Brian Hawken

SENIOR PROGRAMMING ANALYST

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In his own words: "Don't feel restricted by your degree. You define your own career options."

In a sense, Brian Hawken made a critical career move in his third year at Queen's University, switching his major from English to Computing Science. In hindsight, he still thinks the decision was smart, although his take on it has shifted slightly after working two years as a programmer analyst for Toronto-based Celestica, the third largest electronics manufacturing services company in the world.

"I intended to take English and Education degrees and then teach," says Brian, who was born in Kingston and, for the most part, grew up there. "But the situation for teachers around 1995 was looking a little grim, and I was nervous about not getting a job. I thought, 'You can't go wrong with computers,' so I changed programs.

"In retrospect, I would still make the switch, but with the knowledge that computer programming doesn't have to be my only career. It may be the first of many careers I can choose."

Some "basic but consistent" experience with computers helped him to make the leap from Milton to motherboards. "My father is a very technical person and we always had a computer in our home. He even built one of his own when I was very young. During high school I fiddled around with computers and took courses right up to OAC.

"In university, a friend and I developed our own computer game. My role in it was more creative than technical. It was a sort of turn-based text strategy/combat game. I'm not sure what became of it, but it was fun to do."

For now, developing his own direction within the computer industry is as important to Brian as developing databases. Your choice of degree, he argues, should never dictate your career.

Changing his degree focus addressed more than his worries about future job prospects. The major paradigm switch between English and computer programming helped him feel more grounded. "I came to realize that one of my problems with English was that there was never any concrete answer to my questions. No structure, no right or wrong. With convincing arguments, it's possible to prove just about any point.

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something goes wrong, it's ultimately possible to pinpoint the cause and correct it. Some may see this as limited creativity, but I say that everything must have structure or nobody would ever get anything done. What I like about programming is the satisfaction of the results. To identify a problem, write a piece of code to solve it, then watch it work correctly is very exciting."

Immediately after graduation, he upgraded a part-time job in a local restaurant to full-time work, despite the fact, he says, that his goal in going through university was "*not* to be working full-time in a restaurant." A sense of loyalty to the place, which had employed him for six years, kept him based there. Job hunting on the side, he came up with a few prospects, but it was a brief reunion with a classmate at convocation that hooked him up with Celestica. His friend, who now worked for the company, offered to show Brian's résumé to his manager. By August 1999, Brian had turned in his apron.

"I intended to take English and Education degrees and then teach," says Brian. But, "In university, a friend and I developed our own computer game. My role in it was more creative than technical." After that, some "basic but consistent" experience with computers helped him to make the leap from Milton to motherboards.

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As Senior Programming Analyst, he now develops in-house data warehouses, technology required by large institutions to store mind-boggling amounts of information. Users of data warehouses include consumer industry giants such as Wal Mart and Air Miles, which rely on many years' worth of data for analyses of buying trends. "Data warehousing is a relatively new concept and constantly under development. It's fun to make discoveries yourself."

However, Celestica also gives him the latitude to explore other aspects of the industry. For instance, his administrative duties in a 60-person department include hiring staff, an experience that has taught him new ways of looking at human resources. "The emphasis in interviews now is more behavioural — whether the person, not just the degree, really fits into a team. I also want to hear whether you're keeping your skill set current. What have you learned lately? They say that

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what you're taught in university (at least in Compsci) is obsolete in six months, so you have to keep teaching yourself once you're out."

Another path that he has followed at Celestica involves orienting new employees, a task that speaks to the teacher in him. "I usually spend time doing this at the end of the school year, when new grads are coming in, although I'm gradually trying to pass off some of these tasks so I can concentrate on development. But I enjoy instructing others. I've never really been a follower in life."

While he used to log 12 to 14-hour days, Brian has scaled back since his team leader pulled him off a job and packed him off to California to do consultant work on different project. Now he makes time for a longtime passion in his life, barbershop singing. He sings with The Dukes of Harmony, a barbershop chorus that was world-famous in the 1970s when it won Canada's first and only gold medals in international competition.

"I grew up on the Dukes. My father was a big fan and a barbershopper himself. I've always wanted to join, and now I'm trying to put together a quartet from within the group. Of course, you can't get me to shut up in the car or shower. I'm always singing."

For now, developing his own direction within the computer industry is as important as developing databases. Your choice of degree, he argues, should never dictate your career. Fortunately, Celestica gives him opportunities to explore different work options.

"It's a special company, particularly my department," he admits. "They give people right out school a shot, and they have a great team mentality instead of a boss mentality. I like the chance to do different things, and my manager is quite open to that, which involves a lot of trust. That's something I really appreciate." ❖

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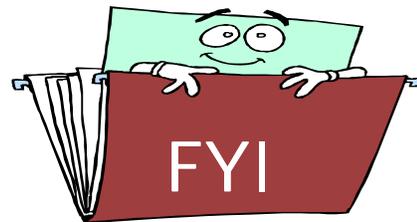
Quick to point out the merits of broadening his perspective, Brian indicates that his administrative duties in a 60-person department have been a real bonus. His experience of hiring staff has taught him new ways of looking at human resources. "The emphasis in interviews now is more behavioural — whether the person, not just the degree, really fits into a team. I also want to hear whether you're keeping your skill set current. What have you learned lately? They say that what you're taught in university (at least in Compsci) is obsolete in six months, so you have to keep teaching yourself once you're out."

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