

# Inside eBay's cockroach cult: The ghastly story of a stalking scandal

[bdnews24.com/the-long-read/2020/09/26/inside-ebays-cockroach-cult-the-ghastly-story-of-a-stalking-scandal](https://bdnews24.com/the-long-read/2020/09/26/inside-ebays-cockroach-cult-the-ghastly-story-of-a-stalking-scandal)

>> David Streitfeld, The New York Times

Published: 26 Sep 2020 05:38 PM BdST Updated: 26 Sep 2020 06:15 PM BdST



"People are basically good" was eBay's founding principle. But in the deranged summer of 2019, prosecutors say, a campaign to terrorise a blogger crawled out of a dark place in the corporate soul. Kako/The New York Times

Veronica Zea is pretty sure that before showing up to work at eBay in the spring of 2017, she used the site only once. She bought a surfing poster. It ended up in her closet.

Although Zea grew up in Santa Clara, California, in the heart of Silicon Valley, she cared little for the dazzlements of technology. In college, she studied criminology. After graduating, and a year spent recovering from knee surgery, she surprised herself by answering a classified ad and ending up at the e-commerce pioneer.

Zea's first job at eBay was intelligence operator. In a windowless room at corporate headquarters in San Jose, she watched closed-circuit cameras and helped people who were locked out of their offices. Zea (pronounced ZAY) was 23, with no special skills, but she

worked hard. Soon she was promoted to intelligence analyst, charged with staying ahead of geopolitical and individual threats.

Her division, Global Security and Resiliency, consisted of dozens of people, including retired police captains and former security consultants. But it was surprisingly intimate. “We’re a family,” James Baugh, the boss, and Stephanie Popp, her immediate supervisor, would say to the analysts. “We’re Mom and Dad.”

True, Dad could be kind of scary. Baugh was a stocky, middle-aged guy with thinning hair, who loved to talk and did not like to be questioned. He would often say he used to work for the CIA. Sometimes he said his wife was working for the CIA right now. Once, he found a knife on a barbecue grill on campus. A deranged person could have used it to hurt someone, he told the analysts, and proceeded to stab a chair. It was never removed, a warning for the timid. (Through his lawyer, Baugh declined to comment.)

Zea had never worked in an office. Her only real job before this was on the Grizzly roller coaster at California’s Great America amusement park. So she just accepted things. Like the way eBay was a regular film festival. Baugh would bring the analysts into a conference room and show the scene from “American Gangster” where Denzel Washington coolly executes a man in front of a crowd to make a point. Or a clip from “The Wolf of Wall Street,” where the feds are investigating shady deeds but none of the perpetrators can recall a thing. Or the bit from “Meet the Fockers” about a retired CIA agent’s “circle of trust.”

That one came up frequently. “No one is supposed to know this,” Baugh would tell the analysts about some piece of office gossip. “We’ll keep it in the circle of trust.”

Like the other analysts, Zea was a contract worker. Her ambition was to be hired by eBay itself. One mistake could crush that hope, and even risk lives. It was her responsibility to track “persons of interest” — individuals who might pose a danger to eBay — and rank them in a threat matrix. The woman who shot three people at YouTube in April 2018 proved there were people out there with a grudge against tech.

“We need to be ready,” Baugh would say. “We are the only ones who can prevent it from being really bad.” Drills happened when the analysts least expected. “There’s an active shooter in Building Two!” they would suddenly be told. Everyone would scramble.



People are basically good" was eBay's founding principle. But in the deranged summer of 2019, prosecutors say, a campaign to terrorize a blogger crawled out of a dark place in the corporate soul. Kako/The New York Times

There were usually six analysts, but turnover was high. Zea noticed that the men were becoming scarce. By May 2018 the group was entirely female. Baugh had a video for that too: Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg explaining "why we have too few women leaders." Sandberg did not say these women should all be young and blonde — "Charlie's Angels" and "Jim's Angels" were their nicknames in the executive suite — but Zea wasn't about to point that out. Women got fired, too, and afterwards the survivors would whisper about why. One departed analyst had been reprimanded for not smiling in front of executives. Another was let go because she sang to keep herself awake during the night shift. A third because she chewed on her pen.

In January 2019, the temperature in Global Security and Resiliency went up even further. Elliott Management, a hedge fund considered merciless even by Wall Street standards, bought a chunk of eBay and asked for changes. Nobody was safe — especially the chief executive, Devin Wenig. The co-founder of another company that had earlier drawn the attention of Elliott said the experience of looking up the fund online was like "Googling this thing on your arm and it says, 'You're going to die.'"

