



In Conversation

In Conversation with Ben (Franky) Franklin

Carol Baker

With concerns over the cyber skills gap concerns racing to the top of the IT agenda, we talk to Ben (Franky) Franklin, Chief Technology Officer and CEO of Training at the BIT Group for his views on how companies can train ‘homegrown’ security champions, ready to defend against hackers and data breaches.

Ben (Franky) Franklin is the Chief Technology Officer and CEO of Training at the BIT Group (<https://www.bluescreenit.co.uk/>). Franky and his team is hugely passionate about creating the next generation of IT and cyber security professionals, and teaches service management courses to corporates as well as the MoD and the veteran community within the digital skills sector. BIT Group is also the official service provider for the ‘CyberHub Trust’ charity (<https://cyberhub.org.uk/>). In addition, Franky personally volunteers for school communities to provide cyber awareness education and training to children and teachers.

As a technology and information security leader who thrives in creating systems, solutions, and strategies, Franky is an expert in business management and technology with a particular focus on leadership agility, and the development of teams to meet performance goals and financial objectives.

Since 2004, the BIT Group (previously known as BluescreenIT) has provided award-winning commercial IT and cyber security training to support organizations and IT professionals across the UK and the world. The company continues to grow, with its head office in the South West and operations in Cambridge, Birmingham, Liverpool and London. The BIT Group has a proud heritage of working with the MoD, winning a Silver Armed Forces Covenants Award in 2021. As official service provider to the CyberHub Trust, it is able to pursue its passion for delivering community driven security and training services, not only to the South West, but the whole of the UK.

The BIT Group operates three specialist business arms: BIT Training, BIT Security and BIT Research. Brought together, the group provides organizations with a bespoke, innovative ecosystem to protect and enhance the most important assets of their business: the people, the processes, and the technology.



Tell us a little about yourself.

My name is Benjamin Franklin. I didn't fly a kite in a thunderstorm, nor am I on the \$100 bill, and neither did I invent the flexible catheter – that was the other Benjamin Franklin – he's way more famous than me!

To save the confusion, everyone calls me Franky. I'm the Chief Technology Officer for the BIT Group. I'm also the CEO of BIT Training – our separate training division. We also have a separate division called BIT Security that deals specifically with cyber security. As both a CTO and a CEO, I believe very much in a hands-on



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approach to training. Not only do I write training courses, but I also personally deliver them as well. Thus leaving me very busy and sometime away from hanging up my CEO Suit on a Friday to spend time on the golf course.

I'm used to being constantly busy. I have an ex-military background, joining the British Army at 16, and I left one day before my 40th birthday. From an IT technical experience perspective whilst in the Ministry of Defence I did everything from working as a service delivery manager, and being an IT trainer, to working in the information security space. During the last couple of years of my military career, I was heavily involved in coaching and mentoring, looking after around 200 soldiers as they transitioned in the military world, getting them trained in information security, and then pushing them out into the field army to become the soldiers that they are today. That led me to become the CTO of BIT Group, and the CEO of BIT Training.

We deliver commercial training for both the public and private sectors, and obviously the relations that I have in the MoD space are still very much there. We do a lot from the MoD resettlement perspective, taking soldiers and Armed Forces personnel when they're about to leave, providing them with training to help them transition from that military side into the commercial world, and then we go a step further and hold them there so that they have a solid and long career once they have left the military.

Can you explain more about the bootcamps you run?

We deliver commercial funded boot camps for individuals and businesses wanting to upskill their cyber skills for development within their organizations. A lot of people became unemployed during COVID – some were made redundant by their employer (despite the furlough scheme), others saw the opportunity to retrain in a different sector or upskill.

A lot of people would love an IT cyber career, but it can be expensive to retrain. With Government funded bootcamp schemes training is done via eLearning courses. This format gives people the ability to learn new skills in a more flexible manner fitting in with their existing jobs, or family life. They also have the opportunity to meet in person other learners and ourselves. We give a fully rounded hybrid training experience, including the use of WhatsApp groups, and we are in the process of creating an alumni group for them in the future. Course programmes are run over a 12-week period, and learners get some great vendor qualifications.

Within the educational space for school kids, we created our ISTEPs programme which is a kind of pathway whereby young people who don't want to do PE, or science, can learn about cyber security and risk – and they love it.

Unfortunately, the school curriculum doesn't really include cyber skills – schools often don't have the teachers or the resources to be able to do it, in which case they can come to our office in Plymouth where we get the kids to take computers apart and put them back together again and teach them about cyber skills. It helps them to transition towards a real-world qualification via the CompTIA scheme, where



school kids as well as commercial people can take the actual exam. This feeds into digital apprenticeships, helping to inspire the next generation of IT professionals, and leads into our work with the CyberHub Trust.

Tell us more about your work with the CyberHub Trust.

The CyberHub Trust is a charity in which we are the official service provider. We helped open the first CyberHub Security Operations Centre (SOC) at the Barking & Dagenham College IoT, London, just as the COVID lockdown hit. This year CyberHub SOCs opened in Hugh Baird College, Liverpool and the Birmingham Metropolitan College. In addition, CyberHub SOCs are due to open in Oxford and Lincoln later this year, with the development of CyberHub SOCs in Plymouth, Manchester and Wales in the future.

These centres allow businesses in those areas to have access to enterprise level security at very affordable rates using talent within the community. This will drive digital apprenticeships in cyber security and further helps address the cyber skills shortage.

What drives the passion in your work?

Starting my career in the army at 16 meant I didn't get a degree. I never went to college. I never went to university. When my army career ended, I had to transition into a new career. Whilst I was able to take some of the skills I learnt in the army and apply them in the commercial world, I've had to learn new skills as well along the way.

The ability to help, support and guide someone in transitioning their career is immensely fulfilling. The work we do at the BIT Group is vastly important. Not only are the programmes we create helping to solve the cyber skills shortage, but we are helping local communities and businesses access the cyber skills they need. We help service veterans find new fulfilling roles outside army life, and sports personnel see a life outside of sports. Our work in the educational sector is inspiring children to become our future's cyber professionals. The work we do in helping individuals reskill for new careers, or upskill to take on more responsibility in their organizations, is another factor driving our passion. Our ability to help make someone's life better... well, it inspires every minute of my day.