How Your Philosophy Degree Can Be Relevant To Tech Startup Success

A degree in philosophy doesn't mean you're relegated to academia. Jon Dahl, founder of Zencoder proves that Aristotle has a lot to teach tech businesses today.

By Lydia Dishman

If he didn't have bills to pay, Jon Dahl would likely be in a lecture hall right now, opining about Aristotle and the intersection between philosophy and theology. When the siren song of a steady paycheck proved louder than the call to academia, Dahl discovered coding.

"I got into programming slowly," Dahl says, "I didn't take more formal classes, but I did a lot of study on my own, including textbooks and video lectures from MIT and Berkeley."

In short order, Dahl accumulated enough knowledge to start his own business. And then three more including Zencoder, a Y Combinator startup built on the back of a previous failed attempt to provide a platform for transcoding user-submitted video. Zencoder took that technology to the cloud and after just two years, got snapped up by online video platform Brightcove (one of *Fast Company*'s Most Innovative Compaines) for a cool $30 million.

Dahl is now VP of technology at Brightcove, where he's in charge of product and strategy for the Zencoder business. Though he still considers himself a software developer, Dahl's philosophy degree proves more useful in his work than one might think.

The Real Relevance of A Philosophy Degree

As many universities push to make humanities studies relevant in an increasingly challenging economic landscape for graduates, schools such as Stanford wrap philosophy into one of its most popular interdisciplinary majors, Symbolic Systems.

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The course of study combines computer science with linguistics, cognitive psychology, and philosophy. The likes of Reid Hoffman and Marissa Mayer credit the combination of logic and reasoning with giving them "a technologist's precision in solving non-technological problems."

Dahl isn't a Stanford alum, but his approach is similar. He says classical philosophy and coding use similar thought patterns. He breaks it down:

- First, both programming and philosophy involve taking large problems, which are too big to really think about all at once, and breaking them up into smaller problems.

- Second, both fundamentally involve thinking in abstractions: taking specific ideas or goals and finding the general principles behind them.

But businesses don't get built on breaking apart problems alone. Successful teams are the foundation of a growth-minded startup. That's another reason Dahl reaches back to the teachings of Aristotle. In his Ethics, the ancient Greek philosopher developed a theory that having a "good life" isn't just a pursuit of happiness. Adds Dahl: "For Aristotle, ethics is about practical wisdom, not just right and wrong."

To empower a team in a tech startup, Dahl relies on knowing what to do in a given situation to achieve a desired goal. "You do this by cultivating habits and virtues that help you excel without even having to think about it," he explains. "The ultimate goal is living life well, but practical wisdom also applies to smaller goals, like "running a startup well" or "programming well."

As software developers spend a lot of time thinking about "programming well," Dahl believes Aristotle's advice would be: "to not focus primarily on the external rules that can help teams build good software, but to focus more on the internal habits and practices that make individuals and teams excellent."

Bottom Line: To create a great company, hire great people and cultivate great teams, Dahl underscores. "Invest in their development and success. Outward excellence in any area--moral excellence or programming excellence--ultimately comes out of the internal excellence of individuals and groups."

Lydia Dishman is a business journalist covering innovation, entrepreneurship and style. She is a regular contributor to Fast Company and has written for CBS Moneywatch, Entrepreneur, Forbes, Popular Science, and the New York Times, among others.