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P4 Tech Women: Finding Mentorship at Hackbright

Dec 19, 2014
by Liz Lam, QA Lead Engineer ([@p4liz](#))

This is part of a [blog series](#) designed to explore the stories of our Women in Tech at Perforce. It's been fun and inspiring talking to each one of these women. As they share where they've been and how they came to where they are now, it is my hope that others will be encouraged and inspired too.

[Silvia Gheorghita](#) is our second [Hackbright Academy](#) hire. She's been at Perforce for just under a year and has already made impressive contributions to the company including adding tests to our automation suite. When she's not heads down testing, she loves photography, running and [blogging about food](#).

 Silvia Gheorghita

When did you first become interested in tech?

I grew up in a family of engineers. When I was a teenager, my dad and I would build computers out of parts, which is how I learned about compatibility and dependencies the hard way. In school, I wasn't naturally good at math but I sought math, physics and computer science because they were hard. I wanted to overcome my weaknesses instead of living with them. I went to a math and computer science-focused school before studying computer science in the US. I still don't think of myself as a "left-brained" person, even though I'm an engineer. I'm actually just a writer with a pretty decent sense of logic.

What were some challenges that stopped you from initially pursuing a career in the tech industry?

While I was in college, I worked as a live-in tech support assistant in the dorms. I graduated in a weak economy and ended up applying for more tech support jobs because that was I knew best. It was comfortable and I was learning, so I stayed in IT for a few years.

Although I had the degree to be an engineer, I didn't feel prepared to face the real-life problems that an engineer would have to handle. I was the only student pursuing computer science in my school so I designed projects for myself and developed them in isolation, with no peers to exchange ideas with or compare myself to. I had no sense of whether I was good enough to code in the real world or how useful my skills were. The absence of a learning community and the scarcity of feedback from authoritative sources were big challenges for me and made me apprehensive about working in engineering as a career.

What was your first programming language?

C++. I went to a math and computer science-intensive high school and we studied C++ for 4 years.

How would you describe your experience at Hackbright Academy?

It was very eye-opening. On the one hand, I realized how many things an engineer can do and how prolific the Bay Area is in terms of producing novelty in this field. On the other hand, I was made aware of my own resourcefulness when there was no one available to help me, and there's a hefty project and a deadline on my plate.

For my final project, I chose something that required advanced knowledge of networking protocols and of Python's methods for encoding and decoding network traffic. No one at Hackbright had this kind of knowledge, and neither did any of my mentors. I got to a point where there was simply no one to ask. No one I knew had the time or availability to plunge as deeply as I had into the networking mess I was in. So I was faced with the realization that I was the best qualified person to help me.

Being an engineer still felt intimidating, even after Hackbright. But my perspective changed—I was much less afraid.

Did you have any mentors before Hackbright?

No. It was the first time that I had someone who was both knowledgeable and happily willing to help me. It made me feel very lucky.

How did you get started with Perforce and version control?

Perforce was one of my first interviews after Hackbright, and the offer came that same afternoon after I left the office. I was the first in my class to get an offer, which was flabbergasting because all of us expected to interview a lot before we found the right fit. I decided firmly on Perforce, so I stopped interviewing after that.

I'd had no experience with version control other than using Git for my Hackbright project. But I had a strong feeling that I'd fit in at Perforce. The people were relaxed, and I felt the work was sufficiently challenging to keep me learning and interested in the job for a good while.

What is your role now at Perforce?

I'm a Software Engineer in Test in the QA department, working on our Git Fusion product (an adaptor between Perforce and Git).

What language do you code in today?

I spend a lot of time writing scripts in bash and expect. I also analyze Python code as part of my job and I'm now starting to write tests for our automated tests suite in Perl.

What resources would you recommend for people interested in learning how to program?

- Join a MeetUp for women who practice coding together (Women Who Code is a good one). The knowledge sharing and camaraderie you get there are very refreshing.

- Take a course in logic. Logic is very important in programming and helps structure your thinking.
- Take a course in bash. You'll need to know your way well around a terminal regardless of what kind of programming you do.
- Come up with small programming tasks for yourself and learn how to complete them. They have to be attainable (not too complicated), and they have to be useful to you. A lot of people find learning tools like Code School very useful. I personally learn better when I work on practical tools for myself, because I actually have a stake in the final product. For instance, write a script that resizes all the images in a folder to a maximum length of the longest side, for sharing on the web.

What advice would you give to women getting into the software industry?

- Contact a Hackbright alumna. All of us feel grateful to be where we are, and most of us are happy to share about our experience and help others reach similar goals. We're pretty easy to find on LinkedIn, or through the Hackbright network.
- Attend tech talks. They are everywhere - Girl Geek Dinners are just an example. Eventbrite is a great place to look for them. Many of these talks are free and they're great for networking. But most importantly, they help you get familiar with the jargon of tech and help you feel that you belong in this world, instead of feeling like an "impostor."
- Don't go in with preconceptions. If you think that all tech companies are frat houses where "brogrammers" look down on women, and you prepare yourself to be tough and ruthless to make it through, that could really hurt you. Although I've heard of the "brogrammer" culture, I didn't find any of it at Perforce. Many of my friends didn't find it either at the companies where they went to work. Instead, we found smart, well-intended people with whom it's a pleasure to work. So, my advice is: go in with an open mind, and try to be an optimist.

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About the author:

Liz Lam plays on Team QA at Perforce Software. She loves breaking software, contributing ideas to new features and apparently writing blogs while consuming large amounts of coffee.

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