Business exec says he was 'wrong' about the value of liberal arts
Students with liberal arts degrees have the soft skills to thrive at tech companies

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A business executive who has long believed the best tech workers have programming or engineering degrees is changing his tune.

As the founder of digital marketplace Reverb.com and co-founder and former CEO of online broker optionsXpress, David Kalt has long believed that more students need to major in computer science and engineering to meet increased demand in the technology industry.

But looking back at the technology teams he created at his companies, Kalt says he realized that the best employees often held degrees in the liberal arts, not STEM. According to Kalt, the liberal arts instill in students excellent critical thinking skills that help them navigate challenges in the technology world.

"A critical thinker is a self-learning machine that is not constrained by memorizing commands or syntax," he says.
How to create T-shaped professionals

Kalt notes that many top programmers are self-taught, meaning that their technical education doesn't necessarily begin in a college classroom. A philosophy or history major can pick up programming skills on their own, he says. In fact, these students are often exposed to certain basics of programming in their humanities classes.

While there are plenty of computer-science degree holders who have made excellent employees, Kalt says workers who majored in the liberal arts tend to possess certain qualities that make them stand out. Kalt points to Reverb.com’s COO, a self-taught engineer with a degree in philosophy from the University of Chicago. According to Kalt, it is the COO’s critical thinking skills and people skills that have made him successful.

“My point isn’t that we don’t need qualified, formally trained engineers with university degrees,” Kalt says. “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” (Kalt, Wall Street Journal, 6/1; Stillman, Inc., 6/24).

Also see: Yes, it is possible to achieve liberal arts outcomes with guided pathways

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