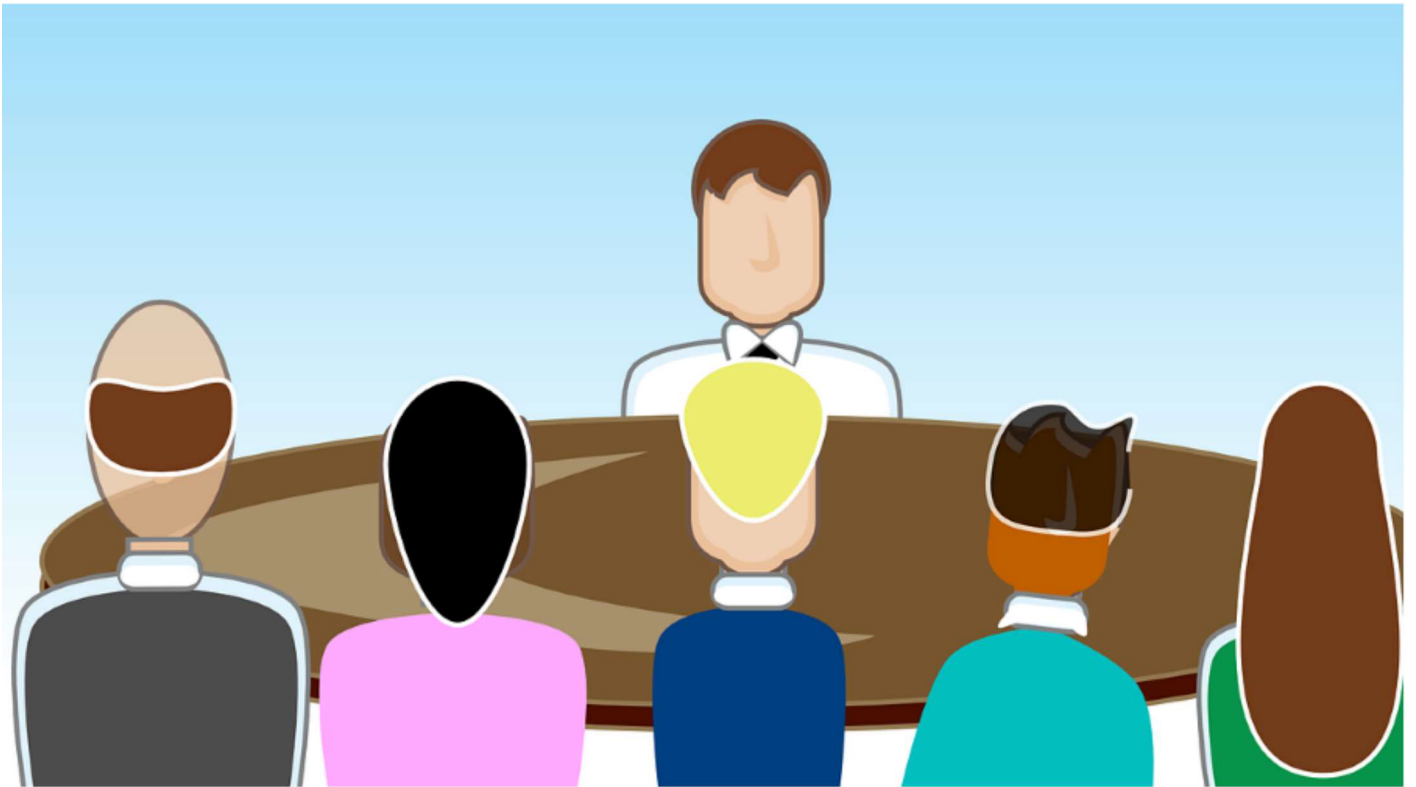


# SECURITY

**Thank you for laying me off: Companies come and go, but talent is forever**



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*February 25, 2021*

*Erik Antons*

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It was the most humiliating professional experience I'd ever endured.

For most organizations, 2019 was the greatest in recent history.

