

MVP: Crowell & Moring's Gabriel M. Ramsey

By Allison Grande

Law360 (October 20, 2020, 3:40 PM EDT) -- Crowell & Moring LLP partner Gabriel M. Ramsey guided Microsoft through a massive global effort to disrupt a network of millions of computers infected with malicious software and has helped the tech giant seize control of fraudulent websites used by suspected nation-state hackers to steal personal data, making him one of Law360's 2020 Cybersecurity & Privacy MVPs.

HIS BIGGEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

Relying on a combination of civil enforcement and collaboration with government and private sector partners from around the world, Ramsey has aided clients such as Microsoft, Sophos and DXC Technology Co. in effectively combating malicious cyberattacks designed to infiltrate networks and trick visitors into providing access to valuable information.

These efforts included the disruption of the sophisticated Necurs botnet, an army of infected computers that hackers leveraged to distribute financial theft malware and ransomware that attacked Microsoft and its customers. Through widespread international coordination among a range of stakeholders to disable domains and through the application of federal hacking, trademark and state laws, Ramsey and his colleagues, along with Microsoft's digital crimes unit, were able to block more than 6 million of the botnet's "fallback" command and control infrastructure from being registered by the attackers, which limited the hackers' ability to control the botnet and allowed Microsoft to mitigate the botnet's damage.

"Getting a big set of stakeholders together to take control of 6 million malicious domains that have the potential to control a botnet, that kind of audacity in my view has the possibility of deterring just as much as an ultimate arrest because you've just imposed huge, undeniable costs on the actors," Ramsey said.

Microsoft also recently turned to Ramsey to help counter attacks by the suspected North Korean hacking group Thallium and presumed Iranian hacking group Phosphorus.



Both collectives tricked government agencies, businesses and other victims into giving up sensitive information or providing access to computer systems by pretending to be affiliated with Microsoft. Through separate civil lawsuits filed in federal court last year, Ramsey and his team have obtained injunctions transferring control of websites believed to be run by the threat groups to Microsoft, which has enabled the tech giant to assist victims in addressing the threat.

"These actions are important too, because they're less about skilled cybercrime at a big scale and more about very sophisticated actors trying to get into very high value victim infrastructure," Ramsey said. "Those are the matters that are not the highest profile always, but they're impactful in protecting those kind of companies and public sector entities that are important to functioning democracies and are targets of actors who maybe don't support functioning democracies, so it feels good to get in front of threats like that."

HIS BIGGEST CHALLENGE:

Combating these types of cyberattacks can rarely be accomplished alone, requiring Ramsey to understand the intricacies of how to most effectively deal with the issues in other countries and to build strong relationships with key partners in these locales.

One of the trickiest aspects of this endeavor stems from the varying levels of sophistication among the hosting companies and service providers whose infrastructure cybercriminals abuse, according to Ramsey.

"The internet's a big place, so there's many repeat players where you've already done something and you know it's a savvy hosting company, for example, who knows what to do, and it's an easy conversation, and then you may have folks who are just not so sophisticated and don't understand the urgency," Ramsey said "So that's the challenge: always educating stakeholders to help you help everybody."

WHAT MOTIVATES HIM:

Dealing with rapidly evolving cyberthreats and attempting to stop hackers from controlling the internet for nefarious purposes requires quick and nimble thinking, a task Ramsey is always eager to tackle.

"These cases are just fun, in the sense that they're very kinetic," he said. "It really is not just pure legal brief writing and the heady stuff in the law. You have to use law creatively to do very practical things. And a huge amount of the work is very hands-on, where you're physically impacting infrastructure and immediately seeing effects, and managing that in real time makes it a very exciting practice."

WHY HE'S A CYBERSECURITY ATTORNEY:

Like many who work in the cybersecurity and privacy arena today, Ramsey fell into the practice area somewhat by accident.

Pointing back to a product management job that he held at a video game company in California in the mid-1990s before starting law school, Ramsey said he had long been interested in technology, prompting him to begin his legal career almost 20 years ago as an intellectual property litigator based in Silicon Valley

"I've been in the internet industry for so long, and cybersecurity is a natural evolution of that and businesses' security issues have become more acute over time," said Ramsey, who is currently based in San Francisco.

Ramsey — who was at Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP for 16 years before joining Crowell & Moring in November 2017 — said cybersecurity became more of a focus of his practice about 12 years ago, when he began partnering with Microsoft and other clients that had large digital platforms to build out their nascent programs for proactively dealing with emerging online abuses.

While this work has evolved significantly over the years, Ramsey reiterated that one constant remains the importance of helping to "sustain the stability of the global internet so that we get all the good stuff out of it and manage the bad stuff."

HIS ADVICE FOR JUNIOR ATTORNEYS:

As someone who started out with a focus on intellectual property, Ramsey cautioned younger attorneys against writing the stories of their careers before they've even begun.

"It's all good and well to plan your career, but whatever you plan is going to go completely sideways," Ramsey said.

"So the advice I always give is, follow the thing that's right in front of you that you find most interesting, and just keep following that to its conclusion, as opposed to trying to construct some perfect planning for your legal career," he added. "Just keep moving to the thing that's most interesting in front of you that presents itself and just be fully engaged in that, and it will end up okay."

— *As told to Allison Grande*

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