

TOP STORIES IN OPINION

1 of 12



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Surveillance



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and...

2 of 12



Seth I
Utah's M...
Battles a...

OPINION

Sorry, College Grads, I Probably Won't Hire You

If you're at all interested in media, technology or related fields, please learn a little

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By KIRK MCDONALD

May 9, 2013 7:33 p.m. ET

Dear college graduates:

The next month is going to be thrilling as you cross this major milestone in your education. Enjoy the pomp and circumstance, the congratulations, and the parties. But when it's all over and you're ready to go out into the world, you'd probably like to meet me, or others like me—I'm your next potential dream boss. I run a cool, rapidly growing company in the digital field, where the work is interesting and rewarding. But I've got to be honest about some unfortunate news: I'm probably not going to hire you.

This isn't because I don't have positions that need filling. On the contrary, I'm constantly searching for talented new employees, and if someone with the right skills walked into my office, he or she would likely leave it with a very compelling offer. The problem is that the right skills are very hard to find. And I'm sorry to say it, dear graduates, but you probably don't have them.

In part, it's not your fault. If you grew up and went to school in the United States, you were educated in a system that has eight times as many high-school football teams as high schools that teach advanced placement computer-science classes. Things are hardly better in the universities. According to one recent report, in the next decade American colleges will mint 40,000 graduates with a bachelor's degree in computer science, though the U.S. economy is slated to create 120,000 computing jobs that require such degrees. You don't have to be a math major to do the math: That's three times as many jobs as we have people qualified to fill them.



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It's time to start addressing this crisis.

States should provide additional resources to train and employ teachers of science, technology, engineering and math, as well as increase access to the latest hardware and software for elementary and high-school students. Companies—particularly those like mine that depend heavily on information technology—need to join the effort by sponsoring programs that help schools better train graduates to work

in a demanding industry. But there's one more piece of the puzzle that's missing, and it's the one over which you have the most control: you.

I realize that you've a lot going on, and that the pressures of finding gainful employment are immense. But understand this, because your future might very well depend on it: If you want to survive in this economy, you'd be well-advised to learn how to speak computer code.

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Wonder Land columnist Daniel Henninger on America's lost generation. Photo: Getty Images

I don't mean that you need to become genius programmers, the kind who hack into NASA's computers for fun. Coding at such a level is a very particular and rare skill, one that most of us—myself included—don't possess, just as we don't possess the athletic ability to play for the New York Knicks.

What we nonexperts do possess is the ability to know enough about how these information systems work that we can be

useful discussing them with others. Consider this example: Suppose you're sitting in a meeting with clients, and someone asks you how long a certain digital project is slated to take.

Unless you understand the fundamentals of what engineers and programmers do, unless you're familiar enough with the principles and machinations of coding to know how the back end of the business works, any answer you give is a guess and therefore probably wrong. Even if your dream job is in marketing or sales or another department seemingly unrelated to programming, I'm not going to hire you unless you can at least understand the basic way my company works. And I'm not alone.

If you want a job in media, technology or a related field, make learning basic computer language your goal this summer. There are plenty of services—some free and others affordable—that will set you on your way.

Teach yourself just enough of the grammar and the logic of computer languages to be able to see the big picture. Get acquainted with APIs. Dabble in a bit of Python. For most employers, that would be more than enough. Once you can claim familiarity with at least two programming languages, start sending out those resumes.

So congratulations again on your achievement—and good luck getting your real-world education.

Mr. McDonald is president of PubMatic, an ad tech company in Manhattan. Previously, he was president of digital for Time Inc.

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1

2

3

4

5

VIDEO

1

2

3

4

5

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5 E-Com
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