Economies were booming with record high employment rates, rising salaries, a soaring stock market, renewed optimism in American manufacturing, and a technological boom like something out of a science fiction novel. At my

company, a global hospitality giant, we had our best year ever. With record profits came record bonuses. When the books for 2019 closed and performance evaluations were completed in mid-February 2020, everyone was elated and optimistic. As a vice president and the chief security officer for the enterprise, I received a hefty raise and a whopping increase in long-term incentive pay.

Ninety days later, my entire department and I were laid off.

Storm clouds had been on the horizon. In early 2020, our colleagues in China were among the first who began feeling the economic and social effects of what was originally called the Wuhan virus, when the Chinese government restricted travel and ordered its residents to stay indoors. In Wuhan Province, the epicenter of what was then a flu-like virus outbreak, our 318-room full-service hotel was one of the first to close. Within weeks, our hotel in Singapore, a luxury 5-Star flagship, had one of the first documented cases within a hotel of what was then called “the novel coronavirus.” Travel to Asia was widely restricted. Business travel dried up almost immediately, and convention and meeting revenues were wiped from balance sheets. By early March, nearly one-third of our hotels in Asia-Pacific were closed, mainly due to low occupancy rates. Bookings plummeted and reservations canceled, wiping out one-third of our revenue year-over-year. But no one was particularly concerned, and the feeling was that governments were overreacting. After all, we’d seen this before during the SARS outbreak of 2002. This, too, many of us thought, would pass, and we’d be back on our feet in no time.

But as we know now, the virus then spread to Europe and shortly thereafter, to the Americas. What had begun in China was now playing out globally as governments enacted travel restrictions, keeping leisure, business, meetings and incentives travelers out of the air and out of hotels. When occupancy rates dropped below 40%, a general break-even point for hospitality, doors started to close. At some hotels where the doors had been open perpetually for decades, security teams struggled to find keys to lock their doors. Some simply used chains and padlocks to secure their lobbies. Perhaps everyone was overreacting, even panicking, as the best and brightest in industry and academia struggled to understand and control the uncontrollable. Travel and hospitality were the first casualties to flatline in the face of COVID-19.

From the start, I had been in the middle of the maelstrom. Our emergency management incident reporting protocol was simple — as soon as possible during or after a crisis, associates were instructed to contact our 24/7 call center to report the essential elements. The call center then called me or my backup, whereupon we provided initial guidance, generated a short report and/or triaged the call to the most critical internal stakeholders to provide additional support. It was common then to receive 10 to 12 such calls during the week under blue skies, and many calls came in during the night when incidents occurred in Asia. People do some crazy things in hotels, things they would never do at home—suicides, active shootings, assaults, prostitution, bomb threats, drug overdoses, drug deals, and murders. And then there are the cases of infectious diseases, foodborne

illnesses, fires, extreme weather and natural disasters — and those were just the external threats. As the sky grew dark under the clouds of COVID, our call volume tripled as our teams reported suspected and confirmed cases of what was now a global pandemic.

In early March, a crack team composed of Human Resources and Global Security hurriedly devised a work-from-home plan and expected it to last no longer than two weeks. As we walked out the doors of our offices on the final day of normal operations, we said our casual good-byes, watered the plants, took what we thought we'd need for a couple of weeks, thinking we'd soon return. By the end of March, when municipalities and states enacted longer-term stay-at-home orders, we extended our work-from-home plan. By early April, the first round of layoffs were announced—contractors and hourly employees mostly—and those remaining accepted pay cuts. Our CEO and Chairman publicly announced they would be working without salaries through the end of June. Things became more serious as more hotels closed and COVID-19 cases began to mount.

In mid-April, the first round of layoffs were announced for corporate employees. Now, it was getting real. I contacted my colleagues at other hotel companies and they confirmed similar actions were taking place at their companies, however, very few cuts were considered for corporate security, health, or safety department employees. By now, about 25% of all hotels in North America were closed and more were closing every day. Oddly, Asia-Pacific was starting to recover as leisure travelers returned with their families from long weekends during holidays.

