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Should you enroll in a coding boot camp?

By Steve Hendershot March 07, 2015

Troy Leach moved to Chicago last year in search of glamour and fortune, much the way aspiring starlets beeline it to Hollywood. Except Leach, 46, is no starlet. After working construction in Colorado for the past 29 years—"My body hurts," he says to explain his decision to quit—he was lured here by a computer programming training academy called **Dev Bootcamp** and the potential of a new, high-paying career after graduation.

It was, admittedly, a risk. Leach did not know much about programming or Chicago. But last year, he was accepted into Dev Bootcamp's intensive 10-week school in River North. In exchange for his $12,000 tuition (now $12,700), the academy promised to put career-switchers like Leach and hobbyists through 80-hour weeks to ready them for junior developer jobs at tech companies.

It's a tall order, converting novices into professionals in a field that can take years to master. But Dev Bootcamp claims to have it all figured out. It says more than 1,000 students nationwide have graduated since the program was launched in 2012 and 90 percent have found developer jobs within six months.

In Chicago, Dev Bootcamp and at least seven other nontraditional programs have sprung up since 2011, capitalizing on today's extraordinary demand for developers. Code.org, a Seattle nonprofit, estimates that each year the U.S. creates about 100,000 more tech jobs than computer-science graduates. "It's such an area of demand right now that we're finding our clients just want to see (a candidate's) work—the portfolio and thought process—and they're less interested in a traditional degree," says Rosemary Walker, manager of the Chicago office of **Creative Circle**, a recruiter that places Web designers and developers.

Yet graduating from a coding academy hardly guarantees a soaring career. Veteran techies agree that no one—not even the smartest student at the most effective, immersive school—can become a full-fledged software developer or digital designer in 90 days. That means the long-term success of boot camp alumni depends on strong mentorship and on-the-job training, and such handholding often is in short supply at high-growth startups.

Meanwhile, some industry experts predict that the demand for developers will level out. That would undercut starting salaries and diminish the appeal of candidates with only a few months' training.

To be fair, boot camps don't claim to churn out pros: "You come out as a dabbler, but then you can pick what to build on," says Jim Jacoby, a Chicago user-interface and user-experience designer who advises a design-focused Chicago boot camp called **Designation**.

What they do promise: a head start that will enable graduates to learn more easily on the job, like a culinary school grad at a fine-dining restaurant. These are sexy, newfangled trade schools for high-paying, white-collar jobs, and if their grads can climb the ladder over time, this model could not only address the tech industry's staffing shortage but pose another challenge to traditional higher education.

The coding boot camp phenomenon is not confined to Chicago. Around the country, 241 such schools have sprouted in the past five years, according to **Course Report**, a boot camp-review site. Boot camps churned out 6,000 graduates nationwide last year; the typical graduate is a 29-year-old man who is getting into programming but already working in a technical field or at a startup. Course Report's research indicates a 75 percent job-placement rate nationally, with graduates earning an average starting salary of about $75,000.

Most boot camps are private companies that don't disclose revenue. As their market grows, some have become more than a conduit between aspiring programmers and tech companies—a few have turned into hot startups themselves. Last year, test-prep company **Kaplan** bought Dev Bootcamp for an undisclosed amount. In January, one San Francisco-based boot camp, **Hack Reactor**, acquired another, **Makersquare**, also for an

undisclosed sum.

“It was the wild, Wild West all last year, and now you're going to see major consolidation,” says Aaron Fazulak, co-founder of Designation.

Dev Bootcamp co-founder Dave Hoover, who was a senior programmer at Chicago-based Groupon during its explosive ascent, says the boom reminds him of daily deals' heyday: “It's not a complex business model, and it's a model with pretty good cash flow and a two-sided market with students and employers,” he says. “And now they're popping up everywhere."

Tech firms as a rule de-emphasize academic credentials in favor of skills and portfolio projects, and while the boot camps aren't cheap, their tuition and time commitment are a fraction of those of universities or even community colleges. If you can get started in three months, then get paid to continue learning on the job, well, why not? Another selling point is flexibility. Part of the boot camp pitch to employers is if they suddenly need specialists in a particular programming language or framework, the schools can quickly revise their curriculums.

For Leach, the prospect of an in-demand, highly paid job—entry-level Web developers can earn $80,000, and Web designers can earn $60,000—was a compelling draw. “I know the world is moving in this direction,” he says. “Making a crapload of money is intriguing, too.”

