

Transcript: "What It's Really Like to Work at NSA"  
Episode 6 of No Such Podcast from the National Security Agency

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Ashley: To this day, that is the most productive, creative, innovative team I've ever worked on. And you don't come by those teams or those people very often.

Vanessa: Honestly, one of the things I tell people, even if you are familiar with the agency, but definitely if you're not familiar, find a development program because it's something for everyone.

Brian Fassler: Welcome to the latest episode of No Such Podcast. I'm your host, Brian.

John Parker: And I'm John.

Brian Fassler: And we are really excited because today we get to talk to two of our colleagues. Today, you're going to meet Vanessa and Ashley, who have been with the agency for a little over 10 years. So welcome to the podcast.

Ashley and Vanessa: Thank you. Thank you. Appreciate it.

Brian Fassler: We're really excited to have you here. And we want to learn all about what you do here at NSA as well as, you know, your journey to get here at NSA. So let's go ahead and get started.

Ashley: OK. You want me to jump in?

Vanessa: Sure.

Ashley: OK. So my name is Ashley and I've been at the agency for this is my 11th year, I think.

Vanessa: Wow.

Ashley: I know. Time's flying. So how did I hear about the agency? I had no clue NSA existed when I was looking for a job. So my brother at the time was a police officer. So he was like, oh, well, we're hiring for police officers. And I'm like, I don't want to be a police officer. But I'll look at other opportunities. So I just started applying for all these different jobs. And at that time, Vanessa, I knew Vanessa worked there.

Ashley: But Vanessa is way more technical than me. So I was like, yeah, I can't do that. But there was some like technical writing positions available. So I majored in communications. Not saying I'm the best writer, but I was like, well, let me try it. So I applied for that.

Ashley: And then lo and behold, I got into no such agency that I had to learn everything about. But yeah, it's been a good experience so far.

Brian Fassler: OK. And how about you, Vanessa?

Vanessa: So same thing with Ashley. I've never heard of the agency. So, it was kind of funny that my aunt, actually she was taking her daughter to like a women in... expo. And so I had just graduated- a couple of years from school. And so she asked if I could come join because she knew my major was computer science. I was like, you know, sure, whatever. And so I went and it was a lot of different

agencies and companies there. And so when I was there, this agency approached me. We were just talking. I was just in the back and we were just walking around. And then when I was in the back, we were talking and the lady approached me and she was asking me my background.

Vanessa: You know, I'm just talking about, you know, what I've been doing. And she's like, oh, you know, you may be a good fit at, you know, this agency. And then she said it and I'm like, and I never heard of NSA. She's like, really? You've never heard of NSA? I was like, no. I said, is it similar to like CIA? I mean, that's the only thing we knew about in school. And so she's like, it's similar. And so it's funny. She just said, well, you know, send me a resume. At the time, I was just a couple of years into where I was currently working. I said, OK, fine. And then literally a few weeks later, I sent her my resume and then I had some interviews and she wrote me back and said, I think you'll be really good for these positions. And so I was like, OK, I'll apply. And then here I am.

Brian Fassler: And how long have you been with the agency?

Vanessa: I've been here. Ooh, near 13 years, I think 2011.

Brian Fassler: OK.

John Parker: Yeah. You know, I've only been here about two years myself. So I think I'm the newbie of the group here. So just looking back, do you remember kind of how you felt when you did the application? Because I mean, my process took about a year between the interviews, the application itself, the background checks, et cetera. And I was pretty nervous the whole time because I didn't really hear too much about what was going on behind the scenes. So how did you feel?

Ashley: Anxious.

Vanessa: Yeah definitely.

Ashley: Right? Because it's like graduating from school, having that first real job. You know, I had some side gigs, which I don't consider them a real job, but just anxious, like, OK, well, am I getting the job? Am I not? I mean, I don't want to reach out too much, right? Because then I'm like, oh, she's annoying. She's not going to get the job.

Ashley; But, yeah, very anxious because the process was so, so long.

Ashley: But when the time came, I was like really, really, really excited. Again, I didn't really know what to expect. I didn't know about all the great things that the agency offered at the time. So now that I'm here, I never I don't see myself leaving.

John Parker: Did you have a mentor when you came in? I'm assuming Vanessa.