As Wenig and other eBay executives tried to make nice with the hedge fund, they did not want to hear criticism of the company. That may cause trouble. And if a critic persisted? They needed to shut up. If necessary, they needed to be scared speechless.

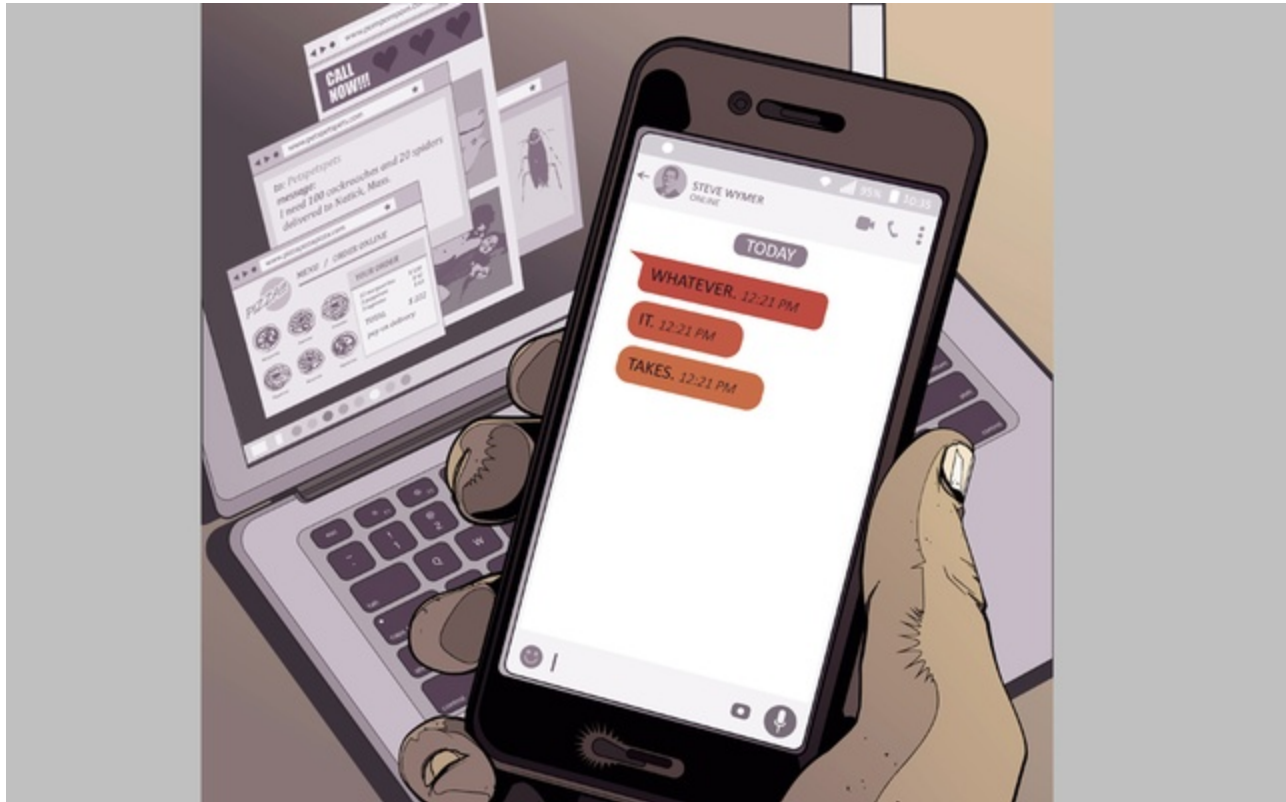
Another mandatory video was from “Billions,” the TV drama about Wall Street ruthlessness. At least five times, Zea was compelled to watch a scene in which a billionaire toys with a subordinate he has caught considering a job with a competitor. “You don’t try to be loyal,” the billionaire sneers. “You just are.”

Loyalty. That was one of the tenets of Global Security and Resiliency. In the summer of 2019, Zea did what her boss, and her boss’s boss, and the chief executive of the \$28 billion company wanted — even as those things got more and more deranged, and as they were all drawn into the most lurid scandal in the history of Silicon Valley.

