Closing the Digital Skills Gap

by Darren W Pulsipher, Jon Gottfried - 2023-03-16

In this episode, Darren talks to John Gottfried, co-founder of Major League hacking, about closing the digital skills gap through practical collaborative work using hackathons.

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In the episode of Embracing Digital Transformation, Darren interviews John Gottfried, co-founder of Major League Hacking, about his journey into the tech industry. John has always enjoyed tinkering with computers since he was a child and learned technical skills out of necessity to make his computer do what he wanted. He would go to the local public library to borrow books on programming languages like C and PHP and follow the examples in them. John lived through the growth of the internet, from dial-up to gigabit fiber optic internet. Despite earning a history degree in college, John landed his first job as a programmer by parlaying his tinkering skills into a part-time job that paid his bills. He has had the opportunity to do everything from building server racks to writing code for small businesses.

Environment for Tinkering

In the past, hosting a website used to be a complex task that required purchasing, setting up, and maintaining a server. However, with the advent of cloud computing services, this has become much simpler. Cloud providers like AWS, Google Cloud, or any other provider offer similar commoditized services to spin up a server in just five minutes. In the early 2000s, after catching mono John started his career as a programmer. He was dragged to tech events and hackathons in New York City by his colleagues and that changed his perspective on the industry. It inspired him to create Major League Hacking, a company that organizes hackathons and coding competitions for students.

Major League Hacking

Major League Hacking (MLH) was founded with the goal of empowering hackers, a broad term that encompasses anyone who wants to create with technology. The organization's mission is to provide people with the skills and support network they need to start their careers in tech. MLH's founders were inspired by their experiences mentoring students on campus and wanted to make an organization out of it. They began by organizing hackathons-- weekend-long invention competitions where people came together to build prototype apps and share ideas. Today, MLH has expanded its offerings to include a variety of ways to help people build their skills, including hands-on projects and a supportive community.

Building a Community of Learning

Major League Hacking has extended its reach through various programs including meetups, workshops, virtual conferences, and immersive fellowships. Their goal was to bridge the gap between foundational skills and real-world application. The viral spread of their hackathons and events made it possible to connect with different universities and communities without marketing efforts. To support local leaders in building their own communities, they provided mentorship, connected them with other schools, and brought in sponsors. Big corporations and small companies could also get involved by bringing real-world tools, APIs, and proprietary tools to hackers. This way, they provided exposure and mentorship and rewarded them for creating interesting projects.

Bridging the Skills Gap

Hackathons provide a unique learning experience to bring people together that otherwise would not work together. Many hackathons are sponsored by corporate representatives who send engineers, recruiters, or developer evangelists to spend the

weekend with students, helping them debug their code and teaching them about APIs. While hackathons are fun and offer free pizza and swag, they also offer valuable education and real-world practice. Hackathons are beneficial for professionals as well and that anyone can benefit from committing to a focused time and place to build something. Hackathon projects are typically open-ended, and prizes are often offered by sponsors for different categories. Project teams form organically at hackathons, and many lifelong bonds and even startups have been founded after meeting at these events.

Hackathon Successes

John shares a story about a team of high school students who built a prototype app at one of their events that automated tasks on the iPhone. Apple acquired their company four years later and made their project a core feature of iOS, which was an impressive achievement for a project that began at a hackathon. John believes that hackathons are an excellent source of intern and new grad talent and may soon replace career fairs. People interested in participating in hackathons can visit MLH's website to learn more about upcoming events and sponsorship opportunities.

More information can be found about hackathons near you at https://mlh.io/

intel.