Ashley: Yes, you were a mentor, Vanessa. Yeah, I did. But when I first started, no, I didn't.

Ashley: You know, even in school, they talk about having mentors, but sometimes those things go in one ear and out the other. But coming into the agency and hearing our leaders preach about having a mentor and, you know, a coach and different things like that and learning about the difference between a mentor and a coach and why you need it and why the mentor can help you be successful. That's when I started diving and looking into it and figuring it out. And as I came across good people, right, I would say, hey, can I be your mentor? Can I be a mentor? And that's kind of like how I built my cadre.

Brian Fassler: So we talked a little bit earlier about your relationship prior to come to the agency and you all knew each other before you come to Vanessa. How did you help Ashley when she was kind of dealing with that anxiety going through that process? And was it different from yours or would you say it was similar?

Vanessa: Actually, mine was a little different. Like I don't a lot of times like telling my story because I didn't realize how much of an anomaly it is, like because mine was pretty-- like I'd never heard of it. I randomly met some lady a couple of weeks later. I had, you know, she sent me some jobs and it was like really, really quickly-- the process.

Vanessa: And so my story was a little different. Like I was in an interviewing within a matter of a couple of months. And even like my whole process maybe took like maybe four months. If that. And I every time I say that everyone's like, really? I'm like, I promise you all. Like I think I had like everything the same day. Like I had a little lunch break and then I think I did my poly and my test, my psych test. So that's why I told Ashley when she was going through some like just relax, you know, with the poly and everything, just relax and different things. But the whole process was, I think, unique to everyone. So I think it just depends.

John Parker: I mean, all in all, it's honestly not that bad. I said mine took a year, but it was the occasional email that I had to answer, maybe, you know, show up for the polygraph, which that is what it is.

Ashley: I think on the outside end, it could be very nerve wracking when you hear, oh, I got to do background checks. And then you got to get a reference from every address that you live. You know, all of those different things. And at that time I was like, well, I was in in school. I was in Winston Salem. And who am I going to, well let me call my roommate? It's like people you probably haven't talked to in a while. So it's just it's a lot of information.

Ashley: But in the end, it's definitely worth it.

John Parker: Oh yeah. Of course you're not thinking about that as you're going through trying to collect all the data. Cause you don't know. You don't know why behind it. You know, once you're in, obviously you can see why they were doing it. It's like, OK, I could see it. It wasn't that bad looking back. But it can be intimidating.

Ashley: Yeah.

Brian Fassler: I think that's what kind of unique about jobs. Like, you know, you work with somebody and I say you instantly have a connection with them because you know that you all went through the exact same process to get into that place.

Vanessa: Right. Right. The whole thing was just patience, like with anything. You just have to have patience. And, you know, once it's time, it's OK, because I'm sure around that time is like, it's all right. You know, you want to have enjoy your vacation and different things anyway. So just take this moment, you know, and do the things you need to do. So it all worked out.

Various voices: Yeah. Yeah.

Brian Fassler: And then when you got that letter of the email or the call and say, hey, we want you to come work for NSA. How did how did you feel?

Ashley and Vanessa: Woo! Really? Exactly. I got a job. With a salary! And benefits!

Ashley: So, no, it was it was great, you know, a great feeling. And then the nerves come about. Oh, OK, now we got to start. Now I need to get a wardrobe and, you know, go through. I guess I said that.

Ashley: Real clothes.

Vanessa: Real clothes!

Ashley: That the time when we had two weeks of EODing, I think is when it was.

Brian Fassler: Which is entry on duty.

Ashley: Entry on duty. Sorry.

Brian Fassler: Which is what we all go through. It's like an orientation.

Various Voices: Right. Yep. Yeah.

Ashley: So it was definitely a sigh of relief once I got that final job offer. And it's like, OK, I'm good. Now then the next hurdle comes. Yeah. Right. Now you got to learn the mission and learn the people. So, yeah.

John Parker: Speaking of learning the mission, we have that two week orientation. I don't know if you've ever heard of it, now we have something called the first two program. It's sort of an extended two year just introductory program to every different aspect of the agency where you can go out and, you know, view all the different orgs, the different mission spaces. You get a chance to meet with various mentors, which I'm still actually in the process of doing. And it's been wonderful seeing all the different facets of the agency. Now, when you both came in, did you happen to do anything like that? Did you have any kind of development program that you might have participated in?

