CANADIAN BUSINESS

Free coding bootcamp #HTML500 aims to solve Canada's tech skills shortage

Employers say schools are failing to prepare students for a code-literate workforce

Feb 24, 2014 Daina Lawrence

1,300 people signed up for HTML500, a free one-day coding bootcamp, leaving 800 on the waiting list. "There is a pent-up demand for this type of thing," said one participant. (Lighthouse Labs)

Business has long and loudly lamented the growing skills mismatch in Canada's workforce. What young people choose to study and what post-secondary schools teach seldom matches up well with what employers need. On a recent Saturday in Vancouver, 50 employers, including Telus and Hootsuite, took the rare and laudable step of actually doing something about it.

Five hundred people sit around tables inside a cavernous rail maintenance building, laptops at the ready. They are about to learn to code in HTML and CSS—skills that are in high demand in the Internet age. The crowd is mostly in its 20s, evenly split between men and women. These are the lucky ones. There were more than 800 people on the waiting list for HTML500, a free one-day learn-to-code event.

If nothing else, HTML500 shows there is an appetite to learn technical skills of a kind not readily available in schools. "There is a pent-up demand for this type of thing," says Andrew Pawson, manager of user interface development at Telus—and not just among employers.

Participant Ryan Smith, 22, recently graduated from Simon Fraser University with a degree in communications, "so a lot of writing and reading, but no technical knowledge at all," he explains. A recent summer job at a marketing firm identified a big gap in Smith's education: he had to use computer coding as part of his job of updating the company's blog entries and he had no idea how.

Smith says his new job at a human-resources firm requires even more hands-on computer skills, so he knew he had to get further training. "I think it is a long-term investment, and I want to have that in my skill set." After the introduction provided by HTML500, he plans to continue to teach himself coding using online resources.

Coding is creeping into the curriculum in school systems abroad. Beginning this September, schools across England will begin teaching children over five to code in an effort to stave off rising youth unemployment. In Canada, employers say they are still waiting.

"I've concluded that we need to start these after-school clubs and weekend activities until the education system catches up," says Alexandra Greenhill, co-founder and CEO of HTML500 sponsor myBestHelper, a digital service that matches caregivers and families. "We need developers, and so we're investing a little bit into people who are bright and interested and willing to learn how to code because it doesn't take a long time," says Greenhill. "You can be a really great coder in about three months and start working—and we're hiring."

Follow Us   **Like Us**