

Podcast Transcript

Risk Never Sleeps

Episode 92

Bill Willis

Ed Gaudet: Welcome to the Risk Never Sleeps Podcast, in which we learn about the people who are on the front lines, delivering and protecting patient care. I'm Ed Gaudet, the host of our program, and I am pleased today to be joined by Bill Willis, CTO of IDMWORKS. Where are you calling in from?

Bill Willis: Well, right now, I'm in a cubicle at San Francisco airport on the way to join the 2 to 9 CIO conference for the weekend.

Ed Gaudet: Oh, very good, very good.

Bill Willis: My friend Drex. And, yeah, I'll be hanging out with Drex and the crew. There's about 12 of them, I guess. So, yeah, it'll be great.

Ed Gaudet: That's a really good event. Excellent. So, tell our listeners about your current role in your organization.

Bill Willis: So, as the chief technologist at the cybersecurity company, we focus specifically on the identity component of security posture. So when you think about how things are attacked and how to protect things, it's not the network anymore.



Bill Willis (cont'd): It's the identity and the attack surface that people are looking for, which is either intellectual property or data they can use to resell in an open market with value. So we work with our customers and our partners to be able to, number one, help them assess what their identity posture currently looks like, or they currently have challenges that need to be addressed and kind of give them the risk assessment that says, look, your door is wide open, dude, you just got to fix it. It can be as simple as the following: Most organizations process to change a password. Has it changed since you and I were in diapers? And that's been a long time ago. So, just get it so the attack surface doesn't have to take a phone call from somebody they don't know. Then those people might know the questions to ask or answer to be able to get that, remove that, and either go to a service environment or self-service password reset environment, which both technologies and processes are available today and are delivered well. You don't have the MGM \$35 million problem. Write a check and get your casino back. Then you know the United Health care thing that happened. It's a big deal. It's a big deal. Mhm.

Ed Gaudet: And how did you get into health care in general?

Bill Willis: I've had a career of this. I was the chief information security officer at Amoco in the 80s before British Petroleum purchased them, and that was before an identity industry even existed. So we built something in-house. The industry had heard that this thing had been built and existed. Somebody rapped on my door and said, hey, how about coming out to California and making one of these? And so that's how I ended up on the outside of that. So, the idea here specifically is to be able to solve every industry's problem, not just one. IBM bought that product. And then I spent a baker's dozen years as their global subject matter expert for security and identity. One of the things that I got to do in this random collection of accidents, which was called a career, was help the country of Australia digitize and bring electronic processes to the constituents of Australia. So, for their entire health care system. So that was the whole ecosystem from soup to nuts. And so between the identity part of my career and the healthcare part with its starting point there, you know, the passion to make sure that the world is a better and safer place has never been stronger for me. So that's why I'm at Drexel. We will do the thing with that group and just show how it isn't hard to do some of these things. You know, most people think that it's a technology problem. It really is not a technology problem. It's a data problem.



Bill Willis (cont'd): It's a process problem, and it's a people problem. So if you can make sure that the data is well protected and well organized, that you can make sure that the processes are working and automated, and that you don't have historical debt, if you would like one person doing the same job as far as epic administration for 25 years and get that out of the way, you really can create a very self-sustaining, self-managing, self-healing ecosystem from an identity perspective and the attack surface specifically for not only patient care but patient information and just research. You know, you name the data set somebody wants better protected.

Ed Gaudet: And if they're not using you. What are some of the alternatives? What else are they looking at working?

Bill Willis: So there's a group of us out there, right? I mean, I'd like to say that we have this seminal thing, but there is a group of us that is just as passionate there. Some are better at it than others. We find ourselves pretty good at it, but some folks are good at it. And so, you know, there's a collective that has the same passion and the same intent that we do. Okay, great.

Ed Gaudet: And from a customer's perspective, how should they think about you amidst those other alternatives? How are you different?

Bill Willis: We have an advisory group. Myself is the chief technologist, and I've got a lifetime and career of doing this. And so I think that is probably one unique thing that we have as chief technologist, somebody that actually invented one of the singular brand new products that ever started the industry. So we have a career worth of available information and tends to speak loudly. We do something that I think is fairly unique. We do a fireside chat where there's no investment for someone to take advantage of us. We said, hey, we'd like to understand what's happening. We literally bring a bag of dry-erase markers because when you go into some place anymore, they don't necessarily remember they have dry marks in the first place. So we'll get a big whiteboard. You get a couple of the key players in there, and for the first time, they'll actually look at their identity, posture, and ecosystem because we'll spend about an hour, hour and a half drawing it up on the board. For the first time, they have a dynamic view of the whole ecosystem.