But after moving to Chicago last March with his wife and starting classes at Dev Bootcamp, he soon hit a roadblock. He failed the test to advance beyond the program's first three-week phase, retook the course and failed again. He left the program and toyed with the idea of moving back to Colorado. (Dev Bootcamp students who fail an assessment may retake that phase at no cost. About 5 percent of students leave after twice failing an assessment.)

But he soon realized that Chicago offered other options and enrolled in January in **Anyone Can Learn To Code**, which holds classes at River North tech incubator 1871. For $9,000, the 12-week program offers night and weekend classes that allow students to hold a day job. (Leach paid $8,000.) To afford the training, Leach landed a $9-an-hour job working at O'Hare International Airport as a baggage handler. It was a far cry from his $60,000 construction salary, but this time around, he's getting the hang of coding. And, he says, “I've got this whole new spark. I enjoy it.” On his off days, he says he spends 14 to 15 hours practicing what he's learning.

What's not entirely clear is how boot camp-trained developers will fare over the course of their careers. Alumni “are still just a year or two out, so one of the things we have yet to see is the career trajectory and whether they're advancing and getting promotions,” says New York-based Course Report co-founder Liz Eggleston.

Some in the sector foresee nothing but blue sky. Boot camps are “here to stay,” says Anna Lindow, general manager of campus education at **General Assembly**, a New York-based boot camp that opened a Chicago facility last fall.

Chicago recruiter Rosemary Walker agrees: “This is the future of education. The apprenticeship model is cost-effective for people looking to enter the industry, as well as for employers.”

But while boot camps may threaten two-year and four-year colleges, today's outsize job-placement percentages won't last, others in the tech sector warn. At some point, the rising supply of coders will match demand, which is expected to flatten out. “There is a huge misalignment right now, and this money won't last,” says Michelle Joseph, CEO of **People Foundry**, a consulting firm that helps venture-backed startups build their teams.

What's more, Joseph says that the sexy, well-funded startups she represents are poor fits for boot-camp grads. That's because developers at such companies often work quickly, under pressure and with little supervision. Not only is that a tough environment for a would-be apprentice; it's not great for the startup, either. “You don't know what they don't know until the product doesn't work,” Joseph says.

“I'd be afraid of somebody coming in here (from a boot camp) because they'd be hacking out code and creating problems I would have to go back and fix,” says Kamil Chmielewski, director of software at **Rithmio**, a Chicago-based wearable-technology startup. “I've been coding for 10 years, and only now have I really started to understand what will result from each decision I make.”

Probably the best known of Chicago-based bootcamps, and one of the early pioneers, is **Starter League**, which eschews job-placement promises and is now emphasizing a longer, nine-month program that focuses on broad entrepreneurship training. Co-founder Mike McGee says he worries, too, that the market is overheated.

McGee predicts that many 90-day boot camp grads will be disappointed not only by the job market but in the job itself. “Why would you quit your job, cash out your 401(k) and come to a boot camp just to get a crappy job at the end of it?” he says.

But a crappy job is still a job. Claire Jencks walked away from the San Francisco National Maritime Park Association last year to spend eight weeks and $7,000 on tuition (rates have since increased) to learn coding at Chicago's **Mobile Makers** Academy in River North. Today she is earning more than $60,000 as an associate software developer at financial giant Capital One in San Francisco.

“I struggle with the sense that I'm not good enough and everyone else is better than me,” says Jencks, who opted to attend the coding academy in lieu of grad school and got a job less than a month after graduation. “I'm also learning that all beginning engineers are kind of making it up as they go along.” Larger companies with formal on-the-job training programs, such as Capital One or Chicago-based electronic payment-processor **Braintree**, acquired by PayPal in 2013, can take the time to mentor junior developers. Some startups are welcoming homes, too. **Social Sprout**, which manages social media for clients, has hired five Dev Bootcamp-trained engineers in the past year as well as five computer science grads with four-year degrees. All 10 are being mentored together.

The university-trained coders have a better grasp of programming theory, says Jim Conti, Chicago-based Sprout Social's director of talent. But he likes the mix. “The fact that both are coming into similar roles makes for greater diversity and strength.”

If he hacks it this time, Leach will enter the job market April 19.