It was during this time while participating in a webinar on mental health that I was reacquainted to the Kübler-Ross Grief Cycle. A Swiss psychiatrist, Kübler-Ross first introduced her five stage grief model in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, based upon her work with terminally ill patients. The model contends the stages of grief are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. It has received criticism in the years since, mainly because those studying the model mistakenly believed this is the specific order in which people grieve, and that all people go through all stages. Kübler-Ross now notes that these stages are not linear, and some people may not experience any of them. Further, others might only undergo two stages rather than all five, one stage, three stages, etc.

And then it happened. During a global leaders call in early May, our CEO announced during an emotional delivery that a significant number of corporate employees were being laid off at the end of May. When asked by a caller if this was a temporary measure, the CEO said that while he certainly hoped so, plans were in place to terminate employment with approximately 500 corporate employees, and many more at the property levels. But I thought I was safe. After all, I led the corporate security department for a global enterprise within an industry which prioritized the safety and security of its guests, employees, and assets. I had an incredibly lean team, and despite that, we were delivering a best-in-class program. My budget was a rounding error compared to those of our competition. We were still providing regular guidance and support to the field during

emergencies, and I was supporting our sales teams as they struggled to save our major accounts. Later in the day, my supervisor called and relayed the news everyone dreads—the doomsday plan had been enacted, and my department was being eliminated.

I was being laid off. I was floored.

A number of thoughts immediately flooded into my mind:

*How could this be happening to me?*

*How would our hotel security teams fare without the regular guidance they'd come to depend upon?*

*Didn't they know we'd been delivering a best-in-class program?*

*Did they know just how small my team and budget were?*

*Didn't they see me and my department as critical to operations?*

Yes, the pandemic had come to town, but the usual threats remained. As a mission-first oriented person, I pleaded with my boss, asking him if our CEO had truly understood what he was doing by eliminating my department. I offered to take a 50% cut in pay. My boss graciously thanked me, but said he was powerless to the decision. I had officially entered the stage of Denial, followed quickly by its step-sibling, Anger.

Just two years earlier, I left a great job and lifestyle in San Diego and relocated back to Chicago for what I thought would be a fantastic opportunity. Yes, I missed the lifestyle in San Diego desperately and I hated the cold, dark days in Chicago, but I loved my job and the people. Further, I was good at it, confirmed up and down by the chain of command, colleagues, and friends who saw me in action and listened to me describe it. In December 2019, thinking Chicago would be our forever home until retirement, we started a massive renovation project on our apartment building — a vintage greystone three-flat located about two blocks west of Wrigley Field. Though my wife and I had considerable experience renovating, converting and managing real estate, this would be one of the largest and most expensive projects we'd ever undertaken.

But just like that, as of June 1, 2020, I joined the casualties of COVID-19. I was unemployed. Though the press releases said only 500 corporate employees were laid off, the number was much higher across the enterprise. I was lucky, though, as I was provided a six-month severance package, a benefit I would learn later, few of my colleagues with other companies in other industries received when they were laid off. I immediately thought of the junior employees with whom I regularly interacted. I would be fine financially, but what about the sea of tireless 30-somethings who were struggling financially even under blue skies? What about the late 50-somethings who had been with the company for decades, who had kids in college and were likely never to see such high paying jobs again in their lives and would need to start over? Our teams were incredibly collaborative and mutually-supportive. Senior management often referred to the



organization in familial terms. We never got to say goodbye to each other, and there would be no sense of closure, apart from an email or two of condolence. I wouldn't return to work with the people and in the job I loved.

