Why Every Tech Company Needs An English Major

It's an increasingly tired meme that we need more STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) graduates. Of course we do. Research shows we need more qualified workers to accommodate an economy that's increasingly reliant on engineering skills.

But there's something else we need: English majors. Why? Because as important as the technology is that powers our lives, businesses also depend on humanities-oriented communicators to articulate why the technology matters.

Indeed, every technology company, and certainly every startup trying to make its imprint on the world, needs English majors. Perhaps many.

Telling Stories

I work for an engineering-driven Big Data startup, so I understand the importance of engineering and I don't for one minute doubt that Silicon Valley's war over engineering talent is justified and will only increase. Small wonder, then, that an analysis of the salaries of University of Virginia graduates found that systems engineering and computer science graduates stand to make more than twice as much as their peers studying the liberal arts.

A strong developer is worth her weight in gold, but engineering is only half the picture in any tech company, and certainly in any startup. For every company that can develop an incredible hardware or software product, there are more companies who fail in the attempt to get someone interested in buying that product.

This is why former Twitter and Google executive Santosh Jayaram told *The Wall Street Journal* that "English majors are exactly the people I'm looking for" in building up his startup, Daemonic Labs.

English majors, according to Jayaram, can "tell stories," which is increasingly the difference between success and failure in a startup:

> *Almost anything you can imagine you can now build, so the battleground in business has shifted from engineering, which everybody can do, to storytelling, for which many fewer people have real talent.*

Vivek Ranadivé, chairman and CEO of Tibco and a hardware engineer by training, concurs with Jayaram's premise, arguing that "a liberal arts degree is more of an asset than learning any trade." Why? Because such graduates are trained in communicating—in storytelling.

Quality storytelling could be the difference between getting funded or not, and getting customers...or not.

You Think Hiring Engineers Is Hard? Try Marketing

I'm very fortunate to work for an awesome company with an exceptional product. We firmly believe our product can change the way developers interact with their data.

But too often, as I regularly tell my Marketing colleagues, we tell that story "too small." We focus on features, on the "what" of our database product, and not nearly enough on the "why" behind the technology. Answering that "why" question is something English majors do very well.

Gifted with the ability to communicate through writing, English majors, too, are worth their weight in gold. However, it's surprisingly hard to find good writers.

Really, really hard.

English majors, after all, have difficulty finding their way in technology. I should know: I'm an English major. I moved to Silicon Valley in 1997— somewhat by accident, as I was working for a large Japanese trading company. And there hasn't been a day since that I haven't felt uneasy in the engineering-centric Silicon Valley, which prizes engineering prowess over almost everything else.

So even when we English majors are among you, we try to hide the fact that we're more Ernest Hemingway than Brendan Eich. I've only recently recognized the value I bring to tech companies after literally decades of feeling self-conscious about not being an engineer.

Help Wanted: English Degree Preferred

Now that I run marketing for a software startup, the need for strong communicators is obvious to me. Blindingly so. But I still find the English majors among us don't make nearly enough of their writing skills. Just as GitHub is the new résumé for engineers, so, too, should social media and blogs be the résumé for would-be marketers. If you can write, show it.

This is why my next marketing hire might not have a traditional marketing background. I care far less about familiarity with Eloqua or other marketing automation programs and far more about the ability to construct an interesting thesis and synthesize it in a few hundred words. With so much textual communication, and so much riding on the ability to distinguish one's product through that communication, the ideal marketing candidate may look more like a technology journalist or blogger and not at all like an engineer.

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