

Can hack but not shoot? FBI may ease entry for cyber agents

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In this March 29, 2017, file photo, FBI Director James Comey speaks during the Intelligence and National Security Alliance Leadership Dinner in Alexandria, Va. Aspiring federal agents who can hack a computer with ease but can't shoot their way out of a paper bag could soon find a more welcoming FBI. (AP Photo/Cliff Owen, File)

Aspiring federal agents who can hack a computer with ease but can't shoot their way out of a paper bag could soon find the FBI to be more

welcoming.

In a series of recent speeches, FBI Director James Comey has hinted the bureau may adjust its hiring requirements to attract top-notch cyber recruits, the better to compete with private sector companies who can lure the sharpest technical minds with huge salary offers.

He's floated the idea of scrapping a requirement that agents who leave the FBI but want to return after two years must re-enroll in the bureau's storied but arduous Quantico, Virginia, training academy. He's also lamented, half-jokingly, that otherwise qualified applicants may be discouraged from applying because of a fondness for marijuana.

And he's suggested the FBI may need to build its own university to groom cyber talent and questioned whether every member of a cyber squad actually needs to be a gun-carrying agent.

"Our minds are open to all of these things because we are seeking a talent—talent in a pool that is increasingly small. So, you're going to see us experiment with a number of different approaches to this," Comey said last week at a gathering of the Intelligence National Security Alliance.

The rethinking on recruitment comes as the FBI confronts increasingly complex cyber challenges, including crippling state-sponsored attacks, and as it's racing to develop more sophisticated techniques for combating internet-based threats.

The FBI, for instance, has struggled in recent years to break into encrypted cellphones of criminal suspects and sued Apple last year after agents could not access a locked iPhone used by a mass shooter in a San Bernardino, California.

Though an unidentified third-party vendor ultimately came forward with a tool to open the phone, law enforcement officials remain concerned about electronic terrorism recruitment that occurs through encrypted channels and out of sight of investigators.

Even crimes that investigators have tackled for decades, like child pornography, have grown more complicated as suspects trade images through secret internet networks that shield their locations and identities. The Justice Department has been developing ways through bulk hacking to uncover the users' locations, though defendants have repeatedly—and with some success—challenged the use of that tactic.

"The world's not coming back. The old school stuff that I did 20, 30 years ago in the State Police and the FBI, all those crimes nowadays have a major cyber component to it," said Robert Anderson, a retired FBI executive assistant director who oversaw cyber investigations.

Given the increasing emphasis on computer crime, the bureau has struggled to find prospective cyber agents who check all the conventional boxes for successful agents, Comey says.

"We will find people of integrity who are really smart, who know cyber—and can't do a pushup. Or we'll find people, maybe they can do a pushup, they're smart and they can do cyber—but they want to smoke weed on the way to the interview," the FBI director has said.

Comey's floated different possible solutions, but he's returned several times to the idea of waiving the requirement that people who want to return to the FBI after two years outside the bureau re-enroll in Quantico.

"Our people leave, go to the private sector, discover it's a soulless, empty way to live—and then they realize, 'My life is empty, I need moral

content in my work," Comey said, light-heartedly and to laughter, in a recent speech at the University of Texas at Austin.

He added: "I gave the creds for the second time to a 42-year-old cyber agent, and I said, 'So, how was Quantico?' He said, 'It was a nightmare, it was a nightmare.' And so we're trying to figure out, are there ways we should approach this differently to recognize the challenge we have in attracting talent."

Comey made headlines on the topic in 2014 when, in response to a question, he said that a prospective candidate who had previously smoked marijuana should go ahead and apply anyway. FBI rules disqualify applicants who have smoked marijuana within the last three years, and there's been no sign that that will change.

He was chastised days later at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing by then-Sen. Jeff Sessions, now the United States attorney general and Comey's boss, about whether he understood that those comments could "be interpreted as one more example of leadership in America dismissing the seriousness of marijuana use."

Comey replied that he had tried to be "both serious and funny" and was merely remarking on the FBI's challenges in developing a cyber workforce at a time when "more and more" young people were trying marijuana. He pronounced himself "absolutely dead-set against using marijuana" and noted that he had not said that he would change the FBI's policy.

Anderson said, "Anything new in the government is like getting your wisdom teeth pulled out. Anything new takes a while for the culture of the FBI to adjust to it."

He added, "If the strategic vision is to create a mecca for cyber, we're

going to have to change."

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