



# Greg van der Gaast

for The SCTE

Exclusive interview conducted by Mark Matthews

**Greg van der Gaast's meteoric rise is far from typical. From an early career as one of the most notorious hackers in the world, he later found himself working for the FBI as an undercover operative. He is an expert in cyber security.**



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Greg's expertise in this area now finds him speaking at events worldwide on how organisations can protect themselves from cyberattacks, looking more broadly at strategy, leadership and commerce as tools in a company's armour. Courtesy of the Cyber Security Speakers Agency, we learn more about

Greg's incredible career as well as his unique, holistic approach to cyber security.

### **Reflecting on your early experience as a hacker, how did it lead to your career in cyber security?**

It's interesting because in one way it gave me an attention to detail in terms of what to look for, what causes breaches. But somewhat weirdly, what it influenced the most is my defensive mindset.

### **In what respect?**

Back then, you built a computer, you loaded your operating system and then you joined a chat room full of hackers. We didn't have broadband; we didn't have home routers. Your computer was directly connected to the Internet; there were no firewalls at that point.

If you hadn't secured it, locked it down, tightened it, patched everything, updated everything - bear in mind hard drives still made a lot of noise back then - if you hadn't done that, about 30 seconds after joining that chat room, your computer started making a lot of noise and everything just started shutting down. You would have to reinstall Windows.

### **You were being hacked upon entry to a chatroom populated by hackers?**

Exactly. That's probably what has stayed with me the most, just making absolutely sure that things are locked down properly.

**What is the most pressing cyber threat to UK businesses?**

Everyone will say ransomware, but ransomware is basically a payload... it's a way of monetising a breach. I think the shocking thing is the way companies get breached. The way that people get in the door hasn't fundamentally changed in the 25 years I've been doing this.

**That doesn't surprise me.**

People are still not building systems properly, they're still not maintaining them properly, they're still not doing asset inventory. They're not patching properly, they have poor processes, they have a lack of consistency in processes. You're basically living in a house with a thousand doors and windows, and some are constantly being left open.

**In a large organisation it isn't hard to see how that can happen.**

That's how people get in. For large businesses and organisations, you need a holistic and business-aligned security approach that's truly proactive and in line with the business, in line with how things work, so that you come up with effective, sustainable ways of doing things rather than the security status quo, which is just 'buy another tool'.

**Could you tell us more about your holistic approach to cyber security?**

A lot of people are very focused on GRC, regulatory compliance, ISO, NIST, whatever. I always build a bespoke framework for every single business. I ask, what does the business do? Who are the people? What is the culture like? Then I try to protect it.

**So you are looking at the company as a whole?**

I think of security as a quality function, if we improve the quality of things, you will have fewer defects. Most security vulnerabilities are defects. So, if I really focus on quality, I have fewer defects that will lead to breaches that I have to detect and respond to, and I will also have higher overall quality.

**This sounds like a top-down way of assessing the issue.**

It is. If I improve the quality of a product, it will have fewer security vulnerabilities, but it also has fewer bugs and features that don't work, that customers will complain about. It will have less rework, there's cost savings. I approach everything from a quality, tailor-made framework kind of approach.



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