

Rodriguez: Collaboration Accelerates Security Innovation

Security Innovation Network Chairman Robert Rodriguez on why small, unknown security companies need the chance to work with federal officials

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A 22-year veteran of the [Secret Service](#), Robert Rodriguez knows the inner workings of government. And it is that understanding that he uses today to foster relationships between public, private and government organizations. As chairman of the non-profit Security Innovation Network, Rodriguez's goal is to increase collaboration that will lead to the innovation of security technologies that maintain and protect our nation's IT and telecommunications critical infrastructures.

Rodriguez, a 2009 CSO Compass Award winner, spoke with CSO about the difficulties small, private security companies face when trying to win grants from the government and how the economy is impacting SIN's efforts to give unknown firms their shot at success.

Talk about the Security Innovation Network's mission. What are you trying to accomplish?

Sometimes you have to move out of your neighborhood to really see your neighborhood. That is what I'm trying to do with the Department of Defense and the [National Security Agency](#). I'm trying to create awareness of available solutions out there that they don't know about. They see the same usual suspects. That's a term they used. A lot of the folks that apply for grants within the Beltway understand the process and it's very complicated. So, what I'm trying to do is open the door to those small companies in the garage in Maine or Louisiana that have no clue as to how the government operates, but would like an opportunity. So it's bridging the gap from Silicon Valley and the Beltway.

There is a huge cultural divide of understanding of the venture capital model and the entrepreneur model and the government. There is a misunderstanding of the acquisitions and procurement policies and the requirements that exist today. I'm hopeful readdressing some of the language in the policies might accelerate in innovations.

"Not invented here" is a problem within the government. But with all respect to the government, they are in the business of mission readiness. They cannot afford to be risk averse. But the threat evolves so fast there needs to be some element of risk right now. Their operating systems are being affected adversely.

When you talk about [Lehman Brothers](#) and the pain that was incurred from their failing, it hurts you in the wallet. But when talk about failure of a command and control operating system, now you are talking about life and liberty. So the stakes increase dramatically. That is one of the reasons the White House issued the presidential directive last year allocating anywhere from 30-40 billion dollars just to fix government operating systems.

What are your priorities for 2009?

Advancing innovation through collaboration is our focus: through education, through awareness forums. Also networking and building relationships. Case in point would be the first IT Security Entrepreneurs' Forum (an event Rodriguez founded and chairs) three years ago. Retired General David Bryan was with [Northrop Grumman](#) at the time and spoke and met with several companies at the forum. He invited several of those companies back to Northrop for meetings. He ended up working with five. He had never heard of any of those companies beforehand.

This year, Dave Bryan is at Man Tech as the president of their cyber division. They are building a huge division there and he is a \$25,000 sponsor of the event. He's bringing several people, wants an interview room and wants to take advantage of the innovation that is coming across the country to the forum.

When it comes to collaboration among security companies, there must be some apprehension about revealing too much. How do you get past that and foster frank conversations?

Trust. It is a lot of work. It is mutually beneficial relationships that are trust based. I reach out via phone, email or in person. I've been building public-private partnerships for seven years. I use that model to start it with from the top down. If I can get to the CEO or Chairman, I will, because leadership can drive change.

But I think we are moving from proprietary to more open environments. Whether it is IT infrastructure or if it's just the way a company does business. The word is getting out on what we are trying to achieve here. The other part that's good is that the pain for the IT environment is driving the need. The attention is now coming all the way from the White House to systems administrators to federal and intelligence security leaders in the industry.

The Security Innovation Network is a non-profit that relies on sponsorship. Has it been more difficult to find sponsors in this economy?

Did I achieve the sponsorship level that I wanted to this year? Yes. I had to ask more people, but I was still able to get Wells Fargo, Intuit, [eBay](#), General Dynamics, Man Tech, Stanford, a few others. And I opened it up to emerging companies this year.

What I hear from the companies like the eBays and Intuits is that their travel budget is affected. Their overall budget is affected. But its startups I'm concerned more about.

This year's entrepreneurs' forum is coming up and usually we get a bump before a conference. Procrastinators wait until the last minute. Last year folks signed up and drove the numbers up. But this year I'm curious if the economy will keep those people at home. Still, I'm pretty confident that we will still hit close to 240-250 people at the IT Security Entrepreneurs' Forum.