Vanessa: Well, yes, we did actually. And, you know, this is what I always say. Ashley is was my angel because at the time, like I said, I started before Ashley and, you know, it was a good first job, but I was still looking for something I wasn't really sure what the agency had to offer, you know, the space being new to me. And so when Ashley came in, I think I was like a year and a half. And then I don't know how she found out, but then she heard me talking and I was like, I wish I had, you know, I'm not really sure what to do. I don't know what they offer. She's like, oh, why am I to actually apply for this development program. And then it offers a technical and a non-technical area. So I was like, oh, that's pretty cool. OK. So she was doing a non-technical, I was doing technical. And so we joined the program together.

Vanessa: And at the time, it was a three year program that had six months of rotating positions. And so that is how we started.

Ashley: Yeah. And there was, like she said, a practitioner track, which was the non-technical and then the technical track. But a lot of the program, we did things together. But as we come up with the tours, right, of course, she would look for more technical tours and those type of organizations and meet the opposite, right? Whoever was on that practitioner track. So it actually worked out.

Brian Fassler: So let's talk a little bit more about the development program. So you came from a communications background. You came from a computer science background. Talk through kind of the process of what all goes on in a development program. You had talked, I think, briefly about doing a

tour. Can you walk us through a little bit of that and then Vanessa, maybe you can talk about some of the tours that you did and the things that you walked away with when you attended those tours.

Ashley: Yeah. So the agency has a bunch of different development programs for all different skill sets. My organization actually just went through an exercise where we gathered requirements that we want as an organization so that we can get some development program participants in. And there are about 15 to 20 or more development programs at the agency.

Ashley: So it's very competitive to get in. You have to meet certain requirements. And I know that's what we had to do when we applied as well. All development programs are different. There are different requirements that you have to meet when you are in the program. So in our case, if I recall correctly, we had to, you know, find tours on our own, right? That kind of teaches us how to research and network and reach out to people. So we would have to reach out to these different organizations. In addition to going on those six month tours, we had kind of like responsibilities within the development program. So we would have to report back to the to the larger group about the progress that we're making or what we're working on and come up with these different projects so that we're briefing each other on the different programs. So one that they understand everything that we're doing on the tour. And two, if somebody else was interested, they could you know, they can learn about it and possibly reach out. And then there were certain requirements that we had to meet, certain tours that you have to meet in order to graduate.

Ashley: And I think you, your track actually had to do-

Vanessa: An exercise.

Ashley: Exercise. Yeah.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Ashley: But again, all development programs are different. But it definitely helps you with from the networking aspect, especially since you're going from office to office, you're meeting tons of different people. And then at the end of the day, they're trying to recruit you. Right. When you graduate, you have to find a home.

Ashley: So you want to make a good impression so that, you know, somebody will hire you and want to vouch for you and things like that.

Brian Fassler: So, Vanessa, you mentioned something about an exercise. Can you tell us a little bit more what was all involved with that exercise?

Vanessa: Oh, yeah, sure. So we had to at the end, we had to go into a cyber defense exercise. And so we had to join either the offensive side or the defensive side, which is protecting the network or you're acting like the adversary attacking the network. So what they wanted to see was everything that we've been learning throughout the program, putting into like a real time, real, real world scenario.

Brian Fassler: Sounds like a great experience.

Vanessa: Oh, yeah.

John Parker: I mean, looking back, are you glad you did it?

Vanessa: Definitely. It was honestly one of the things I tell people, if you even if you are familiar with the agency, but definitely if you're not familiar, find a development program because it's something for everyone.

Vanessa: It was funny how Ashley brought me to the development program, but she found her position, her dream job in like the second tour and then left me. I was like, what are you doing?

