

Non-technical founder? Learn to hack

I frequently get asked by non-technical solo founders if I know any potential hacker cofounders they should talk to. These people give a passionate pitch for the idea and a long list of all the hustling they've done, customers they've spoken to, models they've built, provisional patents they've filed, etc. Most of the time, they are thoughtful and hardworking. But they've often been searching for their technical cofounder for many months, and things have stalled during that process.

When people like this say "I'll do whatever it takes to make this business successful" (which they almost always say), I say something like "Why not learn to hack? Although it takes many, many years to become a great hacker, you can learn to be good enough to build your site or app in a few months. And even if you're not going to build the next version, if you're going to run a software company, it seems like a good idea to know a little bit about it."

Usually the response is something like "That wouldn't be the best use of my time", "I don't like it", or "I don't have that kind of brain". (Earlier today it was "You don't understand, I'm the idea guy. If I'm hacking, who will be talking to investors?", which is what prompted this post.) But every once in awhile people think about it and decide to learn to hack, and it usually works out.

They're often surprised how easy it is. Many hackers love to help people who are just starting. There are tutorials for pretty much everything and great libraries and frameworks.

As an important aside, if you try to learn on your own, it can be really hard.

You'll hit some weird ruby error and give up. It's important to have someone—a friend, a teacher at a coding bootcamp, etc.—that get you through these frustrating blocks.

When hackers have to for their startups, they are willing to learn business stuff. Business people should do the same. If you're not willing to do this, you should remember that there are far greater challenges coming in the course of a startup than learning how to code. You should also remember that you can probably learn to code in less time than it will take to find the right cofounder.

Speaking of cofounders, a word of warning: meeting a stranger for the express purpose of cofounders hardly ever works. You want someone you've known for awhile and already worked with. This is another good reason for learning to hack yourself instead of bringing on a cofounder.

You can build the first version of your product, and even if it's terrible (we had a non-technical founder in YC that learned to hack with Codecademy and was still able to learn enough to build a prototype), you'll actually be able to get real user feedback, iterate on something other than mockups, and perhaps impress a great hacker enough to join you. Although you may never win a Turing Award, if you're smart and determined, you can certainly get good enough to build a meaningful version 1.

If you're a solo founder and you can't hack, learn.