter, and anytime anyone walked in, she was incredible. Like I had never met a more positive, like upbeat, very happy, very welcoming. You could always hear her voice down the hall when she was welcoming somebody in and listening to Aysha talk about, you know, what she was doing when she was in her workplace that like adds a whole other dimension to me because now I'm thinking back on that, and I'm wondering like how much of that was her, just, you know, just doing that for everyone else, because the majority of the company, they were

all white. So I, that puts a whole thing on it. And something else that I've learned, at least even now listening to this, so.

Aysha ([09:34](#)):

Yeah, that whole, just the whole creation of a persona thing. It's so it's almost like, I don't know if you guys watch Black Mirrors on Netflix or have seen that series, but there's an episode where it's like, everybody has, in a sense, like a social credit score that you need to, like, you have to uphold it. And it's very much, it feels like that. Or I can say it not here at all, but it felt like that in that last position, like I make it to work at, you know, 7:30 AM and it's not until 10 that I'm actually sitting down at my desk to do some work because I'm making sure that I have, you know, checked all of the boxes of saying hi to this person and sitting down and having conversations about things I could really, really, really care less about. And in my day to day, you know, life, but I need to make sure that I am, you know, being pleasant with person X, Y, and Z, because it's a, you know, political organizational type of thing.

Heather ([10:34](#)):

You know, and what we're, I guess what we're fighting here like with creating these perceptions is, you know, it's, it comes back to that, but language use, you know, am I too assertive? Will they think I'm angry? Am I enough? You know, am I being, you know, introverted or am I being unsocial? And we're sort of fighting against, you know, this sort of language use that gets used against underrepresented people in a way that aren't, but this sort of language isn't used in that way against the people who are represented in the majority. So which sort of brings me to something that I think Meredith you're going to want to sound off a little bit on you know, about questioning our own language use with that EC Council survey, if you wanted to introduce us to that a little bit.

Meredith ([11:27](#)):

Sure. So I don't have the exact date in my mind, but EC Council sent out a survey on LinkedIn one morning to gauge the perceptions that people attending this online webinar that they had surrounding women in cybersecurity and specifically women in pentesting, if I recall correctly, for the Certified Ethical Hacker, also known as the CEH cert, and they basically sent out questions that were perceived as very sexist in nature. They asked the question what, according to you, are the most common challenges faced by women in the cyber security domain. And the three options that people could vote for or only men can do this job, women can't handle this job, and women aren't encouraged enough. And for the first two options there that really struck a chord with a lot of people on both inside my friend group, some of the diversity and information security groups I'm in, and a lot of people on Twitter, because those first two are beliefs that appeared to be held by many and are upheld in some cases by some organizations. And they have such a large community, essentially one that offers certifications, who has had a few issues with sexism before put this out publicly, was saddening and embarrassing to see.

Roxy ([13:03](#)):

Even the third one is a problem because it's saying women aren't encouraged more. And so it's like saying, women just need more encouragement in order to succeed. Not like they already have the skills to succeed and they're not being recognized well.

Heather ([13:22](#)):

And the question is, who's doing the encouraging encouraged by whom. And, you know, I think the answer implies another layer of problem there. It suggests that women can only do this job if they are

encouraged by people represented in the majority, rather than women can do this job because they have the skills to.

Roxy ([13:42](#)):

Yeah, and likely they don't even need encouragement, they just need recognition. That's it. Recognition by the people that are paying them or hiring them.

Heather ([13:55](#)):

And for those who aren't familiar, following the backlash with the survey the team initially started blocking people who were criticizing the phrasing of the survey. By and large, from what I understand, the people they blocked were largely women, which does not help the situation. Eventually, one of them I forget if it was a C-level exec or came on and apologized, and the manager, I believe Meredith you know this better than I do all you can correct me if I'm mistaken, but I think it was the manager of the team who said that the team that put out that survey was women, that it was comprised of women, and therefore their survey could not be sexist.

Meredith ([14:45](#)):

Correct. I believe it was. Yeah. The CEO spoke up first and said, we are a multiracial and I'll actually grab the quote here. "EC Council is on multi-racial equal opportunity global organization with team members that speak dozens of languages. We pride ourselves on being a member of the InfoSec community with the goal of making this world a better, more secure place. As the CEO, I personally wish to apologize and take full responsibility. We need to do better. We can do better. We will do better."

