

Olivia Rose, CISO, Mailchimp

Collaboration, Culture and Confidence

Olivia talks Mailchimp corporate culture, the need for collaboration in cybersecurity, and how women must shed their doubt and insecurity.

- 06:55 We need to stop viewing security as a competitive landscape and start collaborating.
- 10:11 Mailchimp's absolute customer focus.
- 13:25 Security is a male-dominated field but has so much to offer women.
- 15:14 Women must get over the insecurity they impose on themselves. You will be successful if you work hard.
- 18:30 Mailchimp's unusual but wonderful corporate culture.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:00:31] So I have the pleasure of having Olivia Rose today as our guest on the Cyber360+ UberKnowledge podcast. So first of all, I know you and I were supposed to connect last month, and I had my notes all written up to congratulate you on your new role as the CISO at Mailchimp. So, now it's a little bit late, but I'm still going to congratulate you on your not-so-new role as CISO at Mailchimp.

[00:00:28] I was looking through your background. It's a very interesting journey that you've undertaken. Definitely, I'm interested in what being a CISO at Mailchimp looks like, but from your past history of going from networking to voice to security, pre-sales, post-sales, consultancy to CISO, walk us through what sorts of realizations and life events caused you to get to where you are right now?

Olivia Rose: [00:01:32] That's a good question. And thank you for the congratulations. It has been a wild, exciting, fun ride these last ten minutes. Ten minutes [laughs], it's felt like ten minutes. I meant ten years at Mailchimp, so I'm excited to be there. Yes, you're absolutely right, my background is quite varied, and one would say it's not the typical way you rise up into the CISO role. And I think that actually leads me to have many advantages over someone who may have taken the more direct route, but it also leaves me with more disadvantages as well. So, I think it's critical to know what those advantages and disadvantages are, so you know how to close the gaps if you need to and how to leverage what's positive.

[00:02:29] In a nutshell, my background is that I started in security back in 2002 when I was with IBM. Well, then it was Internet Security Systems, ISS. It was bought out by IBM. Then I got into consulting there and decided I really liked it. And I stayed in consulting through Solutionary, which was bought out by NTT. Then after that I went into ControlScan because I was offered the opportunity to build out a new security consulting practice, which I thought was super exciting. And so I stayed in consulting there. I went from there to deciding it's now or never to build out my own company. It started off as a cloud security consulting company focusing on AWS, but it became more than that as well offering the general spectrum of security and consulting services from assessments to pentesting and all that good stuff. And now it's doing fairly well, but due to personal reasons, healthcare insurance costs, I unfortunately, well fortunately and unfortunately, had to go back and work for a company again, which looking back, it was good timing for me to go ahead and do that anyway.

[00:03:51] So I went to work for Kudelski Security, back on the consulting side. Throughout this whole process, all these years, I've always focused on helping C-levels and executives define their security programs, build out their security strategies, looking at what they need from a staffing management perspective, how to report into the board, how to translate security from a technical viewpoint into the business terms and strategic drivers that executives would understand. And as we all know,

“My background is quite varied, and one would say it’s not the typical way you rise up into the CISO role.”

that's critical in order to get support from executives. So after a couple of years there, I thought, you know, I'm interested in leading this myself and going to work for a company and doing all this myself instead of consulting and advising. And that is what led me to Mailchimp.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:04:46] Wow. That's quite a journey.

Olivia Rose: [00:04:49] Yeah, I know it's a lot.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:04:51] One of the other things I saw, as I was researching you, was you had written something on LinkedIn earlier this year about you joining Mailchimp. There were two things that were remarkable about that post itself: it was a short post, but the amount of outpouring of love and support that you got from the community and your response in terms of how grateful you are for that support. For our listeners who are both in the security industry and ones that are not, what is so unique about this industry that causes people to essentially be like a community? Is it because you guys have a common cause, which is protecting your organization and your extended community? I mean, yes, there are other industries as well, where there's networking, cloud infrastructure, so on and so forth, but there's something about the security industry that causes this feeling of bonding. Where does it come from?

Olivia Rose: [00:06:01] Yes. That was actually a fascinating post because I just posted that I was joining a new company, Mailchimp, I'm super excited, CISO, it's my dream job at a dream company. To me, it was just a simple notification to my network and I literally got thousands of views and hundreds of comments. And people were just so supportive that I actually responded to that with the post that you just mentioned just saying, wow, I just cannot believe the outpouring of support and love felt by this community and connection. It really surprised me and kind of blew me away.