Bill Willis (cont'd): When the technology part of the industry comes in, they only focus on one thing, and from an identity perspective, you've got lifecycle management and identity governance. You have multifactor authentication, single sign-on, privileged access management, and password management. There is nobody that's going to come in and say, hey, I'm the best at all those things. It just doesn't exist. And not necessarily would you want that either. Do you want to make sure that you get the best of breed that fits your environment? So when we come in, we look at it holistically. We're switching that way, right? We don't come in with prejudice. We actually look at what it is. And so that's different from our perspective because the product and the technology stack don't come in and give you that holistic view of your entire identity posture. They will come in and say everything's a nail, and I'm a hammer. And that's not the way things are.

Ed Gaudet: I love the balance and unique integration of both experience and innovation. Along with that, you know, that unbiased approach, I think, is useful in many industries, including healthcare.

Bill Willis: In what we do is when we do that, Ed, specifically, and we've done this a bunch of times with healthcare folks, when we draw it up, it's obvious on a couple of things that you can do right away that are tactical, that will actually close significant gaps. I'll give you an example of how at least half of the folks that we've talked to have the tools and technologies to implement self-service password management. They just really haven't looked at it in that way. And so what we do is we train them on three things. Number one is the total cost of ownership for you to do that today. Because every time you make a help desk call, that's real money, especially if you've outsourced it. And we know tons of hospital systems that have outsourced that. So we've got one customer that's in healthcare, 50 bucks a call to their help desk. They have a hospital portfolio of over 60,000 people who work there. So they were doing at least \$300,000 to \$400,000 a year just on password resets. And they're already paying for the technology to enable that. So we showed them specifically how I can change that ten degrees, change the process to get the service desk and the help desk out of the identity business. So, if they make a call, they'll send a link to the person's personal email or cell number. They'll click on that link and then run themselves through making a password change. You've closed the door, you have good data, you have an automated process, and you've eliminated the attack surface problem. As far as them being able to call that.



Ed Gaudet: Excellent. So, as you look out over the next 12 to 24 months, what are your top priorities or strategic initiatives?

Bill Willis: So we want to make sure that folks really know they have a problem but don't know how to speak to their leadership in a way that's non-technical. We think that's the biggest problem. So they know they have a problem, they know they need investment and how to fix it, but they don't know how to talk to leadership and say, hey, here's our current total cost of ownership. If we make an investment here, we can actually have the velocity to the return on that investment and come up with a new TCO and show that lineage and a tie, those n number of use cases to real dollar payback. That's what we try and teach and coach those folks. In some cases, we've actually done presentations for the leadership to ensure they understand. So if I'm going to be Johnny Appleseed on anything, it's the ability to have that connective tissue and give the ability for leadership to understand what we're trying to do. And so the technical folks are saying, I can't get them to understand.

Ed Gaudet: Excellent. The last couple of years have been difficult for many people due to the pandemic. What are you most personally or professionally proud of?

Bill Willis: For me, over the last couple of years, it's the fact that people are willing to meet with us and go through this face to face, and after they become so used to not coming into the workforce, right? They're just places that are mobile, and they don't do it. But once we actually go through this exercise and have a chat, basically like you and I had, they will see the wisdom and the value of this, do that fireside chat, and get that real-time Visio. They're like, you know, I can get at least half the group that I need to get in in the house, and the rest of them can do like this, or we're doing on zoom call, grab a bag of popcorn and sit in the stands and watch it all godown. So yeah, we feel really good that they recognize that.

Ed Gaudet: Outside of your current job, what would you be doing? What are you most passionate about?



Bill Willis: Well, the gray hairs, real head. So, I qualified for Medicare here last month. So, my father was an auto body repairman out of the 50s. And so I grew up working for him and grabbed the bug for cars. And so I have some cars waiting for me if and when I'm done, you know, doing this, which I'm clearly not done any time soon, but I feel good. I believe I've got a voice in it in a way to help folks here, but if one goes down, then yeah, there are a few things that are a little rusty around the edges that are going to get some.

Ed Gaudet: What type of cars?

Bill Willis: Mostly Chevy's out of the 50s, 60s, and 70s. So, you know, old school muscle car, if you will, that you and I grew up with.

Ed Gaudet: A supersport or Chevy SS or.

Bill Willis: Yeah, Camaros and Corvettes, and yeah, some Novas. I got a 65 Nova Super Sport from Oakland. That will be fun. Cool. Some young 16-year-olds will think he's going to blow my doors and get a hard lesson.