And we had so many great things in the pipeline! Initiatives which had begun years before were just starting to bear fruit. As a very competitive person, I had regularly evangelized the company and my department while speaking at travel, security, sales and training conferences, telling our unique story and sharing our successes. As a company, we managed more than 70% of our hotels, giving us tremendous operational control (nearly 75% of hotels in North America are franchises). We were on the verge of being the first hotel company to receive a prestigious security certification from the Federal Government. We had just started rolling out our CCTV compliance and security audit programs, both industry-firsts. We had developed and were delivering progressive emergency management and business continuity programs and training. We were training our hotel teams in advanced first aid techniques. We had just started our workplace violence prevention program — a policy was awaiting approval, we had trained our core prevention team, and were managing cases on a regular basis. We had just produced our first-ever regional security conference, offset with sponsorships to enable nearly every security manager to attend for free. And we did all of this during the regular, exhausting cadence of updating and interpreting global policies, procedures and technical standards, conducting and managing investigations, analyzing and distributing intelligence, participating in our risk council as one of six critical risk owners, briefing board and executive committee members, representing the company within numerous professional organizations, and providing timely support to the field for the never-ending emergency calls of crises.

When people learned of our extensive program, they asked me about the size and composition of my team. I was both embarrassed and incredibly proud to say, "Believe it or not, there are only two of us worldwide." The response was typically that of amazement and disbelief. Eyes usually widened and jaws dropped. Most people then looked at me as if I'd just lied to them, so I usually added, "Please keep in mind most full-service hotels have full-time security teams on site. But at the corporate level, there are really three main reasons why we can pull this off. First, we know what we're doing. My deputy has about 35 years of intensive security risk management experience, and I have about 20, and we've both worked in highly kinetic environments. Second, we work our tails off. Third, we have some very talented and dedicated vendors and contractors helping us."

But I knew it was unsustainable. We were operating on the ragged edge of reality. While I certainly never felt I needed what our competition had amassed, without obtaining certain critical resources, I felt I would burn out within two to three more years. Many of my colleagues predicted sooner. However, it was my burden to bear and my problem to solve, and there were movements afoot to reorganize Global Security under another department to take advantage of certain economies of scale. If it couldn't be done, I felt I would need to look elsewhere for another job.

While I struggled to understand what had just happened to me, it was even harder to explain it to friends, family, and colleagues. Their responses were of disbelief and shock.

I had started progressing into the stage of Bargaining — struggling to find meaning — but when I tried to think logically about what had just happened and place some sense of reason to my situation, I took several steps backwards into Anger. One time it happened when I learned about the positions which were spared.

And then there's the stigma with being laid off. I anticipated questions I thought I'd be asked by recruiters, interviewers, and former colleagues:

*If you did such a great job, why did the company eliminate your department?*

*Why are you looking for a new job so soon? Are you a job-hopper?*

*Did the competition take similar steps? Did they eliminate their corporate security departments as well?*

I refused to become distraught over my situation. I would simply power through as I was trained to do. My energy turned toward finding another position. In June, internal recruiters were still reaching out, positions were being posted, and it appeared I would have few problems finding another fulfilling role before my severance ran out. I honed my interview skills, joined LinkedIn Premium, and watched countless videos on interviewing. I formed a limited liability corporation and did some consulting (ironically, the name of my LLC is Blackswan Resilience). I participated in webinars and podcasts with former vendor-partners. I started preparing for the Certified Information Security Management certification and read a number of inspiring books, including *12 Rules for Life* by Jordan Peterson, *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl, *The First 90 Days* by Michael Watkins, *Atomic Habits* by James Clear, and *Fortitude* by Dan Crenshaw. I spent off-hours helping my general contractor renovate my apartment building, nail gun in hand, eating dust, and sometimes just getting in the way. My former deputy and I regularly called and propped each other up as we struggled to understand what had happened to our lives. I participated in as many trade organization webinars as my schedule would allow, and I ran more miles than I had in years. I did what I'd always done when I felt powerless to what was going on around me — I managed what I could, improved what I could, and stayed busy.