Heather ([15:16](#)):

And I'm not going to like, kind of, I mean, I don't mean to dump on his approach. He should have apologized. He apologized properly, I think, but that also smacks of the, you know, being, I think Aysha, Aysha, I think you were the one that caused it on buzzwords, you know in that's that phrase. I mean, I feel like basically every company now has that initial part of his apology somewhere in their company manifesto that we are a diverse company, blah, blah, blah. And it doesn't really mean anything if the company's actions aren't following through. Sorry, go ahead. Meredith. You were saying.

Meredith ([15:51](#)):

As I say, very true. And one of the things that stuck out to me about that statement was they stress the importance of being multi-racial being equal opportunity, but not specifying, you know, a specific there, which frankly is great. You know, I would love for there to be equal opportunity across every diversity identifier, but they specified the fact that they are global, they speak dozens of languages, but they never stressed the point about being gender diverse, which was what caused this lack of communication and this core survey to go out in the first place. And to me, it just congratulations. You wrote an apology, and as you said, there were many buzzwords in there, but it missed the mark. For those of us who identify as female who were looking to see, you know, yes, we do in fact care about you as well.

Heather ([16:43](#)):

What about, I'm going to kind of throw this to the group, anyone can jump in. What about the defense that, because the team that created the survey was comprised entirely of women, the survey can not

then language cannot then be sexist. What do you guys think about that defense? Can, I guess, let me rephrase the question, can phrasing be sexist against women, if it is women saying the phrasing.

Meredith ([17:12](#)):

Absolutely.

Roxy ([17:12](#)):

Totally. I admit, I said some sexist stuff when I, when I when I first got into cybersecurity, I admit it. Because I was uninformed at the time, I guess. And I was one of the cool girls who hung out with the dudes. So yeah, it's totally possible.

Heather ([17:35](#)):

I think it, I think it comes back to like, you know, what, we were sort of hitting on it a little bit, a few minutes ago is just about evaluating the language choices, you know, and, you know, having that persona is part of it, but we also need to sort of like reevaluate, what sort of assumptions reside within the language choices, the connotation and the language choices that we're making. You know, again, I certainly hope, you know, this, you know, whether it's a team full of women or not that they are not overtly sexist. I don't think that they intended the survey to be sexist. I almost wonder if looking at the phrasing of the survey, if they meant, if they were, I guess trying to say, like people say it's a man's job. People say women can't do this job. If they were just sort of speaking like in that way, but they miss out on the portion that it, you know, if it was just a simple editing issue, I, I guess as a little bit more optimistic side again. But, you know, so we really have to sort of reevaluate what sort of terms we use, even if we're talking about a group to which, you know, that we identify with, because that whole like subconscious part of racism, sexism, homophobia, et cetera, you know, we have to really be mindful of what sort of, I guess, subliminal messaging we're putting out there just by not being cautious with our word choice.

Ryan ([19:06](#)):

Yeah. The hard part about language and communication is how much of the meaning gets lost. And like what, what, like when I heard those questions for, when I heard those prompts from that group, it just made me think, you know, I think I know what they're trying to say, but I think that the meaning is saying something completely different. And that's probably what a lot of people were upset. I know when I heard that, I was like, wow. And then when you said that they were blocking people from that, I was just like, okay. And now we have actions along with words. So.

Heather ([19:44](#)):

Yeah, that wasn't the best choice.

Aysha ([19:46](#)):

This was an issue because inclusion is about ensuring that, you know, the company, our organization has that like culture, you know, making everybody feel welcomed, but then also, I just pulled up the survey and it's almost like, and I know we just said this, but it's almost like one, they didn't have anybody on staff who was like the DEI or like person or anybody on staff to be a second set of eyes. Because even in just reading this, like had they replaced, it says what, according to you, are the most common challenges faced by women and the cybersecurity domain. And then only men can do this job, women can't handle

this job, and women aren't encouraged enough, had they changed challenges to fallacies. This wouldn't have been an, a thing, like a topic of discussion at all. Do you see what I'm saying? Had they had just had another set of eyes on that to say, "Hey, this is going to strike a cord. This is not inclusive. How about of challenges we put fallacies in there and what are the most common fallacies faced by women and the cyber security domain, or what are the most common fallacies or most harmful fallacies in the cyber security domain?" And then had those questions. This would have taken a whole nother direction and probably their incentive direction, but because the people or whoever put the survey together, they either were just not well-educated in this, or, you know, they just didn't care enough to actually take the time to run it through some checks and balances that it became this, this big thing.

Heather ([21:25](#)):

Yeah, for sure. So we're going to go ahead and wrap this up and our next session, we'll be tackling the rest of our chat, where we focus a little bit more on what companies specifically can do to more effectively address roadblocks to improve diversity and inclusion. So make sure that you keep an eye out. And, until next, time stay safe.