Ed Gaudet: That's right. Positraction. What? If you could go back in time, what would you tell your 20-year-old self?

Bill Willis: Patience is a gift. Embrace it. When you are impatient to continue, make sure you listen. Because wisdom, knowledge, and opportunity, once you have those three things, you don't have to be impatient. You don't have to be patient anymore. It can be as impatient as you want. I think the challenge from this is that if you go back and look at how that plays out now, there is a level of impatience that I feel because there are plenty of people that could solve these problems or trying to do right now if we could just have that conversation. And so that level of impatience is required, I think, because, as you said, Risk Never Sleeps. These people are knocking on, you know, everything they can find to try and make more money every day. Wear leaking things. And it doesn't have to be that.



Ed Gaudet: Yeah, it's a great segue into the next question. I've got to ask, what's the riskiest thing you've ever done, Bill?

Bill Willis: Well, the riskiest thing that I ever did, I never did it. So my daughter went skydiving. I was like, oh, hell no, I'm not doing that. So I would say, you know, I'm not a risk taker. Come to that, you know, when I drive a vehicle, I drive it fast. I make sure it's on a closed-loop track with all the right gear and all that kind of thing. So there's always some level of risk when you have a high-speed thing, but you know, you put yourself in a position to mitigate that risk. And I guess that kind of speaks to the industry I've been in for almost 40 years.

Ed Gaudet: Right? Excellent music or movies? Which music?

Bill Willis: Music.

Ed Gaudet: Okay. You're on a desert island. You could take five albums with you because I think I can use the word album with you. You'll know what that means. Most kids have no idea what an album is.

Bill Willis: We can do eight tracks if we want. I still have notes. They're talking.

Ed Gaudet: But what would you take? Five albums.

Bill Willis: I think I'd take LED Zeppelin.

Ed Gaudet: Nice.

Bill Willis: I would say Doobie brothers. Take Chicago.

Ed Gaudet: Nice.

Bill Willis: I would take James Taylor and I would take the Black Crowes.

Ed Gaudet: Oh, there you go. What Zeppelin album would you take?

Bill Willis: The one that has the story on it.

Ed Gaudet: Okay. For. Yeah, that's Zeppelin for. All right. The hardest lesson in your career?

Bill Willis: Not everybody agrees with the right answer.

Ed Gaudet: That's a great answer. And that's a unique one. I haven't heard that one yet. Yeah. And that's so true, right? Yeah.

Bill Willis: You know, there's plenty of times it's like here it is. And it's either politics or a blocker, or the arms aren't long enough to do it doesn't mean that the answer is wrong and people won't admit it's wrong or that it's right. And they know it instinctively and you give them empirical evidence. I'm a very evidence-based person. And you find the insecurity is if you can provide the evidence and again, do it in a way that leadership will support you. Yeah. There is no manager or leader in the world that once you show success, won't ride that success and give you more gas to continue going forward. You just have to get that first nugget. Yeah. So yeah, it's just do let me open the door. Let's just show you what good looks like.

Ed Gaudet: I love that pre-lead with the data. Lead with with the facts. What advice do you have for folks who are breaking into IT and may want to take a CTO path in their career? What advice would you give them?

Bill Willis: Don't be afraid. In a role as a chief technologist, you have to understand tactical, strategic, and operational, and you have to apply vision and also have some common sense. So as a chief technologist, you really do have to exercise both sides of your brain, and you're going to run into people who are straight-line thinkers, and you're going to run into people who are circular thinkers. And you have to understand the differences between them and make sure that everybody understands. They may disagree with you, but at least they need to understand. And it goes back to the answers in front of you.



Bill Willis (cont'd): And then you have to have the ability to get people to come onto your side and believe in you. So when you build a team, once you actually have that role as the chief technologist, you have to get your team to believe that the answers are right. And sometimes that means you roll up your sleeves and do it yourself. My father taught me probably one of the greatest wisdom lines I ever heard. I taught you everything that you know, but I did not teach you everything that I know. And that rings true in everything that we do in life. So as you and I have collected this wisdom and understanding and knowledge, you know, going through the world for as long as we have, when the young pups come in and they're all full of vigor and energy. And so there are still times when they'll get to a T-intersection, and they don't know if they should turn left or right.

Ed Gaudet: Yeah, that's really sage advice. Bill, thank you for joining the program today. This is Ed Gaudet from the Risk Never Sleeps Podcast. If you are on the front lines delivering care and protecting patient safety, remember to stay vigilant because Risk Never Sleeps.



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