But anxiety and depression were always just a bad day away. During July, the second and third order effects of the pandemic were becoming apparent. Postings for new jobs slowed, fewer recruiters called, and leads dried up. One recruiter said his company was placing their search on hold as they anticipated a poor second quarter. I spoke to and traded emails regularly with former colleagues as we continued trying to process the tragedy. I heard from others whose jobs were spared, as they described their melancholy work environments, sharing constant concern that their

positions were next on the chopping blocks. It seemed as if everyone was looking over their shoulders. I was still angry, but had accepted my fate. I was staying busy and staying the course, confident I would find another fulfilling role within weeks.

It was during July that a core group of supporters began to regularly call and email me to see how I was doing, offering support in the forms of forwarded job postings, articles they thought I'd appreciate, offering to vouch for me as references, and with one mentor, even meeting up in person at a city park over a couple of brown bag-covered tall boys to commiserate about politics, the economy, and social issues. Most were mentors whose opinions were highly respected in the industry. Others were former coworkers in similar situations. Some were former colleagues from professional organizations with whom I'd collaborated on numerous projects. Others were former vendor-partners. I was especially touched by some who were in much worse situations, yet offered what little they had—prayers, introductions, insight, or just laughs—the equivalent of the very shirts from their backs. My former supervisor checked on me each week. I think it was cathartic for him as well, as he shared his woes over the horrid state of the industry. My transition coach, part of my severance package and a man I would never meet in person, was equal parts social worker, psychologist, and friend. He propped me up and gave me hope when the darkness started to cloud my judgement.

And then I entered the phase of Acceptance. On August 3, I tuned in to my former company's second quarter public earnings call. I knew it would be grim, but I wasn't prepared for what I heard. Net income decreased by 376% year-over-year. Revenue per available room decreased 89.4%. Company stock was trading at 50% of its all-time high just six months earlier. Industry experts now predicted it would be early 2023 before the industry would make a full recovery. I was happy to no longer be working there, but my future was still very uncertain.

As September came, job postings had ground to a halt. Thankfully, I'd developed four strong leads over the summer and was in the final stages of interviews at each company. Each opportunity had its positives and negatives. One was an energy company where I knew the CEO, but it was small, located in the Northeast U.S., and had no international presence. Another was a global leader in energy manufacturing, but would also involve a relocation to the Northeast. One was a booming manufacturing company where the histories of the previous two CSO's were short-lived and it required a move to Silicon Valley. The fourth was a solid Midwest-based global manufacturing company with a 110-year history of producing durable goods. I was confident that offers were right around the corner, and thought my biggest concerns would be managing the timing of the offers and picking the best ones. Several thoughts ran through my head:

*How can I slow down one company while I wait for offers at the others?*

*How can I influence and speed up the offers?*

*If the CEO at the energy company wants me, would I be willing to forego the international challenges I so loved?*

*What if I decline an offer, hoping to get one from another suitor and that one doesn't come through?*

*The Silicon Valley opportunity is pretty exciting, but do I really want to move there?*

I looked for guidance and in mid-September, my prayers were answered—I received rejections from two companies, narrowing my options to two. I was both deflated and relieved. The energy company went in a different direction, but I was happy. It never felt like a good fit, and the company wasn't international, let alone global. I wouldn't need to worry about Silicon Valley, as the manufacturing company decided they wanted someone with more manufacturing experience. Ironically, it was the Midwest manufacturing company which came through. From the start, it always felt like the best fit, and in mid-October, I started as their new Chief Security Officer (CSO). I was elated and motivated more than any other time in my life.

I couldn't have planned it better if I'd tried. My new department was much larger and had an adequate budget to match. The company's revenue was five times that of my previous employer. The pace of the department was sustainable, and the scope of our duties was reasonable. The program was in good condition. This would be a case of sustained success and realignment, and there were no burning platforms nor unreasonable expectations. Further, while an eventual relocation was expected, my new headquarters was only 90 miles east to an affordable vacation spot near my home in Chicago.

