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SMBC's new cybersecurity chief is building the bank's security foundation in real time



Donna Hart joined SMBC in February as chief information security officer. She is based in Charlotte.

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As a Japanese banking giant ramps up hiring in Charlotte, Donna Hart is laying the cybersecurity foundation behind its long-term growth plans.

Hart joined Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corp. (NYSE: SMFG) in February as the Americas Division's chief information security officer, stepping in as the Tokyo-based bank executes its most ambitious U.S. expansion to date. SMBC announced April 7 it would establish its second U.S. headquarters in uptown Charlotte, backed by a \$50.5 million investment and a commitment to hire 2,000 employees through 2032.

That build-out puts Hart at the center of a high-stakes build. Cybersecurity, she argues, is the foundation SMBC's Charlotte growth depends on.

Hart most recently served as CISO at Ally Financial Inc. (NYSE: ALLY), where she spent five years building an enterprise information security and risk management program from the ground up. Before that, she spent more than two decades at Wells Fargo & Co. (NYSE: WFC) and predecessor Wachovia Corp. in progressively senior leadership roles. She's a Charlotte native.

The role she stepped into is notably different from anything she's held before. Hart said SMBC's global footprint adds a layer of complexity Ally never demanded. And the threat landscape is shifting fast, driven by artificial intelligence tools that are accelerating both defensive capability and attacker sophistication in equal measure.

Hart recently spoke with the Charlotte Business Journal to discuss building a world-class cybersecurity function in real time. Following are excerpts of that conversation.

You stepped into this role as SMBC is building out its second U.S. headquarters in Charlotte. What drew you to this opportunity at this stage of your career?

As a native North Carolinian, I've been extremely blessed to work for three great companies and remain in Charlotte for over 25 years. As full-time working parents, my husband and I have been able to have family close and help us raise our two sons. However, when I decided it was time to look for a new career challenge, I was completely prepared to move to another city for the right opportunities. I was pulled to SMBC before I even learned the location because of its culture, technology strategy and outlook on how technology has become critical to business operations. Many companies continue to see technology as a cost, not an opportunity. I'm drawn to companies like SMBC that see it's important to tie technology innovation to business outcomes.

The other big draw was the chance to influence a global organization; those opportunities don't come often. For me, this was a moment to step out of incremental change and into something that I can truly help shape. SMBC is standing up an operations and support hub in Charlotte – with a clear ambition to grow it into a full-service, globally relevant location over time. I get to bring my judgment, experience and leadership to the table early – shaping how security is designed and embedded as the organization grows. This is work with real weight behind it. But the real challenge – and what excites me most – is staying ahead of rapid, AI-driven change and an increasingly complex landscape.

What ultimately motivated your transition to SMBC from Ally? And how does the scope of this role differ from what you were doing previously?

I'm grateful for my time at Ally. I learned a lot, worked with outstanding people and helped build a cybersecurity function grounded in trust, teamwork and the smart use of technology. I will be driving cybersecurity for SMBC Americas much in the same way I did at Ally. What SMBC adds to my book is a global footprint.

As I step into this role, I'm excited to apply my experience by building a new team, creating stability and putting strong, dependable foundations in place. SMBC's global footprint brings a new level of scale, complexity and challenge, but for me, leadership is still about the same things: great people, clear direction and enabling teams with the right tools to do their best work. I am really looking forward to what we are going to build. And the final big factor is impact.

As the broader organization expands, our cyber teams are laying the groundwork first – resilience, trust and the ability to grow safely. You can genuinely see how the work you do today will shape what this place will look like in five or six years' time.

SMBC has said Charlotte will start as an operations and support hub, with ambitions to grow into a full-service location. From a cybersecurity standpoint, what has to be in place for that shift to happen?

Charlotte is a strategic growth opportunity for SMBC. Right now, we're focused on building a strong operations and support hub, with ambition to grow it into a full-service location in the long term. Cybersecurity is the foundation, not a constraint. As we expand, we must meet local regulatory standards and stay ahead of AI-driven risk – because secure growth is sustainable growth. Front-office hiring could follow in line with the broader expansion of SMBC Americas, but what we're building in Charlotte today will create the confidence to scale tomorrow. That's what makes this journey so exciting.

What are your top priorities when it comes to building and scaling your team in Charlotte?

We're building something for the long term. Over the next six years, our focus is on thoughtfully growing a world-class, global capability – scaling teams with intention, investing in people early and maintaining a culture where careers can genuinely develop.

Right now, we have 75 roles open in Charlotte across three key areas – IT and data, risk and governance, and business operations. These teams add to the existing foundation that SMBC has built in Charlotte, and they will play a critical role in shaping how the Charlotte facility operates, innovates and scales.

What's exciting for anyone considering us is the chance to be part of the journey from the beginning. As the site grows, so will the opportunities – new roles, new challenges and the ability to make a lasting impact. We plan to open additional positions across areas like cyber and operations in the coming months, and I encourage people to follow us on LinkedIn or subscribe for job alerts through our website.

AI is already reshaping how banks operate and how threats emerge. How are you thinking about AI both as a tool for defense and as a growing source of risk?

While AI isn't new, taking the human out of the decision-making loop is – and that creates opportunity for both good use and for bad. Our approach to AI is deliberately adaptive to keep up with the pace at which new models are being released.

As a bank, we have a fiduciary responsibility to be operationally resilient, make fair decisions and protect our customers' data. At the same time, recent changes have made AI adoption for cyber defense a critical initiative. The industry has realized we must fight AI with AI, because the human decision factor is no longer fast enough. So we've pivoted to prioritize AI for cyber defense.

Ultimately, AI reinforces a long-standing truth in financial services: Technology can enhance resilience, but it doesn't replace strong fundamentals or sound judgment. The institutions that manage this well will be those that stay disciplined and are willing to continuously adjust their approach as scale and risk increase in tandem.

ABOUT SMBC

Organization: Founded in 2001, Tokyo-based SMBC offers services including corporate and investment banking, treasury services and equity research, among others. It boasts \$2 trillion in total assets and over 150 office locations across 40 countries.

Charlotte HQ: SMBC has signed a lease for 200,000 square feet at 301 South College with plans to move in as early as this fall.

Currently: SMBC has about 180 employees in a small office at 500 E. Morehead St.