

Career planning workbook

A decision you can defend, a costed route to it, and a twelve-month plan that survives contact with a full-time job.

Most people choose a path by accident and a certification by advertisement. This works the other way round: constraints first, then the path that fits them, then what it costs and how long it takes at the hours you actually have. Fill it in before you spend anything.

1 · THE HONEST CHECK

Before the planning. Tick what is true — and be as willing to tick the right-hand column as the left.

SIGNS THIS SUITS YOU

- ☐ You enjoy solving puzzles
Hunting vulnerabilities, investigating an incident, working out why an alert fired — the core activity is analytical problem solving. If that energises you rather than drains you, that is a meaningful signal.
- ☐ You are comfortable with ambiguity
You will regularly face situations where the right answer is not clear and you have to make a judgement call under pressure.
- ☐ You are naturally curious about how things work
A persistent habit of asking why does this work this way, and what happens if I do this instead. That curiosity drives the self-directed learning the field demands.
- ☐ You can communicate clearly
Explaining a technical risk to a non-technical audience, without condescension and with appropriate urgency, is one of the most valuable and surprisingly rare skills in the industry.
- ☐ You are in it for the long term
Attackers evolve, technologies change, regulations shift. Lasting careers here accept ongoing learning as a permanent feature, not a temporary inconvenience.

WORTH THINKING CAREFULLY ABOUT

- ☐ You are primarily motivated by salary
The salaries are real. But if money is the only driver, the grind of breaking in will feel harder than it needs to.
- ☐ You expect a clear, linear path
There is no single defined route in. The variety is a strength, but it is overwhelming if you need a rigid roadmap.
- ☐ You are not prepared to build anything yourself
Getting hired without prior experience means demonstrating skill, not claiming it. If evenings on this for six to twelve months is genuinely impossible right now, factor that in.
- ☐ You are hoping to avoid working with people
Almost every role involves collaboration. Even the most technical penetration tester writes reports and manages client relationships.

Ticks on the right are not disqualifying — three of the four are solvable with a different plan rather than a different career. But if you cannot tick any of the five on the left, stop here and think again. That is a cheaper conclusion to reach now than after £1,500 of exam fees.

2 · WHERE YOU ARE STARTING FROM

Facts, not intentions. This is the baseline you will measure against.

CURRENT ROLE AND LENGTH OF TIME IN IT

GEOGRAPHY (LONDON, REGIONAL UK, REMOTE-ONLY)

EXISTING CERTIFICATIONS

BUDGET, NEXT 12 MONTHS (£)

EXISTING DEGREE (IF ANY)

REALISTIC STUDY HOURS PER WEEK

TARGET CYBERSECURITY ROLE

TARGET DATE FOR FIRST ROLE

TARGET SECTOR

BIGGEST CONSTRAINT

3 · SCORE THE FOUR PATHS

One to five in each box, against your own answers above — not against which sounds most impressive. Total them.

	A · SOC	B · Pen test	C · GRC	D · Arch
Interest — would I still want this in three years?				
Existing head start — what do I already bring to it?				
Entry-level roles I can actually see advertised near me				
Cost to reach a credible first application				
Time to reach it at my realistic study hours				
Tolerance for shift work, on-call, or travel it demands				
TOTAL				

A high total is a signal, not a verdict. If the winner is a path you have no interest in, you have learned something about your constraints rather than about the path.

4 · WHAT IT COSTS, AND HOW LONG

Approximate UK exam fees. Verify with the provider before booking — these move.

Path	Foundation	Mid-level	Advanced
A SOC and defensive operations	CompTIA Security+ (£330–420)	Microsoft SC-200 (£165) or CompTIA CySA+ (£280)	GIAC GCIH (£2,500+) or CISSP at senior level
B Penetration testing and offensive security	Security+ (£330–420) or PenTest+ (£330)	TryHackMe and HackTheBox practice, or CREST CPISA	OSCP (£1,500+) or CREST CRT
C GRC, risk and compliance	BCS CISM (P) (£192) or ISO 27001 Foundation	ISO 27001 Lead Implementer or Lead Auditor	CISM (£455–600) or CISSP
D Security architecture	Security+, or a cloud foundation such as AZ-900 / AWS Cloud Practitioner	CCSP, or Azure / AWS Security Specialty	CISSP, SABSA or TOGAF

MY FIRST CERTIFICATION, AND ITS COST

WEEKS NEEDED AT MY STUDY HOURS

EXAM BOOKED FOR (DATE)

TOTAL SPEND PLANNED THIS YEAR

5 • THE TWELVE-MONTH PLAN

Three milestones per quarter is plenty. A plan you keep beats a plan that impresses.

MONTHS 1-3

Foundation. One certification started, one lab environment running.

MONTHS 4-6

Evidence. Something written up publicly that a stranger could read.

MONTHS 7-9

Exposure. Applications going out, and conversations happening.

MONTHS 10-12

Conversion. Interviews, feedback, and the next certification chosen.

6 • THE EVIDENCE PLAN

Certifications get you past a filter. Evidence gets you the interview. Five things to have by the time you apply.

What	Why it counts	Proof I will have	Done by
A home lab that runs	Something built, broken and rebuilt. Free tooling is fine.	Screenshots and a short write-up of what you set up and what went wrong	
A completed platform path	TryHackMe SOC Level 1, Blue Team Labs, or the equivalent for your path.	A profile a stranger can look at, with a date on it	
Three write-ups a stranger could read	Not tutorials. What you tried, what failed, what you learned.	GitHub, a blog, or LinkedIn articles — the venue matters less than the writing	
One CTF attempted	You do not need to place. You need to be able to talk about a challenge you solved.	The name, the date, and one problem you can describe end to end	
One piece of community involvement	BSides volunteering, an OWASP chapter, a local cluster meet.	Somebody who has met you and would recognise your name	

7 • THE DECISION

Write it down. A choice you have written down is a choice.

PATH CHOSEN, AND THE HONEST REASON WHY

WHAT I WILL BE ABLE TO SHOW A HIRING MANAGER IN SIX MONTHS

The four paths, explained properly.

Who each one suits, how accessible it is from a career change, and what the junior job market actually looks like for each.

ronanblake.co.uk/career-paths

From The Honest Guide to Breaking Into UK Cybersecurity, chapters two and three. Certification costs approximate at time of writing.