One year later, on June 15, 2020, the US Department of Justice charged six former eBay employees, all part of the corporate security team, with conspiring to commit cyberstalking and tamper with witnesses. Their alleged targets were almost comically obscure — a mom-and-pop blogging duo from a suburb of Boston and a Twitter gadfly who wrote often in their comments section. According to the government, their methods were juvenile and grotesque, featuring cockroaches, pornography, barely veiled threats of violence and death, physical surveillance and the weaponisation of late-night pizza.

“This was a determined, systematic effort by senior employees of a major company to destroy the lives of a couple in Natick,” said the US attorney in Boston, Andrew Lelling, at a news conference, “all because they published content the company executives didn’t like.”

Each charge carries a sentence of up to five years in prison. Baugh, whose age was given as 45, and his deputy, David Harville, 48, were arrested. The other defendants are Zea, who is now 26; Popp, 32; Stephanie Stockwell, 26; and Brian Gilbert, 51. A seventh employee, Philip Cooke, 55, was charged in July. Contacted through their lawyers, none would comment except Zea, who said she would plead guilty. Popp, Stockwell, Gilbert and Cooke are expected to do the same. The case is still open.



People are basically good" was eBay's founding principle. But in the deranged summer of 2019, prosecutors say, a campaign to terrorize a blogger crawled out of a dark place in the corporate soul. Kako/The New York Times

This account is based on court documents and dozens of interviews with people who followed the stalking scandal closely, including six who worked in Global Security and Resilience. The scheme they describe was both completely malevolent and remarkably inept — full of daft assumptions on the part of eBay about a plot that did not exist. It stands as a warning about how easily tech companies can feel aggrieved, and the mayhem that can ensue when they do. And it vividly shows how the internet makes people crazy, often without them ever realising it.

Paul Florence was chief executive of Concentric Advisors, the staffing agency that placed Zea at eBay. "It felt like eBay was breaking the analysts down psychologically — making them doubt themselves, isolating them, turning them against each other," he said. In 18 months, eBay fired at least a dozen analysts. When Florence protested, his firm was fired, too.

"I was relieved," he said. "It seemed like a cult."

### 'CRUSH THIS LADY'

Like many people during the dot-com boom of the late 1990s, Ina and David Steiner took a hobby and turned it into a business. Ina worked at a publishing company and collected books. David, a video producer, had been going to yard sales since he was a kid. He liked

advertising collectibles, antique tools — anything that caught his eye. In 1999, four years after eBay was founded, when the notion of transacting with strangers online was still for the bold, they started a modest website offering advice to buyers.

They called it AuctionBytes, which later morphed into EcommerceBytes. Eventually, by tracking trends and policy updates across the industry, it became a resource for sellers on a number of platforms, from Etsy to Amazon — a kind of trade publication for anyone whose business is auctioning items out of a garage or storage unit. Today, Ina is in her late 50s and does the writing. David is in his early 60s and is the publisher. Neither has spoken to the press since eBay's alleged plot against them came to light.

EcommerceBytes may not have been well known, but it was required reading at the highest levels of eBay. In early 2019, Ina Steiner shared the news that eBay had hired a new communications chief, Steve Wymer, who would report to Wenig.

The two men shared an aggressive streak. Wenig had spent most of his career in East Coast financial media, as a lawyer and executive at Thomson Reuters, and he maintained a certain New York alpha quality. Before working as a technology spokesman, Wymer had spun for three Republican senators in Washington, and he kept up an interest in politics. When Rep. John Lewis tweeted about the civic importance of getting in “good trouble, necessary trouble,” for instance, Wymer replied that he had “another view on how the USA should be governed. My view is equal to your view.”

Publicly, Wenig celebrated eBay's five community values — among them, “People are basically good” and “We encourage you to treat others the way you want to be treated.” But together, he and Wymer worked to forge a more combative eBay, one that drew less inspiration from the Golden Rule and more from “The Sopranos.” (They did not respond to multiple requests for comment, and eBay would not make any executives available for interviews.)

While neither Wenig nor Wymer have been charged — both have denied involvement in the intimidation campaign — they clearly loathed Ina Steiner. In April 2019, she wrote about the chief executive's compensation, noting that his haul of \$18 million was 152 times what the average worker got, and mildly suggested it was coming at the expense of eBay sellers. After her post was published, Wymer texted a link to Wenig, adding: “We are going to crush this lady.”

Whether Steiner was breaking news about questionable expenditures, such as a pub eBay built on its campus, or marking more innocuous developments, Wenig seemed to find her existence infuriating. On May 31, 2019, she wrote that he had “promised to give sellers greater protection” from fraudulent buyers.