[00:06:55] So on that note, I think we have to look at security, and there are several others who feel the way I do, we have to stop looking at it as a competitive landscape. We've got to stop competing against each other so much. We have to truly look at ways we can bond together because we obviously have not, and we're not achieving a head start above our attackers, especially the ones coming from overseas. Obviously, we need to find a solution here and we haven't found it so far. We have to bond together, super smart people across the industry, and learn to work together. What I've noticed in the past five to seven years of being in this field is that competitive spirit really has shot up. We've got a lot more players in the industry trying to sell their services. That's all and good, but with that increased competition, there's been decreased partnerships and support and working together.

[00:08:10] And it's interesting, once I became a CISO, I've had people reach out to me to ask me to join their Slack channels where they exchange information and support

“With that increased competition, there’s been decreased partnerships and support and working together.”

each other and participate in events to try to build that information sharing. So while we obviously need to maintain that competitive spirit, because we're all in this business to make money, right, we also need to keep in mind that we have a higher purpose and that is to protect our country, our families, ourselves, our companies, our employees, stakeholders, and so on from these nefarious individuals.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:08:51] It's a great perspective, and again, for somebody who's not in the security industry, I think this demonstrates amazing perspective, and for those who are and don't feel that sense of bonding, you're doing something wrong.

[00:09:04] Switching gears a little bit, I spent a little bit of time looking at the legal page at Mailchimp and it was positively uplifting. And the thing that that got to me was really the terms of use: the standard terms of use, the additional terms of use, acceptable use, privacy policy, API use, processing addendum; but it was not just the fact that was laid out under each section, it was easy to understand language, calling out the rights and responsibilities of each party. This is a rarity, especially in a B2C company but also in a B2B company. Tell me a little bit about the ethos behind doing this? With Facebook Cambridge Analytica — you can pick your favorite snafu — the topic of ethics in tech is becoming much more mainstream, but still, very few companies are going beyond the letter of the law to do what is right by the consumer. So, what has driven Mailchimp through what is happening right now, and how do you expect to take that forward?

“Mailchimp’s
premise is to do
right by the user;
that is our North
Star, our steering
compass.”

Olivia Rose: [00:10:11] Well, that's exactly it. Mailchimp's premise is to do right by the user; that is our North Star, our steering compass. Everything we do is about our customers because most of our customers are small businesses, small-medium businesses, and we have a requirement and a duty to protect and safeguard them and do what's right.

[00:10:37] And that temperament and feeling is throughout Mailchimp and everything we do. It's a very ethically driven, culture-focused kind of company. I can't speak too much to the legal page, but I can speak to the security page on there — that clarity, it's done on purpose. We're not trying to hide anything from our customers and our future customers. We put it out there in clear and defined terms. And that is under the umbrella of, "we do what's right for our customers."

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:11:20] And it sounds so simple but still so hard for companies to follow especially in bad times, right? I mean, you can do all the chest thumping when things are going well, but it's when the shit has hit the fan — you've got a breach or you have a CVE that needs to be reported — the should we, shouldn't we, all those challenges. So, I applaud you for that forward-looking stance.

[00:11:39] Switching gears a little bit to diversity in tech or diversity in security. Again, I go back to a post that you had written, "Women need to change their perception of the cybersecurity industry." The argument that you made was, just for the purpose of listeners who haven't read the article, what is holding women back is primarily

themselves. And again, I was looking for resonance and it came through in the comments that people had made. And I'd say, pretty much every comment was highly supportive of the attitude that you're your own worst enemy, so get rid of your biggest impostor inside of you and break up. Two questions. One, what was the motivating factor for you to write that article? Number two, after seeing the outpouring of support, has that changed your perspective or reinforced certain beliefs and what are you going to do about it?

Olivia Rose: [00:12:37] Both interesting questions. I stand firm that we don't have an issue anymore because everybody talks about how hard it is to get women into cybersecurity. I don't think we really have an issue with that anymore. I've spoken at local colleges to their computer science classes and they are half women. So there is an interest out there. What we do have a problem with is retaining the women. And you can get into conversations here about unconscious and conscious bias, but from my perspective, what I was seeing a lot just throughout my career and just being a female in general was that there is a high level of doubt.

[00:13:25] The listeners have likely all heard the story that when job postings are listed, the research shows men tend to just look at the first few bullets and they go ahead and apply anyway. Women, though, feel they need to meet every single item listed on there, which is crazy because we all know companies put their dream person and her responsibilities in these job postings and it's impossible for anybody to have all that experience. So they cut themselves out of the running, and it is truly key for women to stop being our own worst enemies. We do it to ourselves in every way in our lives. And, you know, there's many causes for that, that I'm not going to go into. But the thing is in security, it's a male-dominated field. And you've got to get over this insecurity that you feel of being in that field, this impostor syndrome, this fear of not having anything to contribute, this insecurity about am I smart enough or they seem to know more than I do.

