



THE CYBER6 FIELD GUIDE

4 Ways to Make Income in Cybersecurity

The real paths into a six-figure security career — and how to choose the one that fits you.



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There's no single way to get paid in this field

Most people picture one route into cybersecurity: get certified, land a job, climb the ladder. That's a real path — but it's only one of four. The professionals who build durable, high income usually understand all of them, and many run two or three at once.

This guide breaks down the four core income models — **W-2 employment, freelance consulting, government contracting, and influencing** — with honest income ranges, who each fits, and the first concrete step to start. By the last page you'll know which path to commit to first.

One thing before we dive in: these paths aren't ranked, and there's no single “best” one. The best path is the one that fits your life, your risk tolerance, and where you are right now. So read all four with that lens — and pay attention to which one makes you lean in.

01

W-2 Employment

02

**Freelance
Consulting**

03

**Government
Contracting**

04

Influencing

01 THE FOUNDATION

W-2 Employment

A full-time, salaried role inside a company or agency — SOC analyst, security engineer, GRC specialist, security manager, all the way up to CISO. It's where most careers begin and where stability, benefits, and structured mentorship live.

Let's start with what “W-2” even means, because the name trips people up. A W-2 is just the tax form your employer sends you — it's shorthand for being a regular, salaried employee. Someone else owns the business, takes on the risk, and hands you a steady paycheck, health insurance, paid time off, and a title in exchange for your time and skills. That trade is exactly why this is the right first move for almost everyone: you get *paid to learn* on someone else's systems, with a team around you and a manager whose actual job is to help you grow.

The tradeoff is a ceiling. Your income is capped by your salary band and how quickly you can earn promotions, and your taxes come straight out of each check before the money ever hits your account. But don't let anyone talk you out of this path for being “not entrepreneurial enough.” The reps, the credibility, and the network you build inside a real security team are the foundation every other path in this guide is built on.

BEST FOR

Beginners and career switchers who want a stable paycheck, benefits, and a team to learn from while building real-world reps.

REALITY CHECK

Comp varies wildly by industry — finance and big tech pay the most. The biggest jumps come from moving into leadership, not from staying in one seat.

TYPICAL INCOME RANGE (US)

Entry · SOC /
Analyst

\$60–90k

Mid · Engineer

\$100–150k

Senior · Lead

\$150–200k

Director · CISO

**\$200–
450k+**

WHERE YOU'LL SPECIALIZE

”Cybersecurity” is really a dozen different careers

The W-2 world isn't one job — it's a set of domains, each with its own skills, tools, and pay scale. Most people start broad in a Security Operations role, then go deep where the demand and the money are strongest.

● Security Operations

Detect and respond to threats in real time — SIEM, alert triage, and threat hunting in a SOC.

ENTRY-FRIENDLY

● Cloud Security

Secure AWS, Azure, and GCP — identity, configuration, workloads, and container security.

HIGH DEMAND

● GRC

Governance, risk & compliance — audits, policy, and frameworks like NIST, ISO 27001, and SOC 2.

LOW-CODE PATH IN

● Application Security

Secure the software lifecycle — code review, threat modeling, and DevSecOps practices.

DEVELOPER-LEANING

● Offensive Security

Red teaming and penetration testing — think like an attacker to find the gaps first.

COMPETITIVE

● OT / ICS Security

Protect industrial control systems and critical infrastructure — SCADA, energy, manufacturing.

NICHE, HIGH PAY

● Identity & Access

SSO, MFA, privileged access, and Zero Trust — controlling who can touch what, and why.

STEADY DEMAND

● IR & Forensics

DFIR — investigate breaches, contain the damage, and reconstruct exactly what happened.

HIGH INTENSITY

● Security Architecture

Design and build secure systems and the tooling that defends an organization at scale.

SENIOR TRACK

Don't try to learn all of them. Use a SOC or GRC role to get in the door, then go deep on one domain. Cloud Security and OT are among the best-paid and least-crowded right now — and certs like Security+, then CISSP or a cloud-specific cert, map cleanly onto each track.

First step

Land an entry SOC or help-desk role, earn your Security+, and build a home lab you can talk about in interviews. Target a mid-level engineering seat within 12–24 months.

Not sure which domain is right for you?

Talk it through with people walking the same path inside the free Cyber6 community.

[Join the free community →](#)

02 SELL YOUR EXPERTISE Freelance Consulting

Trade a single employer for multiple clients. Penetration testing, virtual CISO work, compliance and GRC audits, incident response — sold by the hour, the project, or the retainer. Higher rates, more freedom, and you keep the upside.

Here's the core idea: as a freelancer you stop renting your time to one company and start selling outcomes to many. Instead of a salary, you charge a rate — by the hour, by the project, or on a monthly retainer — and the gap between what you bring in and what it costs you to deliver is yours to keep. Done well, that gap is a lot wider than any paycheck.