“Shockingly reasonable ...” Wymer wrote to Wenig.

“I couldn't care less what she says,” the CEO responded, adding: “Take her down.”



Veronica Zea, pictured on Sept 3, 2020, is pretty sure that before showing up to work at eBay in the spring of 2017, she used the site only once. Although Zea grew up in the heart of Silicon Valley, she cared little for the dazzlements of technology. Cayce Clifford/The New York Times

If there was one person Wenig detested as much as the Steiners, it was a Twitter gadfly best known by the handle “Fidomaster.” His wife sold on eBay and he thought the site was often unfair to sellers, so he would tweet about it. Each message might get no more than a dozen likes, but the Global Security and Resiliency analysts kept a file on him, and it quickly grew fat.

Baugh was convinced that there was a sinister relationship between the Steiners and Fidomaster — that they were actively conspiring to damage eBay. (He even indulged a theory that Fidomaster was the Steiners’ secret alter ego.) Eight days after Wenig’s “take her down” message, a member of the security team flew across the country and drove to the Steiners’ home, a steeply roofed charmer on a quiet street. On their fence, prosecutors say, he scrawled the word “FIDOMASTER.”

It was both ridiculous and threatening, and a taste of how weird things would get.

eBay never learned Fidomaster’s real name. Neither have I, although we spoke extensively by phone, email and Twitter. Fidomaster shared a parallel story of eBay subterfuge that is only glancingly mentioned in the criminal complaint covering the harassment of the Steiners.

In mid-2019, Fidomaster received an unsolicited message from a new Twitter user calling herself Marissa. Her picture showed her to be about 25. Claiming to be a former eBay employee, she said she possessed “extremely damaging videos of executives misbehaving” — and wanted help passing them to the Steiners.

She was fishing for Fidomaster to acknowledge that he was in league with them. When Fidomaster pointed out the obvious ways one could reach Ina Steiner, whose email address was public, Marissa suggested leaving the videos on a thumb drive at “a hotel in the city of your choice.” The wilder her suggestions got, the more Fidomaster resisted. Get a lawyer, he kept suggesting.

According to Zea, “Marissa” was two of her fellow analysts. Fidomaster’s reluctance to take the hotel bait could have suggested to eBay that perhaps its paranoia was out of control. Instead, leaders of the security team concluded that they needed to redouble their efforts.

‘DO I HAVE UR ATTENTION NOW????’

On Aug 1, 2019, Ina Steiner wrote a post about a lawsuit eBay had filed against Amazon. Although it was just a few paragraphs, and contained only a light note of scepticism about Wenig’s strategy, the chief executive was irate. Thirty-three minutes after the EcommerceBytes article went up, he texted Wymer: “If you are ever going to take her down..now is the time.”

“On it,” Wymer responded. He texted Baugh. “Hatred is a sin,” wrote Wymer, the son and grandson of Baptist pastors. “I am very sinful.”

Baugh signalled that he was ready to escalate. “Amen. I want her DONE,” Wymer wrote. “She is biased troll who needs to get BURNED DOWN.”

Wenig was going to Italy on sabbatical for August. EcommerceBytes needed to be taken care of before he returned.

Planning for the harassment campaign began, naturally, with a movie. Baugh showed the analysts a clip from “Johnny Be Good,” a 1988 teen comedy, in which a villainous football coach must deal with a host of pests arriving at his house simultaneously: a delivery guy with hundreds of dollars of unwanted pizza, singing and dancing Hare Krishnas and their elephant, a rodent exterminator, a male stripper. Baugh asked the analysts for inspiration. One of them suggested sending the Steiners a coffin.

The security chief made it clear that eBay’s leadership supported taking action, forwarding a message by Wymer in which he declared that Ina Steiner and Fidomaster “have seemingly dedicated their lives to erroneously trashing us.” Wymer continued: “I genuinely believe these people are acting out of malice and ANYTHING we can do to solve it must be explored.” He signed off with: “Whatever. It. Takes.”



According to prosecutors, Baugh and members of the security team devised a convoluted and improbable strategy: to secretly harass the Steiners, and then offer eBay's assistance in stopping the attacks — winning the Steiners' confidence and manipulating them into favourable coverage of eBay. They called it “the White Knight strategy.” Inevitably, there was a movie screening: “Body of Lies,” a CIA thriller about a fake plot that draws out a real terrorist.