Meaning and motivation come from very odd places sometimes, particularly when we're looking for them. In mid-September when I was starting to get nervous as to whether or not I'd get an offer, I watched the series *The Boys* on Amazon Prime. If you haven't seen it, the main character, Homelander, is a deplorable protagonist among mostly deplorable superheroes, or "supes" as they're casually referred to throughout the world. The best "supes" form *The Seven*, a varsity squad of sorts, and are employed by Vought International, a multi-billion-dollar conglomerate. In Season 2, Episode 3, there's a scene where the CEO of Vought International attempts to rally *The Seven* to yet another reprehensible task, and Homelander confronts and reminds him of the greatest assets within the company — *The Seven*. He gets up from his chair, calmly stares down the CEO and says, "...We are NOT Vought. You see, companies...They come and go. But talent...talent is forever. The world still needs superheroes and that, family, is what we are. So, let's get out there and do what it is we do." It was exactly what I needed to hear at such a tumultuous time.

While I was initially shocked my former company was so quick to lay me off, I'm now grateful they did. They were honest about the state of their predicament and cut me loose early to look for a new position when positions were still available. I've since learned of several colleagues at other

companies who were strung along for months as their companies limped through the pandemic, only to be laid off later when options were slim.

There have also been a number of lessons learned as a result of this challenge, among them...

- Don't conflate what you do with who you are. When we leave our positions of influence, the emails dry up, the phone calls cease, and it's easy to assume we no longer provide value. It's during this time we learn who we are outside of work and who our real friends are. Viktor Frankl reminded me to have multiple reasons for Being in case one or more of those reasons go away.
- Have a plan for retirement. I got a sneak preview of what it might look like to retire without a plan and it wasn't pretty! I now have, hopefully, plenty of time — or at least the motivation — to plan.
- Jordan Peterson reminded me that caring for oneself — physically, mentally, and spiritually — is paramount. Without this, nothing else matters. Quality sleep may be the most critical element for recovery when undergoing a highly stressful life event.
- Dan Crenshaw inspired me to keep leaning forward. When I asked the recruiter why I was chosen for my current role, she said one of the things which separated me from the more than 250 applicants was my continuous pursuit and interest in the job. They pursued me because I pursued them. Control what you can, improve what you can, and stay busy. Talent is forever (Homelander).
- The Kübler-Ross Grief Cycle is real. My anger, though misplaced at times, was normal, as were my feelings of denial, bargaining, depression and acceptance. They may not follow in order, and there may be relapses, but it's reassuring to know they're normal responses to any life-altering event.

In his outstanding book, *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder*, author Nassim Taleb reminds us that it's only through stress that things become stronger. This differs from resilience, in which, the author argues, things merely withstand stress. To be antifragile is to withstand stress and to improve as a result of it. Think Hydra. When one head is cut off, three grow in its place. Consider the human body after a punishing workout at the gym when bone and tissue grows denser and thicker in order to face the next workout.

As a direct result of being laid off, I'm now stronger — physically, mentally, and spiritually. If you've gone through something similar, you know exactly what I mean. It can be beyond challenging if you're kicked aside by your company, particularly if it has nothing to do with performance and especially if you take pride in your work. To recover may take longer than in the past. You may need to reinvent yourself, and you may have numerous complicating issues, but don't stop leaning forward. You'll be stronger for the experience, and your new organization will

profit from your growth. To paraphrase Homelander, remember, “companies come and go but talent is forever.” The world still needs superheroes, and that is what you are. So, get out there and do what it is you do.



Erik Antons is Chief Security Officer of Whirlpool Corporation where he leads the physical security risk management program for the \$21B enterprise of 77,000+ employees across 170+ countries. Previously, he was Vice President and Chief Security Officer of Hyatt Hotels Corporation where he was responsible for the safeguarding of 127,000+ associates and 910+ hotels, offices and assets in 65 countries. Prior to joining Hyatt, Antons was manager of international security and executive services with Sempra Energy, a San Diego-based Fortune 500 energy services company with 17,000+ employees serving more than 32 million consumers worldwide. Before joining Sempra in 2014, Antons had a successful career as a special agent with the Diplomatic Security Service, U.S. Department of State, where he safeguarded the people, property and information of Americans overseas, often in critical-threat environments.