That's the part everyone likes to talk about. The part they skip: you're no longer *just* a security practitioner — you're a business owner who happens to do security. You'll spend real hours on sales calls, scoping, contracts, and invoices, and some months will be feast while others are famine. The people who thrive here treat the business side as seriously as the technical side — and almost all of them built a reputation as an employee first.

BEST FOR

Experienced practitioners with a marketable specialty who are ready to charge premium rates and run their own book of business.

REALITY CHECK

You're now running a business — sales, scoping, invoicing, taxes. Income is lumpy month to month. Reputation and network are everything.

TYPICAL INCOME RANGE (US)

Hourly rate

\$100–300

Pen-test project

\$5–50k

vCISO retainer

\$5–15k/mo

Annual potential

\$150–400k+

WHAT YOU CAN SELL

Six services that clients pay real money for

You don't sell "cybersecurity" — you sell a specific, scoped outcome. The clearer and more productized your offer, the easier it is to price and close.

Penetration Testing

Web, network, and cloud pen tests with a clear, reportable deliverable clients can act on.

\$5-50K / ENGAGEMENT

Virtual CISO

Part-time security leadership for companies too small for a full-time CISO — your highest-leverage offer.

\$5-15K / MONTH

Compliance Readiness

Get clients audit-ready for SOC 2, ISO 27001, HIPAA, or PCI-DSS — a recurring, predictable need.

\$10-40K / PROJECT

Cloud Assessment

Review and harden AWS, Azure, or GCP environments against configuration best practice.

HIGH DEMAND

IR Retainer

Be on call to investigate and contain breaches when clients get hit — recurring revenue you don't chase.

RECURRING

Training & Awareness

Phishing simulations and security-awareness programs — easy to scale across a client's whole staff.

SCALABLE

THE BUSINESS BEHIND THE BILLING

Niche down

A specialist — "SOC 2 for SaaS startups" — out-earns a generalist every single time.

Find the work

Referrals, a visible LinkedIn presence, and subcontracting under bigger firms keep your pipeline full.

Set up right

An LLC, solid contracts, liability insurance, and clean invoicing protect the income you earn.

First step

Pick one niche, produce two or three case studies, and stand up an LLC. Start by subcontracting under an established firm to build references before going direct.

Thinking about going independent?

Get honest advice from people who've actually done it
— free inside the Cyber6 community.

[Join the free community →](#)

03 THE CLEARANCE PREMIUM

Government Contracting

Support federal agencies and the Department of Defense — as a contractor employee or, eventually, your own prime or sub. Mission-driven work where a security clearance becomes one of the most valuable assets in your entire career.

This world confuses a lot of people at first, so let's clear it up. When you do “government contracting,” you're usually *not* a federal employee. You work for a private company that's been hired — that's the “contract” — to deliver work for an agency like the DoD, DHS, or an intelligence agency. You get a normal salary and benefits from that company; the agency is simply where the mission lives and where you show up to do the work.

What makes this path special is the security clearance. A clearance is the government's stamp that you've been thoroughly vetted and can be trusted with sensitive information. Because it can take months — sometimes more than a year — and real money to grant one, cleared professionals are genuinely scarce, and scarcity means leverage. Once you hold an active clearance, you're no longer competing against the entire job market; you're competing against the small pool of people who also have one. That's why the pay jumps the moment a clearance enters the picture.

BEST FOR

People who value mission and stability and want the long-term leverage of a clearance that very few candidates can offer.

REALITY CHECK

A clearance is a career moat — hard to get, hugely valuable once held. Expect bureaucracy, slow hiring, and location requirements.

TYPICAL INCOME RANGE (US)

Cleared analyst/eng

\$100–170k

TS/SCI premium

+10–25%

Senior cleared

\$170–250k

Prime / sub owner

\$300k+

UNDERSTAND THE LADDER

Clearance levels — and what each one unlocks

Your clearance level largely determines which contracts you can touch and how much you can charge. Each step up means a deeper background investigation — and a bigger paycheck.

Public Trust

Non-classified but sensitive roles. The fastest to obtain and a common first step in.

Secret

The most common cleared cyber tier — it opens a large, steady contractor job market.

Top Secret

Higher pay and a much deeper investigation — fewer candidates qualify, so demand stays high.

TS/SCI + Poly

The premium tier — intelligence-community work and the highest cleared salaries on the market.

TOP OF THE
MARKET

KNOW THE LANDSCAPE

Prime vs. sub

Primes hold the contract directly with the agency; subs work underneath them. Most people start as a sub, then build toward primeing their own work.

Certs that unlock roles

DoD 8570/8140 mandates certs by role — Security+ to start, then CISSP or CASP+ to qualify for senior and management slots.

Frameworks to know

RMF and NIST 800-53 run the federal world, with FedRAMP for cloud. Knowing them is the language of every cleared cyber role.

