

## Interview with Dr. Dan Geer

RICHARD THIEME



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**D**r. Dan Geer was at the time of this interview [Fall 2000] the Chief Technical Officer of @stake, a digital security consulting firm, and had recently been elected President of the USENIX Association. USENIX is a 10,000-member organization comprising engineers, system administrators, scientists, and technicians working on the cutting edge of the computing world. Geer, who holds a ScD from Harvard University, was a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health and participated in MIT’s Project Athena and the development of the X Window System and Kerberos. He held executive positions at Open Market, Inc., OpenVision Technologies (now Veritas), and CertCo, the leading online risk assurance authority. Geer has testified before the House Science Committee and Subcommittee on Technology regarding public policy in the age of electronic commerce. He is currently (2015) the CISO of In-Q-Tel, a research and development arm of the CIA.

*RT:* Dan, you were just chosen President of USENIX. What’s the significance of that for you? What’s your vision for USENIX?

*DG:* I think the best way to thank somebody is to help them out. I got a lot out of that place, and I am trying to put something back. That may sound corny, but it’s a fact. I guess my momma raised me right.

In lots of ways, USENIX made me what I am. USENIX has kept me from getting too satisfied. People who get satisfied stop growing. People who are never satisfied are always curious. They keep growing.

When I try to hire new people, I put a checkmark on the page when I realize that the person I’m interviewing is never satisfied with what they know or can do. The smartest people feel as if they know the least. Over and over again, USENIX told me things I didn’t know I didn’t know.

I highly recommend that any young person starting out, or even someone not so young, should work with program committees for conferences, editorial boards for journals, anything where the interesting traffic is concentrated in your direction. It’s almost impossible to lose if you’re serious about putting in the effort. Otherwise you have to search for the best work and it’s rarely in one place or conveniently indexed. It’s much more difficult to learn to swim if you’re not in the water.

That’s what I’ve gotten out of it. What I am trying to put back in—maybe it’s my heritage, that I’m a security guy—but I’m a professional paranoid. If you think that good times are permanent, you guarantee that they won’t be. USENIX, like everyone else, must be aware of what’s changing, what old opportunities are being eclipsed and what new ones are showing up. As President I intend to push us pretty hard to obsolete our products before someone else does, just as Andy Grove and Jack Welch try to do.



Even for a nonprofit in very good shape like USENIX, it's essential to obsolete our product or someone else will. We need to bring on new conferences. The established conferences in our game more than pay for themselves, while the brand new ones don't even come close. So there is a cross-subsidy: what you already do well allows you to take risks in things you don't do so well. I am pushing pretty hard in that direction.

In the venture capital arena, investors want to invest in companies that go straight down or straight up. They don't want a 2% grower that makes it impossible to get your money out yet you can't write it off. In some sense, intellectual capital has the same characteristics—I want prompt failure or prompt success. I don't want to spend ten years on something that finally struggles to its feet. As a wise person said, the cost of anything is a foregone alternative. That's the kind of paranoia I am trying to bring to the job.

I have always tried to pick jobs where my colleagues would challenge me. The best jobs I have had, I knew I would be embarrassed from day one.

*RT:* It's critical to keep moving out of your comfort zone, to keep yourself on the edge.

*DG:* Yes. I am not an adrenaline sports guy, but maybe it's the same urge applied in a way that has greater long-term value.

*[Editor's note: There was a lot more in this interview, which will someday appear in a collection of Richard Thieme's interviews. We include an exchange near the end of the interview, as we found it quite prescient.]*

*RT:*... and anomaly detection and misuse detection. So maybe in some gray area we must compromise, and that's where risk management comes in. We may never achieve a stasis at the level of totalitarian control, but we are moving in that direction.

*DG:* Yes. It is unlikely that someone will come to you personally and take your privacy away, but children do not have an expectation of privacy. They only develop it later. So if you don't know that you never had it, how much of a fight will you put up when you don't get it?

I don't think it's possible to go much further in our technological world on a "small is beautiful"/egalitarian basis. To continue to rail that way is to give away the lead time we have to modify the coming culture rather than allow it to wash over us like a wave.

Source: Richard Thieme, "All Geered Up," *Information Security*, October 2000, vol. 3, no. 10, pp. 86–92.



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