Jump-start your career with open source skills

"College programs don't always teach the real-world skills you need in today's workplace. Here's how to boost your knowledge through internships and open source opportunities."

Although attending college is not required for success in software development, college programs can provide a great deal of useful information in a relatively short period of time. More importantly, they are designed to cover all necessary concepts without the knowledge holes some self-taught practitioners suffer. College programs also often include theory and history, which can form the foundation for professional exploration and decision-making.

Yet college graduates entering the workforce often find their coursework has emphasized theory over the practice, technologies, and trends required for success on the job. The reason? Curricula take time to develop, so institutions of higher education often teach technologies and practices that are at the tail end of current usage.

Internships

Fortunately, there are ways to learn and develop the knowledge and skills you need to land a job and succeed in today's workplace. One approach is the internship. Many students spend mid-term breaks interning with organizations. Internships are an effective way to gain exposure to different technologies and techniques than those taught in school. An added bonus: you'll get paid to do so (do not accept an unpaid internship; your time is valuable).

Of course, competition for the best internships can be stiff, and it might be difficult to find an internship in the area or industry that most interests you.

Contributing to open source projects

Another way to gain extra knowledge is to participate in, and contribute to, free and open source software (aka FOSS). There are millions of FOSS projects that offer a nearly infinite variety of learning opportunities. It's a superb way to learn critical skills you may not get in school, such as QA, version control, writing tests, using continuous integration and development, writing documentation, and designing user interfaces. You can participate in FOSS on your own schedule, any time of the year. FOSS participation offers the opportunity to learn from, and be mentored by, some of the best and the brightest in the industry. It also allows you to build a portfolio of publicly available work, which will impress prospective employers much more than standard coursework.

Finding a project

Several online services are available to help people contribute to free and open source software. Some provide tips for contributing, while others act as matchmakers, pairing people with projects that need help. First Timers Only, in addition to being a movement requesting and helping project maintainers label bugs as **#first-timers-only**, presents new contributors with helpful links and tips to get started. **GitHub Explore** and **CodeTriage** both provide pointers to interesting projects that are looking for new contributors. During the Christmas holiday season, 24 Pull Requests is a great way to find projects that need help.

Your search for FOSS projects needn't be limited to online. Most urban areas and many smaller communities play host to different events where you can learn and contribute in person. Many groups post their events, conferences, and **hackathons** on Meetup.com or even on Facebook, but don't forget that your local public or college library is a valuable resource to learn about events in your community. If you can't find a group, start one! The library is also a great place to post meetings and bring together people who wish to explore open source contributions.