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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Why I'm Not Looking to Hire Computer-Science Majors

Finding software developers is hard, especially with colleges doing such a rotten job of teaching them skills.
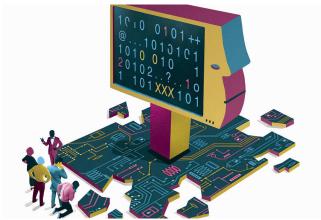

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By **DANIEL GELERNTER**
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I usually say the hardest part of running a tech startup is raising money, but that's a bit of a smokescreen: We spend the money on software developers, who are an incredibly hot commodity in scarce supply. Finding them is the toughest task.

Part of the problem is that startups have to compete with hegemons like Google and Facebook that offer extraordinary salaries for the

best talent. I recently met a college student whom Facebook recruited as a summer intern at $10,000 a month. A junior developer fresh out of college can expect to earn around $10,000 monthly, plus benefits, a $100,000 signing bonus and $200,000 in stock options. For a more experienced developer, the sky's the limit. Business Insider reported last year that a startup offering an annual salary of $500,000 was unable to lure a senior developer away from Google because he was earning $3 million a year in cash and stock.

A small startup has to compensate for its relatively anemic cash offers with more generous stock grants, and—our best feature—a lifestyle of low authority and high responsibility, where each developer sees his work changing the product on a daily basis.

The thing I look for in a developer is a longtime love of coding—people who taught themselves to code in high school and still can't get enough of it. The eager but not innately passionate coders being churned out of 12- and 19-week boot camps in New York tend not to be the best: There are too many people simply looking for a career transition, and not enough who love coding for its own sake.

The thing I don't look for in a developer is a degree in computer science. University computer science departments are in miserable shape: 10 years behind in a field that changes every 10 minutes. Computer science departments prepare their students for academic or research careers and spurn jobs that actually pay money. They teach students how to design an operating system, but not how to work with a real, live development team.

There isn't a single course in iPhone or Android development in the computer science departments of Yale or Princeton. Harvard has one, but you can't make a good developer in one term. So if a college graduate has the coding skills that tech startups need, he most likely learned them on his own, in between problem sets. As one of my developers told me: "The people who were good at the school part of computer science—just weren't good developers." My experience in hiring shows exactly that.

This is a shame because the young people who get degrees in computer science or engineering often have the makings of great software developers—the interest is there. But the education is a failure.

Today we insist on higher-education for everything—where a high-school diploma for a teacher or a reporter was once adequate, a specialized degree in education or journalism is now required. But my lead developer didn't graduate from college, and neither did my other full-stack developer. I do have one developer with a degree in electrical engineering: Did he learn any of his development skills in

college, I ask? No.

There is an opportunity to relieve the drought of qualified software developers that has driven up prices and is stunting startup growth: A serious alternative to the $100,000 four-year college degree wouldn't even need to be accredited—it would merely need to teach students the skills that startups are desperate for, and that universities couldn't care less about.

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