

So You Want to Learn How to Code?



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Tips and stories from three execs who went to coding boot camps.

A growing number of professionals are flocking towards coding boot camps. Some seek to acquire skills they see as highly relevant in a world disrupted by start-ups. Others opt to change careers out of a desire to constantly learn and evolve. Among these contingents are people who had a thriving business career but decided to reinvent themselves as coders. We take a closer look at the path chosen by three such individuals.

Celso, the former treasury specialist turned software engineer

Growing up in Brazil, Celso liked to dismantle game consoles to see how they worked. He came to the United States as an exchange student during his senior year of high school and never left. Though he was originally enrolled in a computer sciences programme at university, he switched to business

after less than a year.

After he graduated, J.P. Morgan soon head hunted him as a treasury expert. Since online banking was taking off at the time, his interest in IT was valuable and he went on to work for Disney and Wells Fargo. While he earned a very generous salary, he felt “miserable” doing “mind-numbing” work. When Wells Fargo imploded around 2016, Celso decided to take a leave of absence for some breathing space.

At this point, his enthusiasm for IT resurged and he began researching boot camps. Settling upon UCLA Extension, he figured the least the experience would do is buy him time, and the most he could ask for was to become a “kickass coder and an entrepreneur”. The boot camp turned out to be tougher than what he could have ever imagined. Worse still, only a handful of his cohort of 60 secured coding jobs. He realised that no matter how intensive, a single boot camp was simply not enough to produce mastery.

Celso also learnt that he was “too old and experienced” for junior jobs, yet too green for more senior roles. He persevered, taking online courses and setting aside hours every day to practice. In time, the embarrassment of feeling unprepared for technical interviews diminished and Celso joined a company – through extensive networking – where his ability to learn and strong understanding of business are highly valued.

The salary is less than half what he made before, but Celso considers it fair, given all he has yet to learn. He’s also glad that he no longer has to work with the “alpha dogs” he encountered daily in finance.

Celso’s main advice for others looking to code is to start early: Put up a website, play and learn. If possible, find a job first, then get your employer to fund your boot camp.

George, the all-rounder who became a front-end developer

In contrast to Celso, George, a San Francisco native, gave no early indication that he would become a developer. After graduation, he joined an asset management firm. Despite enjoying the intellectual challenge, he disliked the culture and soon left. He then embarked on a “journeyman’s career”, including theatrical marketing in Hollywood and corporate finance for a visual effects studio. He even used his basic coding skills to help his brother’s textile business in Mexico.

As George looked to Europe for a challenge, he signed up for an MBA in France. He visited Berlin during a break, fell in love with the place and decided to become a Berliner. He joined a large advertising agency as a digital marketer for start-up clients. To meet deadlines, he often had to work out his own technical solutions.

While he loved these problem-solving challenges, the constant overwork made him reconsider his options. It occurred to him that the developers in the fast-moving start-ups he was helping tended to be both better paid and less stressed, as they weren't directly responsible for market success. He felt that his best choice might be to become a developer.

George spent all his spare time taking free courses and learning from his developer friends. Eventually, he took a part-time role to have even more time for self-study. After nearly a year, he discovered that the government would fully subsidise him to attend a boot camp, so he went. His prior learning served him well.

When he applied for coding jobs, he was surprised to find that many interviews were not as technical as he had expected; motivation and willingness to start at the bottom were just as important. Interviewers seemed more interested in his professional story than in his tech skills. They welcomed developers who could help prevent tunnel vision in their teams.

George leveraged his own networks to look for a job. A contact told him about Aperto, a digital transformation company. He got a job the second time he applied. At first, he earned half his previous salary – which led some to doubt how long he would stay – but his talent soon led to promotions and better pay.

According to George, if you are a logical, dynamic 60-year-old who likes solving problems, nobody in coding will care how old you are. But you will need to show drive and make many sacrifices, as he did.

Michael, the marketing rock star who transitioned to coding

Growing up in a military family, Michael moved more than 30 times around the world and the U.S. After getting a degree in economics and an MBA, he worked for many years as a marketer at Kraft Foods. He even did a stint as a professional rock musician, gaining local fame in New York, while keeping his day job.

Marriage to a screenwriter brought Michael to the West Coast, where he first worked for Mattel. Later he was the global marketing lead of The Sims franchise at Electronic Arts. Living in San Francisco, he inevitably heard the call of the start-up and became CMO of a fledgling robotics firm, then the co-founder of a mobile app start-up. That was when he realised the importance of proper coding skills. In fundraising meetings, investors kept asking, “Can you code?” The rumour was that venture capitalists added US\$150,000 to a company’s valuation for each engineer and subtracted US\$250,000 for each businessperson. After short bursts of intensive self-learning, he decided to join a coding boot camp.

The boot camp was a humbling experience for Michael, as he went from being an experienced executive to a newbie software developer. While he planned on an engineering role at a tech firm, a chance encounter led to an offer for Michael to become the general manager of the flagship coding campus from which he had just graduated.

This year, he finally got his first job as a software engineer. He was often asked, “Why would you want to be a junior engineer when you could be CMO?” Michael’s answer: “If I had chosen to create a vineyard, because I was passionate about wine, nobody would be wondering why I was spending my time weeding and pruning.” In sum, it is about conviction and the passion for something new.

Six things to consider before deciding to become a coder

1. Be clear about your motivation.

Ask yourself why you want to do it. Wanting to prove something or just looking for a change isn’t good enough. Passion should be your main driver.

2. Prepare yourself.

A boot camp alone will only give you a few months to build up your skills. So you should arrive utterly prepared. Take online courses, self-study and practice so you already know a thing or two about coding before you arrive.

3. Get ready to be challenged.

Many boot camp participants find the experience tougher than expected. Learning to code is like learning a new language, only more difficult.

4. Set realistic job expectations for yourself.

Know that most jobs offered after boot camps are ancillary positions. If you had been a well-paid manager, expect a significant salary cut.

5. Play to your differences.

Many hiring companies will value your people skills and business experience, as much as your ability to learn.

6. Have fun and keep learning.

Growth is key to the joy of switching jobs. In this fast-moving industry, you must embrace lifelong learning and always stay on top of trends.

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