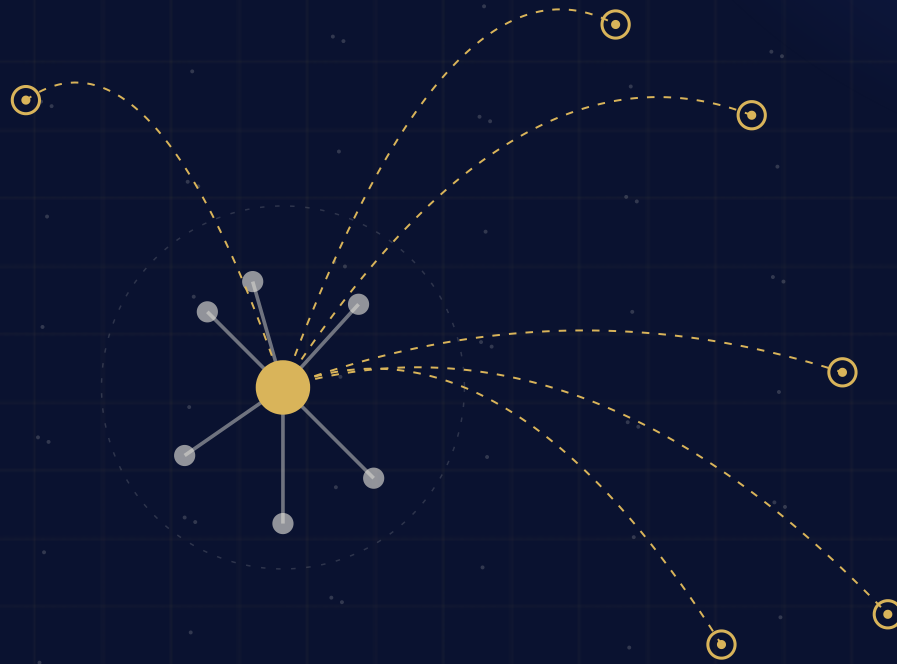




CAREER STRATEGY

The Certificate Is Not the Strategy

When every applicant carries the same signal, the career goes to whoever builds a rarer one.

A certificate answers the question "can this person pass?" The employer is asking a different one: "can this person be trusted with us?"

KEY FINDINGS

- A certificate tells an employer what a candidate recalled, not whether they can be trusted with the business.
- Career capital comes from a rare combination: a track, a kind of business, and one supporting skill.
- Opportunities travel mostly through moderately weak ties, so verified work needs to be seen beyond your own circle.

Most early-career advice in cybersecurity is a list: pass this certificate, then that one, then apply. The list is not wrong. It is incomplete in a way that matters, because a certificate is a signal every other applicant can also acquire. This essay argues that a career strategy begins where the list ends, with a deliberate choice about which combination of evidence will make one candidate hard to substitute, and who will see it.

01 What a certificate tells an employer

Michael Spence's account of job-market signalling explains why some credentials carry weight and others do not. A signal is useful to an employer only when it costs a weaker candidate more to acquire than a stronger one; if everyone can obtain it at roughly the same cost, it stops separating anyone [1]. Entry-level certificates were valuable for exactly this reason when preparation was scarce. As courses, practice exams and question banks have spread, the cost of passing has fallen for everyone, and a hiring manager reading two hundred applications for a junior role increasingly finds the same line on most of them.

The certificate still does a job. It tells an employer that a candidate covered a syllabus and passed an examination. What it cannot tell them is the thing the employer is actually buying: whether this person can be trusted with their systems, their customers and their money when the answer is not in the syllabus. That gap is the space a strategy has to fill.

02 Rarity comes from combination

Cal Newport argues that work people come to love usually follows the accumulation of what he calls career capital: skills that are rare and valuable, which can then be traded for autonomy, mission and pay [2]. The useful refinement for an early-career learner is that rare does not mean world-class at one thing. Becoming the best defender in a country takes years. Becoming one of very few people who combine a defensive skill set, real understanding of how a savings and credit co-operative makes its money, and the ability to write an incident report a manager will act on, takes months of deliberate choice.

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That kind of combination is rare in the Kenyan market not because it is difficult, but because almost nobody sets out to build it. Courses are organised by tool and by exam. Businesses are organised by money, customers and risk. The learner who deliberately joins the two is building a position few competitors will think to occupy.