Ashley: I was hoping we weren't going to go there. But yes. So, you know, everybody has a story, right? And I think that brings in the authenticity with everything. Right. So funny story. A producer on this show, I probably can't turn my head, but Nicki, I met her on my first tour. And that was on the IAD [Information Assurance Directorate] staff. So I did that for about six months. And then I found my next tour, which was in the Information Assurance Capabilities Office. And that was on their communications team. And I met some really, really phenomenal people. And to this day, that is the most productive, creative, innovative team I've ever worked on. And you don't come by those teams or those people very often. So again, that was my second tour. And ironically, I was, I did get pregnant with my second child at the time. And so I had some hesitancy because I'm like, well, I don't want to start a new tour, then go out on maternity leave. And, you know, things that women, I'm sure I'm not the only one think about, right? When they're starting a new job or, or things like that. And my mentor at the time, Sheila. Hi, Sheila. She was like, well, why don't you just stay? And I was like, I went back and forth for days, probably weeks. I had to reach out to people like, Hey, do you think this would be a good idea? But I really think this team is great, right? I'm learning a lot. And at the end of the day, I ended up staying. So I did drop out of the development program and I stayed with the team. And I think that was probably one of the best decisions that I made professionally, because I've grown so much from that, right? Of course, everybody probably turned their nose up, right? People probably had things to say.

Ashley: But when you have decisions like that on the line, you have to do what's best for you. And I think that's proof that nobody can say what's good for you or not, right? That has not hindered me at all in my professional career, in which I thought it would, but it didn't. And I was really actually a good decision. So I did not finish.

(laughing)

Ashley: She was like don't leave.

Vanessa: I was like no!

Ashley: I was like, sorry girl. I love this team. But yeah, that's just part of my story.

John Parker: I love that you mentioned that you became a mom again during the development program. I actually became a dad for the first time right as I was joining the agency, within a month. And that was kind of an adjustment because we work in secure facilities. I don't have my phone. I have very limited access to the outside world. As you were going through that, how did you make that adjustment? How did you balance your work life with your personal life?

Ashley: Work life balance. I'm still learning it today. But the agency does a really good job at supporting that. And I think you just have to find really, really good leaders who support it and actually do what they say, right? People can talk about it all the time, but you want those leaders who actually follow their own, what they're saying that you should do, right? So work life balance hasn't been too much of a

struggle. I am kind of a workaholic, but I do have a supportive family and a supportive husband who is able to assist with the children and godmoms and friends and things like that because it does take a village, right? I can't do everything on my own and then you have the daycare and things. But you mentioned not having access to the outside world. I remember that being a thing when we first started. And at first I was like nervous and it took years to adjust to that, but I'm okay. I like being without my phone.

Ashley: You don't?

Vanessa: No, I'm not used to it.

Brian Fassler: Well, talk to us a little bit about working in a classified environment. We cannot bring our work home with us. We have security practices in place where that information is protected. One of those things is not bringing your cell phone into the job. A lot of people struggle with that, but talk to us a little bit about how you have managed to adapt to those changes where you kind of have to disconnect a little bit with the real world.

Vanessa: It definitely takes some getting used to. And honestly, I don't know if you ever get used to it. Like that's what I was saying to Ashley. I'm not really used to it because I'm just, I'm so attached to my phone. And it's not even like on any type of social media, but really it's everything. Like I even think about Google, like when you mess up your password or something, you have to authenticate with the code. And I'm like, I can't run up to my car in two seconds to get the code. So it's stuff like that.

Vanessa: It still takes some getting used to. And then you have to give your number, if you've got doctor's appointments and you don't want to talk about different things that at your desk. So it definitely is, it's a process that you have to go through. It's the time that you have to go through. But understanding that what the mission is and understanding why we have to leave it in the car, it's definitely understandable. And you do get used to it in a sense of just leaving it. Like even if I go to the store, like sometimes I have to remind myself to take my phone with me. Because I'm so used to leaving it in the car. And we may even have lockers. It is what it is. That's what you sign up for when you come here. And usually I'm glad to do it because it's like, okay, I get eight hours and I can come to my car and say, sorry, I couldn't respond because I was away for eight hours.

Brian Fassler: Respond to the 50 text messages that you have. So what would you tell a prospective employee that's thinking about working at NSA and they hear you talk about, oh, I can't bring my phone in. What would you tell them to kind of alleviate that concern?

Ashley: I think the agency does a really good job at trying to like fill in the gaps, right? So yeah, we can't have our phone, but like Vanessa mentioned, they're lockers, right? So essentially if you have a long walk from the parking lot or you're taking the shuttle, like you can have your phone. You just have to drop it off in the locker.

