

Women in the eLearning Field - Was Your Father a Programmer? (Mar 15)



by Mark Lassoff

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“At the risk of stereotyping, I have found Indians to be more practical in their career choices than Americans. I do remember a conversation with one Indian programmer on a flight from Bangalore to New York. With lots of time to kill, we began to chat. Asked why she decided to become a programmer she responded, ‘No one told me I couldn’t do it.’”

“You must be the person who does all those beautiful designs.”

“No ma’am, this is Jessica. She’ll be the lead developer on your project,” I said. Jessica and the client shook hands. (Jessica’s name—and the names of others on the team—are changed here to protect individual privacy.)

“Oh! I’m terribly sorry. I’ve never met a female programmer before. How did you get into that? Was your father a programmer?”

“This is Rustin. He’s going to be your designer,” I interrupted.

It would have been embarrassing, had the client’s assumption not been so common. Women are designers, men are programmers. This is Texas, after all...

About 10 years ago I was leading a development team of 12 in Austin, Texas. We were a small web development agency within a larger IT firm. Jessica was one of the few females—and only African-American female—to graduate from the University of Texas’ computer science program that year. In fact, Jessica knew only one other African-American female in the entire program while she was at the University.

We were meeting a new client who managed marketing for a large chain of pet supply stores in Texas. The project was a large one for us—bring their entire inventory online and duplicate on the internet the success they had experienced in brick and mortar.

The meeting continued. The goal of the meeting was more or less to transfer the project over to the project team, and get myself “out of the loop.” I had sold the project. The contract was signed and the initial payment made. My job was essentially done.

Perhaps the awkwardness of the initial introductions sensitized me a bit, but I could not help noticing that the client would talk to me and she would talk to Rustin. The client would virtually ignore Winnie, a second developer assigned to the project and also ignore Jessica— who was to be in charge of her project.

As much as I tried to bring Jessica and Winnie into the conversation—and get myself out—the client continued as if they weren’t in the room. Awkwardness grew.

Two days after the meeting, the client canceled the project and asked for a refund of her deposit.

“I just didn’t have confidence in your team,” the client explained.

The experience I described and others in my 20+ year career have led me to a few conclusions.

1. Women are underrepresented in technical fields because we’ve made the environment hostile. Unfortunately in a boys’ club, men act like boys. Incidents of harassment against females in male-dominated tech environments are embarrassingly common and too frequently dismissed. With few women in the tech fields, a hostile environment has led to many dropping out of tech early to pursue careers in fields where the environment is more comfortable.
2. To bring more women into technology, harassment must be deemed completely unacceptable and dealt with swiftly, professionally, and decisively. If men don’t know not to give shoulder rubs to work associates, they need to get a job back in 1986 where that type of behavior was largely ignored. No one should have the expectation that women will work in—and stay in—tech as long as these hostile environments exist.
3. College is not where we should be trying to get girls interested in tech. As a society we continue to (for the most part) give girls a Barbie doll and boys a baseball bat. Societal structures and pressures continue to “genderize” fields to society’s disadvantage. We can’t expect women to get to college and all of sudden adopt technology as their discipline of interest.

As a society we can make successful women in tech more visible, providing tech role models for girls. Imagine if you heard about Ursula Burns (chairperson and CEO of Xerox), Ginni Rometty (chairperson and CEO of IBM), and Patricia Russo (ex-CEO of Alcatel/Lucent) as often as we hear about Steve Jobs, Michael Dell, and Bill Gates. I’ve been interested in computers since third grade because they were introduced to me by an older role model. We need to continue to support efforts that do this for girls today.

4. The profession is worse off due to the lack of women and other types of diversity. Game developers have recently caught on to the concept of casual games. Billions have been made from players tending virtual fields, rescuing virtual royalty, and “Flappy”ing Birds. These games, increasingly played by women and girls, have changed the concept of the video game industry. Some research in 2014 even indicated that more females are playing games than males.
5. How did this entire market get missed? Why was the video game industry obsessed with in-depth violent epics, combat, and misogyny? Count the number of female execs in the gaming industry and you might have some clue. Part of the irony is that the (up till now) ignored casual-game category tends to be more profitable than other categories because the games can be developed by individuals or small teams. Women are largely responsible for driving the growth of this category.
6. Societal attitudes and social mores concerning gender are changing and tech will be left behind if we don’t change too. To discuss gender with a progressive teenager today is very different than the binary discussion we would have had thirty years ago. Discussion includes seeing gender as a continuum and that few are “all boy” or “all girl.” Many teens believe that they have the right to

pick the pronouns by which others refer to them. They often describe nontraditional genders, non-genders, and a whole different relationship between gender and sexuality.

Today's 15-year-olds will be entering the workforce in seven years or less. They're not going to conform to gender-based dichotomies. We'll all have to adapt or get left behind.

Solutions must come from cooperation between men and women (and as some would argue—everyone on the spectrum of genders) and not simply as a result of women being more assertive. I have had the opportunity to train developers in India several times. I don't think anyone would argue that India is more egalitarian than the United States—however, 30 to 40 percent of the developers I encountered there were female.

At the risk of stereotyping, I have found Indians to be more practical in their career choices than Americans. I do remember a conversation with one Indian programmer on a flight from Bangalore to New York. With lots of time to kill, we began to chat. Asked why she decided to become a programmer she responded, "No one told me I couldn't do it."

That sounds like a good place to start.

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