03 Evidence an employer can check

A combination only becomes career capital when somebody else can verify it. There is a rough ladder here. A claim on a CV is cheap to make and cheap to fake. A certificate is harder. Work that another practitioner has reviewed and signed is harder still, because it records how a person reasoned, not only what they recalled. In OCH, missions are reviewed by a mentor before they count, and the credentials that result can be checked by an employer. The design choice is deliberate: it moves a learner's evidence up the ladder.

FIGURE 1 How hard each signal is to fake

A claim on a CV

An entry-level certificate

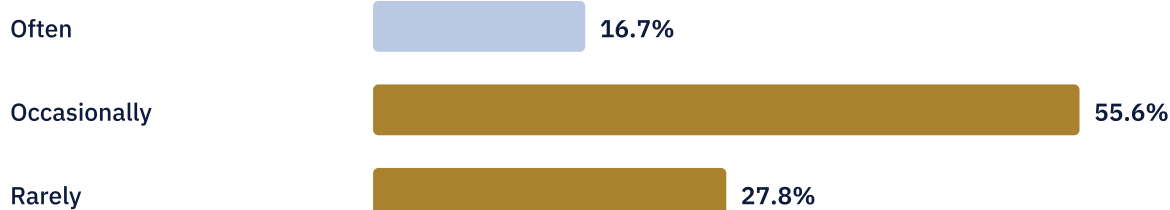
Work another practitioner reviewed

Conceptual. The harder a signal is to fake, the more an employer can rely on it [1].

04 Who sees it

Evidence that nobody sees does little. Mark Granovetter's study of how people in a Boston suburb found their jobs is still the clearest picture of where opportunities travel. Among those who found work through a personal contact, 16.7 per cent saw that contact often, 55.6 per cent occasionally and 27.8 per cent rarely [3]. The useful leads came mostly from acquaintances, people who move in circles the job-seeker does not.

FIGURE 2 How often job-finders saw the contact who led to their job



Among people who found work through a personal contact. Source: Granovetter, *Getting a Job* [3].

Granovetter's sample was small and American, and for decades the finding rested on correlation. In 2022 a team working with LinkedIn tested it directly, randomly varying the mix of weak and strong ties suggested to more than twenty million people over five years. Moderately weak ties produced the most job mobility, with diminishing returns as ties became very weak, and the effect was strongest in more digital industries [4]. Cybersecurity is about as digital as industries get.

For a learner, the practical meaning is that the peers in another university's chapter, the mentor who reviewed one mission, and the analyst met once at a session are not a distraction from the work. They are how the work gets seen.

05 Two applicants, one role

ILLUSTRATIVE SCENE

A savings co-operative in Nakuru advertises for an IT security officer. Two applicants hold the same entry-level certificate. The first lists it with a short summary of coursework. The second lists the same certificate, two mentor-reviewed missions on access control for a member-facing system, and a one-page note estimating what a day of M-Pesa paybill downtime would cost a co-operative of that size. The hiring manager has also heard the second applicant's name before, from a mentor who once reviewed their work.

Neither applicant is more intelligent. The second one made three choices the first did not: to build a combination, to collect evidence another person could check, and to let a few people outside their own circle see it.

06 What would change our mind

If entry-level security hiring in Kenya turns out to be decided overwhelmingly by certificates, regardless of verified work, this argument weakens considerably. OCH has not yet tracked enough placements to show otherwise, and the outcomes for Cohort Two will be published whichever way they fall. The weak-tie evidence also comes largely from the United States and from one professional network; whether moderately weak ties play the same role in a market where much hiring still runs through family and church networks is an open question, not a settled one.

07 What to do on Monday

For learners. Write your intended combination in one sentence: a track, a kind of business, and one supporting skill. Produce one piece of work this month that another person can review. Have one conversation with someone outside your usual circle, and tell them what you are building.

For mentors. Review work in a form the learner can show to someone else: a short written note on what they did well and what they would do next is worth more than a score.

For employers. Ask for one piece of reviewed work alongside the certificate. It costs a candidate an email and tells you more than the certificate line can.

REFERENCES

- [1] Spence, M. "Job Market Signaling." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 87(3), 1973.
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- [4] Rajkumar, K., Saint-Jacques, G., Bojinov, I., Brynjolfsson, E. and Aral, S. "A causal test of the strength of weak ties." *Science* 377, 2022.

Drafted with AI assistance and reviewed before publication. External figures were checked against the sources cited; scenes marked illustrative are composites, not reports of real events; OCH figures are dated.