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Cybersecurity is a new field, meaning there is not a deep reserve of elite individuals looking to make the jump into government. | AP Photo

Recruits eye empty cyber jobs skeptically

By **ERIC GELLER** and **TIM STARKS** | 03/01/17 05:00 AM EST

A month into the Trump administration, numerous key cybersecurity positions remain unfilled and some outside specialists seem wary of taking the posts.

While the Trump White House isn't moving more slowly to staff the roles than the Obama administration did in 2009, the vacancies are decelerating key efforts to protect federal networks and will make it difficult for the Trump team to implement its long-awaited cybersecurity executive order, say experts and recently-departed government cyber officials.

And any prospect of long-term vacancies is even more dangerous, they added, given the rise of digital spies and nefarious hackers.

“It’s just a matter of time before they have a breach,” said retired Brig. Gen. Gregory Touhill, the government’s chief information security officer until January. “The adversary picks when they attack. We need to be ready now.”

But at a recent major cybersecurity conference, cyber professionals openly debated whether they wanted to work in the administration, according to attendees. Potential recruits are being put off by stories that top cyber officials at various agencies are being ignored and worry that serving in the Trump administration is a career-killer.

“The tenor of conversation in Washington right now is causing a lot of folks to contemplate early retirement and moving out of Washington and going to the private sector,” said a former senior White House cybersecurity official.

“We keep on hearing about bringing in the top talent,” added the former official. “‘Trust me, we’re bringing in the top talent.’ Where are they? Where are they?”

Meanwhile, the ongoing imbroglio over the White House’s immigration policy has hijacked the White House’s agenda, pulling attention away from cybersecurity, according to multiple people with knowledge of White House discussions on the issue.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment, but in a “Fox and Friends” interview on Tuesday, Trump said he didn’t want to fill many of his administration’s 500-plus vacant appointments because “they’re unnecessary to have.”

In his first month, Trump has yet to fill six critical cybersecurity roles across the government that also existed when former President Barack Obama took office in 2009.

Within the White House, the president has not appointed a top federal IT official or a chief technology officer for the government. At the Department of Homeland Security, Obama-era career officials are also temporarily holding down the top-two jobs within the agency’s cyber wing, known as the National Protection and Programs Directorate, or NPPD.

DHS head John Kelly also lacks a deputy — although Trump nominated a candidate on Jan. 30 — and the agency’s Office of Cybersecurity and Communications, or OC&C, does not have a new head.

But at this same point in 2009, Obama had only filled one of these six positions. In fact, the former president didn’t name someone to lead OC&C until June 1.

Still, cyber specialists expressed concerns about the Trump administration's ability to staff these positions with effective, talented professionals.

For starters, cybersecurity is a new field, meaning there is not a deep reserve of elite individuals looking to make the jump into government.

“There just aren’t that many seasoned policymakers relative to the level of attention and interest,” said R. David Edelman, the director for international cyber policy at the National Security Council from 2010 to 2012. “There has not been two decades’ worth of time to build the bench of experts from junior to senior.”

Trump compounded this problem, former officials say, with several actions that have irked the tech community. For instance, his push to suspend immigration from certain countries has sparked an outcry of protest in Silicon Valley.

Experts have also seen troubling examples of the Trump White House not properly consulting with the appropriate people on digital security issues, including the senior cyber officials at various agencies.

Touhill said that during the transition he offered to brief incoming Trump administration officials on cyber threats but never heard back.

Then during the administration’s first week’s, a draft of a cybersecurity executive order leaked, revealing text that had seemingly been developed without input from the regular stakeholders at DHS, on Capitol Hill and in the private sector. Subsequent drafts have taken a more conventional approach, incorporating advice from these channels.

Potential job applicants are looking to the final executive order to see how the White House will approach the topic, experts said.

But if the government can’t get these recruits, former officials believe the White House will struggle to carry out the executive order, which is expected to kick off a wide-ranging review of the country’s hacking defenses and to hold agency heads more accountable for their own cybersecurity.

“I don’t think it’ll derail the efforts but it’ll certainly slow the process,” said Chris Cummiskey, a former acting DHS undersecretary for management who oversaw a number of the department’s cyber efforts. “It makes it harder on implementation and getting [the executive order] operationalized. His folks aren’t in place to drive the day-to-day tempo.”

The holes are also harming long-term cyber projects at DHS, said several former officials.

DHS has been working for years to roll out a protective cyber shield — known as “Einstein” — across the government, and to establish relationships with the private sector on fighting hackers.

Currently, career DHS officials are filling the roles necessary to keep these projects in motion. But those staffers can only tread water, according to a former senior White House national security official.

“What they can’t do is say, ‘This is going to be a priority and I’m going to go fight for resources for it and I’m going to really drive the policy goals,’” said the former official. “It’s going to be critical that they eventually get people in those positions.”

The lack of top officials makes it harder for DHS to maintain its tenuous bonds with the private sector and other civilian agencies, where trust is a delicate thing, said Gregory Michaelidis, who served as senior adviser to the NPPD undersecretary until last month. In recent years, legislation has passed giving DHS greater power to swap hacking threats with the private sector and work with other government agencies to bolster their network protections.

“If you take a look at the cyber and IT teams, there’s way too many vacancies,” said the former top White House cyber official. “The senior leadership is going to take some time to spin up. And if you don’t have those incident responders — if you don’t have a [chief information officer] and a [chief information security officer] in place — you’re behind the eight ball if you have a hack on Day One.”

Cummiskey specifically cited the open deputy undersecretary position at NPPD as “vitaly important” since it plays a key role in implementing Einstein, as well as the Continuous Diagnostics and Mitigation program, which regularly scans for flaws at government agencies.

Trump has won praise from the cyber community for picking Tom Bossert, who helped draft President George W. Bush’s cyber strategy, as his homeland security adviser. But with all the other topics on his plate — notably including terrorism — observers say Bossert won’t be able to focus solely on cybersecurity.

During the Obama years, a White House cybersecurity coordinator, Michael Daniel, reported directly to the president’s homeland security adviser. Daniel quickly became the public face of many of the administration’s cyber efforts. It’s unclear whether that role will continue to exist in the Trump administration.

Obama also created Touhill's CISO position in 2016 to help better coordinate cybersecurity policy across the government. It's unknown whether the White House plans to replace him.

Still, former officials, lawmakers and cyber policy experts on both sides of the political spectrum cautioned that it's much too early to panic.

"I'm not alarmed by where we are, but I hope it's getting the urgency it needs," said Rep. John Ratcliffe (R-Texas), who chairs the House Homeland Security panel's cybersecurity subcommittee. "Obviously I'd like them to peddle as fast as they can, but I would rather have them proceed a little more cautiously to make sure they get the right people in these positions because they are so vitally important."

If the jobs still aren't filled in five or six months, though, the situation could be more dire.

At that point, "you're really starting to talk about eating into policy time in a way that is really cutting down on their ability to do things," said the former senior national security official. "Actions will start to lose momentum. That could be a real problem."