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EXPERTS BLOG

Why I Was Wrong About Liberal-Arts Majors

By [David Kalt](#) [Follow](#)

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David Kalt is the founder of Reverb.com, a marketplace for musical instruments and gear, and the owner of the Chicago Music Exchange, a vintage guitar store in Chicago. He also co-founded and was the former CEO of online broker optionsXpress.

As the demand for quality computer programmers and engineers increases, conventional wisdom assumes we need more students with computer-science and engineering degrees. Makes sense, right?

I've been preaching this exact message for the past 10 years as I've fought to recruit the best programmers. Recently, though, I've realized that my experience has proved something completely different.

Looking back at the tech teams that I've built at my companies, it's evident that individuals with liberal arts degrees are by far the sharpest, best-performing software developers and technology leaders. Often these modern techies have degrees in philosophy, history, and music – even political science, which was my degree.

How can this be?

It's very simple. A well-rounded liberal arts degree establishes a foundation of critical thinking. Critical thinkers can accomplish anything. Critical thinkers can master French, Ruby on Rails, Python or whatever future language comes their way. A critical thinker is a self-learning machine that is not constrained by memorizing commands or syntax.

Writing code can be just as stimulating as playing guitar or learning chess. Therefore, like musicians, many of the best programmers are self-taught. They don't write their first line of code in a classroom. Instead, they learn Ruby on a laptop while at Starbucks, just for fun. Most liberal arts degrees encourage a well-rounded curriculum that can give students exposure to programming alongside the humanities. Philosophy, literature, art, history and language give students a thorough understanding of how people document the human experience. Technology is a part of our human experience, not a replacement to it.

While we've hired many computer-science majors that have been critical team members, it's noncomputer science degree holders who can see the forest through the trees. For example, our chief operating officer is a brilliant, self-taught engineer with a degree in philosophy from the University of Chicago. He has risen above the code to lead a team that is competitive globally. His determination and critical-thinking skills empower him to leverage the power of technology without getting bogged down by it. His background gives him the soft skills - the people skills - that make him stand out as someone who understands our customers and knows how to bring the staff along.

My point isn't that we don't need qualified, formally trained engineers with university degrees. Rather, I'm suggesting that if more tech hires held a philosophy or English degree with some programming on the side, we might in the end create better leaders in technology and life.

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