Prosecutors say that on Aug 7, Popp — the “Mom” to Baugh's “Dad” — began sending Twitter messages to Ina Steiner via a fake account, @Tui\_Elei. The profile picture was a skull, and he seemed to be an eBay user from Samoa who believed that EcommerceBytes had harmed his sales. Steiner ignored the messages, even as the tone got angrier and more abusive. @Tui\_Elei wrote: “I guess im goin to have to get ur attention another way bitch...”

A parade of disturbing deliveries began at 4 p.m. on Aug. 10, when a package containing a bloody pig mask arrived at the Steiners' home. Fourteen minutes later, @Tui\_Elei wrote: “DO I HAVE UR ATTENTION NOW????”

The Steiners received a book titled “Grief Diaries: Surviving the Loss of a Spouse” and a funeral wreath. They got fly larvae and live spiders and a box of cockroaches. Copies of the September issue of “Hustler: Barely Legal” touting “eye-popping 18-year-olds” arrived at the homes of neighbours with David Steiner's name on them.

The Twitter bombardment continued, as @Tui\_Elei began to hint at violence: “wen u hurt our bizness u hurt our familys... Ppl will do ANYTHING 2 protect family!!!!”

On his own Twitter account, Wymer evoked Fred Rogers — he said a movie about the inspirational TV personality made him cry, and he once retweeted Rogers' line that “If there's anything that bothers me, it's one person demeaning another.” But inside eBay, Wymer was goading the harassment on.

“I want to see ashes,” he told Baugh on Aug 11. “As long as it takes. Whatever it takes.”

Baugh shared the message with his deputy, David Harville, adding: “I've been ordered to find and destroy.”

## SEEING GHOSTS

After the menacing deliveries and the Twitter attacks, the third phase of eBay's campaign against the Steiners began: physical surveillance in Natick.

On Aug 15, Baugh and Zea flew first class across the country. She had to go, she was told. Late that night, after checking into the Ritz-Carlton in Boston and joining with Harville, they drove to the Steiners' home in a rented vehicle. Their mission was to install a GPS device on

the couple's car, but they soon discovered that the car was locked in the garage. Harville went to a hardware store, prosecutors say, and bought a pry bar and nitrile gloves so he could break in. (That never came to pass.)

The Steiners were suffering. "It was psychologically devastating," Lelling, the US attorney, later said. The couple lost sleep, became anxious and worried about being followed. They turned for help to the local police, who agreed to keep an eye on them.

On the team's second day in Massachusetts, Baugh, Zea and Harville returned to Natick and began following the Steiners' car as it drove the streets. They tapped into an internet feed of the Natick police radio, and when they overheard that they'd been spotted, they abandoned their pursuit.

But the torments continued. At 4:30 am, a 24-hour pizzeria delivered to the Steiners \$70 of pies — and a demand for payment. @Tui\_Elei kept up his semiliterate invective, with graphic sexual references. More pizza. Craigslist ads appeared, announcing estate sales ("Everything must go!") and nightly swingers parties at the Steiner home ("Come knock on the door/ring the doorbell anytime of day or night"). @Tui\_Elei doxxed their home address.

Harville returned to California, and Popp took his place in Boston. The eBay team made another attempt at surveillance on Aug. 18, this time with a different rental car — which David Steiner managed to photograph. The fourth time they travelled to Natick to stalk the Steiners, a Jeep with tinted windows was parked outside the house, easily identified as an undercover cop. With satisfaction, Baugh wrote on WhatsApp: "They are seeing ghosts now. Lol."

Laughing was a mistake — the Natick police were fast and efficient. A detective figured out that a payment had been made on some of the pizzas with a gift card bought in Silicon Valley, just a few miles from eBay headquarters, and the license plate of one of the rental cars was traced to Zea. It wasn't hard to figure out where she worked. On Aug 21, a detective showed up at the Ritz-Carlton to see her. After Zea dodged him, the detective called her phone as Baugh was hustling her to the airport. Baugh answered, pretended he was her husband, and played dumb.

Zea's flight was not for hours, so they got a hotel room at the airport to hide out. Baugh sat on the couch and played a clip from the 2003 comedy "Old School," in which a husband answers the door to a fellow who says, "I'm here for the gang bang." He kept watching it over and over and laughing, telling Zea to lighten up.

## WHATEVER IT TAKES

The Natick police got the FBI involved, as well as eBay's lawyers, who began their own investigation. According to prosecutors, Baugh's security team began a cover-up. To explain away why a gift card used in Natick had been purchased in eBay's backyard, they combed

their list of “persons of interest” — anybody who’d ever made a threat against the company — for locals, so that they could frame someone. They also considered creating a stalker from whole cloth, preferably a Samoan, to match the fake @Tui\_Elei account.