Ashley: The agency also does a really good job where they have different areas per se that are unclassified and you can take your phones. And so even in like one of our buildings, there's a Starbucks and you can take your phone up there and you can just, if you need a break, right? You can go up and you can disconnect and be on your phone. So it may not be ideal, right? For somebody who is so used to being on their phone, but you know, like Vanessa said, you get used to it. And then each desk should have, I think the standard IT environment, you should have an unclassified system. So you do have

access to like your personal email if that was the case, right? I mean, of course there are rules and parameters about what you can and can't do and how much time you spend, but it's not like it's 100% depending on the mission, 100% disconnected from the real world.

Brian Fassler: So tell us a little bit about where you are now, like what your job is and a typical day at NSA.

Vanessa: So I'm with the Cybersecurity Collaboration Center, the CCC is what they call it. And I'm with the DIB division, which is the Defense Industrial Base. And so what we do, we provide different services to DIB companies. So far, I love it. Talking about bringing the phone in, I have to undo that because now I can bring my phone in, I can bring my, we're given laptops. And so everything that we do is on unclassified space.

Vanessa: So it's honestly a different kind of atmosphere that I'm used to since I've been at NSA, everything has been top secret, but now I'm on a different network, which is the unclassified network.

Brian Fassler: Can you telework in that position?

Vanessa: I can, so yes, you are, I don't wanna say how many days, but we are able to telework depending on what you're doing, the mission. But yes, unclassified, so they are allowing you to do things from home.

John Parker: Ashley, how about yourself?

Ashley: So I am a Chief of Staff in the Network Services Organization. So it's within the Capabilities Directorate. So capabilities directorate is kind of like the IT arm of NSA. So I work within that division and I kind of manage all of our hiring space, actions, all staff related functions for the organization because without networks, right, our agency wouldn't be running today. So our org is very vital, very critical to the agency. But yeah, so managing all the staff related work, have a small team and small but mighty team, it's nice and fun, but it's a very technical organization. We have some very, very, very smart people that work there.

Ashley: And I learn a lot from them all the time, network systems engineers, network managers, a lot of networking SMEs. So again, I don't have a technical background, so definitely learning a lot.

Brian Fassler: Yeah, and I find that just that we talk about diversity here and it was so much better because we do have people from varying backgrounds and experience and whether you're introverted or extroverted, that's what helps us succeed. You get perspectives from all different types of angles or whatever. So I think that's a strength that the agency certainly has.

Vanessa: Yep, I totally agree.

Ashley: Yeah, and the agency, they want, they encourage diversity, right? Even diversity in jobs because they encourage you to go out and explore, right? Maybe every three to four years and just go out and explore and then they want you to bring the knowledge back, right? Come back and tell us what you learned. So that is one thing that I really do like about the agency is how they do, they encourage that. They encourage that in all the employees.

Vanessa: That is true. I always make fun of my mom because she comes from the school of being in a position for 20 years, it's like, that was their badge of honor. But I'm like, no, it's actually, if you're in a



position more than like three, four years, everyone's like, whoa, you don't want to explore? Like what's wrong? So I appreciate the encouragement, how they encourage you to go grow and to go do something else. You've been here for a while, go try something else. So I definitely appreciate that.

Brian Fassler: Yeah, and I think that's something that the agency encouraged. I don't know if you've seen that, John, in just a short time, but they want you to go out and try a different job, especially if you might not have experience in a certain field. I mean, you have a comms background, but you could certainly learn about peer-to-science here and they encourage you to go out and find other opportunities here.

Vanessa: Definitely, yeah.

Brian Fassler: Just makes us all more around it.

Vanessa: Sky's the limit.

Brian Fassler: Well, thank you both so much for your time today. We really learned a lot about your journey here at the NSA. And thank you for sharing your unique perspective about the agency and encouraging everyone else to become a part of our family.

Ashley and Vanessa: Absolutely. Of course. Thank you for having me. Thanks for having me. Yeah, thank you for this time.

Brian Fassler: So thank you again for joining us for No Such Podcasts. I'm Brian.

John Parker: And I'm John.

Brian Fassler: And we'll see you next time.

John Parker: Thanks for watching this episode of No Such Podcast from the National Security Agency.

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John Parker: And for those of you that may be interested in joining the NSA, you can find out more information by visiting [nsa.gov slash careers](https://nsa.gov/careers). One more time, that is [nsa.gov slash careers](https://nsa.gov/careers).