Where the work is

Concentrated around the DC metro, San Antonio, Huntsville, and Colorado Springs — plus a growing pool of remote-cleared roles.

First step

Target a contractor or agency role that sponsors a clearance. Get to Secret, then TS/SCI, and your cleared status compounds into every future negotiation.

Curious about the cleared world?

We break down clearances and contracting step by step in the free Cyber6 community.

[Join the free community →](#)

04 KNOWLEDGE AT SCALE Influencing

Build an audience and monetize what you know — YouTube and LinkedIn content, courses, newsletters, sponsorships, affiliates, and communities. The only model here that scales beyond hours-for-dollars and keeps paying long after the work is done.

This is the path most people in security sleep on — and the one with the most misunderstood name. “Influencing” here has nothing to do with going viral or chasing clout. It means building an audience around what you genuinely know, then turning that attention into income and opportunity. Every post, video, and newsletter you publish becomes a small asset that keeps working for you long after you hit “publish.”

Here's why it's so powerful: it's the only model in this guide that isn't capped by your hours. A course you record once can sell a thousand times. A single YouTube video can bring you clients and job offers for years. The catch is that it starts slow and pays nothing for a while — you're building trust, and trust compounds quietly before it pays loudly. That's exactly why it pairs so well *on top of* the other three paths rather than replacing them.

BEST FOR

Communicators with a point of view who want leverage and scalable income — usually layered on top of one of the first three paths.

REALITY CHECK

Slow to start and highly variable, but it compounds. Requires consistency for 6–12 months before meaningful income appears.

TYPICAL INCOME RANGE (highly variable)

Sponsorship

\$500–10k

Course launch

\$5–100k+

Newsletter/community

\$1–30k/mo

Top creators

6–7 figs/yr

CHANNELS TO BUILD ON

Pick one platform — don't spread thin

Each channel rewards a different strength. Go deep on the one that fits how you naturally communicate, and repurpose from there.

YouTube

Long-form tutorials and career advice — the single strongest authority builder in the space.

HIGHEST TRUST

LinkedIn

Where hiring managers and clients actually are — the fastest path to professional traction.

BEST FOR B2B

Newsletter

A direct line to your audience that no algorithm can ever take away from you.

YOU OWN IT

Short-form video

TikTok, Reels, and Shorts for top-of-funnel discovery and fast audience growth.

FASTEST REACH

Community

A paid Discord or Skool where members get access, accountability, and support.

RECURRING REVENUE

Podcast

Network with leaders and compound authority and relationships over the long run.

RELATIONSHIP PLAY

THE MONETIZATION STACK

Audience first, then layer the income on top

You rarely monetize one way. As your audience grows, you stack revenue streams — and the audience itself pulls people into your other three paths.

- 01 Sponsorships** — brands pay for access to your audience.
- 02 Courses & cohorts** — package what you know into a product.
- 03 Affiliates** — earn on tools and certs you already recommend.
- 04 Memberships** — recurring revenue from a paid community.
- 05 Pull-through** — your audience becomes consulting clients and job offers.

First step

Choose one platform and post consistently for 6–12 months. Document your real journey, lead every piece with value, and build an email list from day one.

Want to build an audience?

Learn to grow and monetize what you know, alongside others in the free Cyber6 community.

[Join the free community →](#)

SIDE BY SIDE

The four paths at a glance

Path	Startup effort	Income ceiling	Stability
W-2 Employment	Low	High	Very high
Freelance Consulting	High	Very high	Medium
Government Contracting	Medium	High	High
Influencing	Medium	Uncapped	Low → compounding

THE REAL STRATEGY

Stack them — don't choose forever

These aren't four doors where you pick one. The highest earners layer them: a W-2 role that funds the bills, influencing that builds a reputation, then consulting or a cleared contract that the audience and credibility unlock. Start with one to build a foundation — then stack the next.

Ready to pick your path?

You don't have to figure it out alone — start with the free Cyber6 community behind you.

[Join the free community →](#)

WHO'S BEHIND THIS



Marquis Carroll

Fifteen-plus years across IT and cybersecurity, with roles at **Google, Twitter, Rubrik, Cisco**, and U.S. government contracting. Marquis started on a help desk and worked his way up to leading security teams and consulting for large organizations and federal agencies.

He built Cyber6 to hand people the playbook he had to assemble the hard way — so the next generation can move faster, earn more, and skip the dead ends.

YOUR MOVE

Join the free Cyber6 community

Get around people building the same career you are. Inside Cyber6 you'll find the roadmaps, real talk, and support to go from "interested" to earning — whichever of the four paths fits you best. It's free to join.

Income figures are illustrative US ranges based on industry data and Marquis's experience as of 2026. Actual pay varies by location, experience, specialty, and market conditions. This guide is educational and not financial or career-placement advice.