“Women have
got to get over
the insecurity that
they impose on
themselves.”

[00:14:41] My point in that article was security is an incredible field for women to be in. It's not all technical knowledge. A lot of it is governance, risk, and compliance, which is GRC, which substantially relies on some personality traits that women tend to have: analysis and listening and being able to multitask, of course I'm generalizing here, but women tend to be strong in those areas.

[00:15:14] Women shouldn't demean themselves just because they're not technical or think they're not technical enough. There's so much opportunity in security. We obviously need as many people from as many diverse backgrounds as we can get because we're losing this fight against the attackers and the bad folks out there. Women have got to get over the insecurity that they impose on themselves. And just my whole point there was, go for it, just go for it. Do it. You will be successful if you work hard and dedicate yourself to it. So that was the point of the whole article.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:15:51] No, it's brilliant. It seems, again, so simple and yet, people

second guess themselves — should I, shouldn't I, and just trying it out and seeing what works is the best way to move forward.

[00:16:06] So, one last question, and this comes back to, again, the ethos, the culture behind Mailchimp. I was watching an interview with MSNBC where your founders were talking about the billion dollar cash buyout offer that they spurned, and how the employees mentioned that they were here not for the money alone but a greater sense of purpose. Now, purpose and a unicorn, especially in a B2C kind of organization which is highly visible, it's not something you hear talked about at all, if ever. So as the CISO of Mailchimp where your founders firmly believe in a higher cause, which is greater than getting the first buyout offer or making money, so how does that shape the way Olivia approaches work every day? How does it help you be a better employee, person, leader every single day?

Olivia Rose: [00:17:08] Yeah. It's hard to believe this, as you mentioned, it's kind of a unicorn culture. It truly is that way at Mailchimp. Their stance is to bring your whole self to work, that the more diverse you are, from a different area of life, you bring your whole self. You don't need to be ashamed or tone down any aspects of your personality in your experience. There is a very unique perspective on culture and diversity. So we even have our own, and it's fairly large, culture and diversity team to actually go out to areas and websites and blogs to actively look for more diverse individuals to hire and bring into the company. It's truly amazing. You don't really ... you can't really believe it until you're actually in the culture, but it's literally like going back to the good old days — back before the big crash, way back when — with all those online businesses starting, there were pool tables and snacks and food. That's what it's like. The culture is absolutely amazing and they prize every single person.

“The culture is absolutely amazing and they prize every single person.”

[00:18:30] So along those lines of how the culture helps to make me be a better CISO and helps my team operate, there's a lot of support for the security team and what our vision/mission is from people who are not in the security team. Because everyone who works there loves Mailchimp so much, they have this heartfelt stance to not let any bad folks take over or do damage to our brand and our company; that is just a horrible thought for anybody who works there.

[00:19:13] So we have a lot of support from external groups where they'll report things into us. They're excited about security awareness, learning more about it, how they can protect our customers and our brand as well as, of course, themselves and their families. It's an extremely supportive culture where everyone likes to be heard, which if you look at it from a negative viewpoint, you would think it would drag out processes and implementing things. But what I'm learning is that it actually enhances the process and what you're trying to do because I'm getting viewpoints from people who are giving me valid feedback that I never would've thought of myself. And to me, I think more companies should really look at taking on this type of cultural respect and diversity respect that Mailchimp carries and gives to our employees because

when people feel respected and part of the culture, they have more skin in the game to protect your brand and get involved with security initiatives.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:20:34] That's great. Like you mentioned we have lots more to talk about when we're talking through diversity and what that means to security. I have already a litany of questions for our subsequent discussions on a monthly basis.

[00:20:50] This has been a really, really, interesting conversation. And again, congrats on your "new" or not-so-new anymore role ...

Olivia Rose: [00:21:00] [Laughs] Thank you.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:21:00] And everything that you're doing both within the confines of Mailchimp, but also to the broader community especially to allow women the freedom to choose and experiment, I salute you for that. I'm looking forward to future conversations.

Olivia Rose: [00:21:15] Well, I am as well. Thank you so much.

Ashwin Krishnan: [00:21:18] Thanks, Oliva.

Olivia Rose: [00:21:19] Thanks.