Managers also ordered up fake dossiers on the Steiners as persons of interest themselves, for the purpose of sharing them with police — to “make them look crazy,” as one of them put it, and discredit their harassment complaints.

Meanwhile, members of the security team wrote emails to one another to create the appearance that they had just discovered the @Tui\_Elei tweets, and one of them, Brian Gilbert, phoned the Steiners, ostensibly to offer eBay’s support — the final step of the “white knight” strategy. “Just made phone contact,” Gilbert informed the team afterward. “They are totally rattled and immediately referred me to Natick PD.”

For hours, prosecutors say, the team workshopped cover stories to mislead the Natick authorities, and at one point considered enlisting a “friendly” in a Bay Area police department to provide falsified security camera footage. The next day, Aug 22, Gilbert met with Natick detectives. According to records produced by prosecutors, the confident tone of the security team’s communications changed almost immediately.

On Aug 25, looking for some high-level support, Baugh wrote Wymer that his team had done an “Op” on “our friend in Boston.” Police had gotten wind, he said, and even eBay’s lawyers were asking questions. “If there is any way to get some top cover that would be great,” he wrote. Wymer’s response is unknown.

Baugh’s team tried to stonewall company investigators. When eBay’s legal department interviewed Zea the next day, over speakerphone, the lawyers did not know that Popp was coaching her in the background. Zea lied, saying she had been in Boston to attend a conference. Afterwards, according to prosecutors, Baugh instructed the team to erase data from their phones. By the end of the month, eBay lawyers knew enough to place the first members of Global Security and Resiliency, including Baugh, on administrative leave.

On Sept 18, Zea got a message from her placement agency: “We find it necessary to terminate your employment effective today.” She received no severance. Wymer was also fired. Wenig resigned later in the month, saying it was clear he “was not on the same page” as the eBay board. There was no hint of scandal. His exit package was \$57 million.

In June 2020, when the FBI completed its investigation and the charges became public, Wenig said in a statement that he had done nothing wrong. “There was no direction, no knowledge, no private understanding, no tacit approval. Ever,” he said. “I was just speaking off the cuff.” In a separate statement, Wymer said he would “never condone or participate in” any of the activities directed against the Steiners.

Ina Steiner continues to cover eBay news big and small. The company's stock has nearly doubled since a March low, thanks to the coronavirus powering online sales. Elliott Management has booked a substantial profit.

Zea is faring less well. She got a job as an analyst at a big social media company last fall, but when the Steiner case became public, she was fired. She has moved back in with her parents. She used the people-tracking skills she acquired at eBay to wipe herself off the internet. Some days, she feels she barely exists at all.

"It's easy to say, 'Why didn't I leave?'" she says. "But in the moment, I was terrified and stuck. I am so sorry. I regret playing even a small role here. If I could go back in time and prevent the Steiners from experiencing this in any way, I would do so in a heartbeat."

She says she did little in Massachusetts except sometimes drive the rented cars around Natick and call her mother and cry about how much she hated her job. It had been truly sadistic: Once, a guard pulled all the analysts' personal possessions out of their lockers and dumped them in trash bags, to teach them that they could not expect privacy at work. This was followed by a clip about locker discipline from the Vietnam film "Full Metal Jacket."

Tech platforms are used to commit crimes all the time, but Zea's experience is something new: being asked to commit a crime to protect the platform itself, or at least protect the executives running it. Balk — as one of her colleagues did — and you're fired. Go along with the plan, trusting that the ex-police captains on your team know the difference between right and wrong, and your fate might be much worse.

"I don't know when I'll ever trust an employer again — or when an employer will ever trust me," Zea said.

Wenig and Wymer have no such worries. In June, Wenig was reelected to the board of General Motors, a position that pays \$317,000 a year. Mary Barra, GM's chief executive, called the cyberstalking scandal "regrettable" but noted "it didn't involve any GM business."

Wymer has a new job, as chief executive of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Silicon Valley. The chair of the board said the nonprofit was "aware" of what happened at eBay, but believes Wymer is "a leader with integrity" and was the unanimous choice for the job.

A tweet from the organisation announcing his hiring included as a hashtag Wymer's signature phrase: Whatever It Takes. For the children of Silicon Valley in the bleak year 2020, that's the new Golden Rule.