

Interview



John Colley



You'd be hard pressed to find anyone in the UK infosec industry who doesn't know of John Colley. He is to infosec what Simon Cowell is to the music industry – a true figurehead (albeit, less scary). He doesn't attribute his high profile to his impressive CV though – instead, as [Eleanor Dallaway](#) finds out, he believes it to be the result of his networking with helpful peers over the years

Within only months of Colley's (almost accidental) entrance into information security, he joined I-4 (The International Information Integrity Institute, now run by KPMG group, but at that time, owned by SRI International), a forum for information security professionals. Interestingly, his career has now come full circle, as he enters his fifth year as managing director EMEA, for (ISC)², the not-for-profit leader in educating and certifying information security professionals throughout their career.

The relevance of industry forums and networking consortiums at both the beginning of Colley's career, and now in his full-time role at (ISC)² is no coincidence. Indeed, he can't emphasize enough how much peer-to-peer interaction can make or break a career.

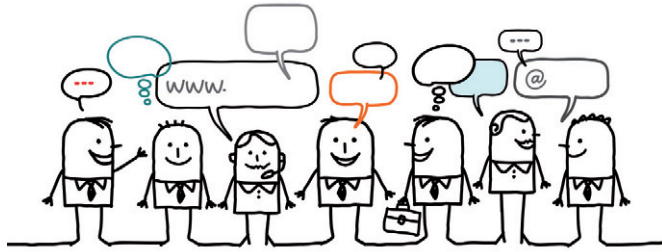
Donn Parker, who Colley fondly describes as "literally one of the founders of information security", set up I-4. ICL (International Computers Limited) – who Colley worked for at the time – was a member. "[Parker's] idea was to get a whole group of blue chip companies together, and form a little club – keep it exclusive (limit it to about 60 companies), meet two or three times a year, and share information about what your problems were". The objective, explains Colley, was learning from one another; an intention that was certainly met.

The first I-4 meeting that Colley went to was in 1991. "I met Paul Dorey, David Lacey, and Bob Fletcher", remembers Colley. "All these people were incredibly friendly and happy to share information."



My generation all sort of parachuted into the [information security] role

Colley was, in his own words, "parachuted into" the role of information security and data protection advisor at ICL in April 1991. "In June, I was at the forum and still didn't know much about information security. I



The infosec industry is set apart by its incredible willingness to share information

guess I learnt everything I needed to from these people, and over the years at the forums, I learnt some incredible stuff."

The willingness to network and share information is something that Colley believes sets the information security industry apart. "Competitors in the computer market would share information about their security problems, under a confidentiality agreement, obviously. It is really quite amazing", says Colley, who is proud to still be in contact with most of the people he met 20 years ago.

From Day One

Having studied for a degree in mathematics and physics at Westfield College, University of London, Colley realized that he "better get into IT" not long after graduating.

Colley joined ICL as a trainee programmer – "very much a 'techie'" – which he describes in hindsight as an "interesting experience and steep learning curve". He spent time "in systems doing programming and stuff like that", but eventually moved into management, completing ICL's core management courses, the final core which he describes as "top-level strategy, rather like at the MBA level.

"That was quite useful later on in life. I'm not sure if [technical disciplines] these days invest in giving employees the management training that they need in terms of business development", he says with doubt. "This is a real shame."

Over the years, Colley did "just about every single job there was to do in IT", including tenures at Eastern Gas, the Nigerian Ports Authority and, of course, ICL, which he "kept going back to".

Colley describes his time at Eastern Gas as "privileged – because IT people were paid more than just about everybody else, we always had our lunch in the senior

management canteen, with silver service and waitresses", his time in Nigeria as "an interesting experience", where he "learnt how to survive in a hostile environment", and his constant returning to ICL as "a reputation and integrity thing".

His various roles at ICL included contract work implementing software systems around Europe, but mainly consisted of IT management roles, being responsible for teams of 20 or 30 people at a time.

In 1991, ICL made their information security and data protection advisor redundant. "He had no real responsibility and it showed that they didn't take him seriously when they made him redundant". Shortly after, ICL got a bad audit report – "a couple of items concerned information security. They then looked for someone who would take it over, and asked me to do it".

Colley, like many of his contemporaries, "didn't even know how to spell security, let alone what it was about" at this point. Others in the industry tell a very similar story, says Colley. "My generation all sort of parachuted into the [information security] role."

First Things First

"The first thing I did [in my new role] was write some objectives – why did we have a security function, and what was it meant to be doing? I then produced a plan, a strategy, with steps on how we were going to achieve that."

Twenty years ago, the role of the information security professional was understandably different. "Companies ran their own networks. In the early nineties, most weren't connected to the internet. We're talking about lots of personal computers, internal email systems, protocols. So security was getting more and more on the agenda – particularly the worry about computer viruses.

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