Meet’in Up in Austin, TX

I attended a meetup in Austin, TX designed for people interested in becoming a data scientist. Perfect, I thought, as ***I*** am a person interested in becoming a data scientist. The meetup consisted of a panel of data scientists, and 50 onlookers, myself included. The panel was made up of 5 individuals who work in the field, locally, and they talked about their experiences as well as what they look for in employees. Overall, I would say that it was a positive experience.

The pros were that I made some contacts. Most of the other people attending were newly interested in the data science field, like me, which gave us all something to talk about. The panel was very friendly, open to answering any questions, and knowledgeable. One panelist came from academia (a former professor) but the rest of the panel were from a math oriented background and fell into data science. Their stories were interesting to listen to.

The cons were that I did not meet anyone who came from a CS background and worked their way into data science. One panelist went so far as to say that CS people are less capable to move into this field than math educated people are to move into CS. Also, all of the panelists come from the tech sector, so every project they described centered on company profits or consumer acquisition. Coming from the realm of CS myself, and not having any graduate math level work under my belt, it was hard to not take that personally. Also, having worked for other people my entire life, and watched businesses come and go (which means the jobs also come and go), I am less than moderately excited about helping a company increase clicks by improving their recommendation engine than I am about working 16 hour days to produce an algorithm that would predict the best possible placement of a dog park – the latter actually sounds fun.

I hope to be the exception to the norm for a CS person moving into data science, but I also want my work to mean something to me. I would hope that the data science position I eventually fill will task me to solve real world problems, and enhance people's lives, rather than find ways to retain customers and increase profits. Also, I will be looking for a less formal meetup to attend in the future.