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BostonWorks Career Development & Education

So You Want to Be...a Software Engineer

Welcome to the cutting edge

Computer systems. They're everywhere. You don't travel, commute, shop, or work without them. The software engineers creating the systems are the cowboys of the new millennium, blazing new trails with innovation and technology.

If you like computers, you have a flair for math, and you want to stay on the cutting edge, a career in software engineering could be a smart choice. And although the heyday of the internet bubble has passed and been replaced with downsizing and outsourcing, software engineers, who position themselves to stay innovative, are still in high demand.

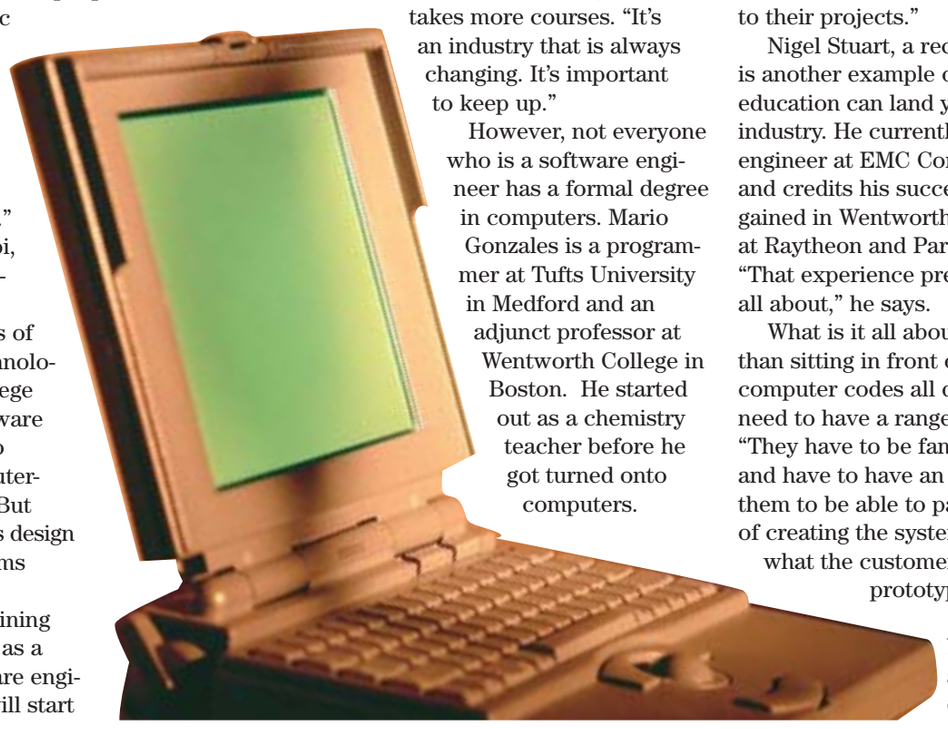
In fact, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, computer software engineers are projected to be one of the fastest growing occupations through 2014. "There is an incredible need for people with technology skills," says Eric Braude, associate professor in the computer science department at Boston University's Metropolitan College. "In every field there is more and more software needed."

According to Heikki Topi, associate professor of computer information systems and director of the master's of science in information technology program at Bentley College in Waltham, the term "software engineer" is used loosely to describe all types of computer-related development jobs. But basically software engineers design large-scale computer systems and applications.

Topi recommends combining education with experience as a career pathway into software engineering. "Often someone will start out by getting an undergraduate degree in computer information systems, computer science, or engineering and then go to work at a company as a junior developer to get some experience. Then, they will come back to school for a master's degree in information systems or software engineering to advance and stay current in the field."

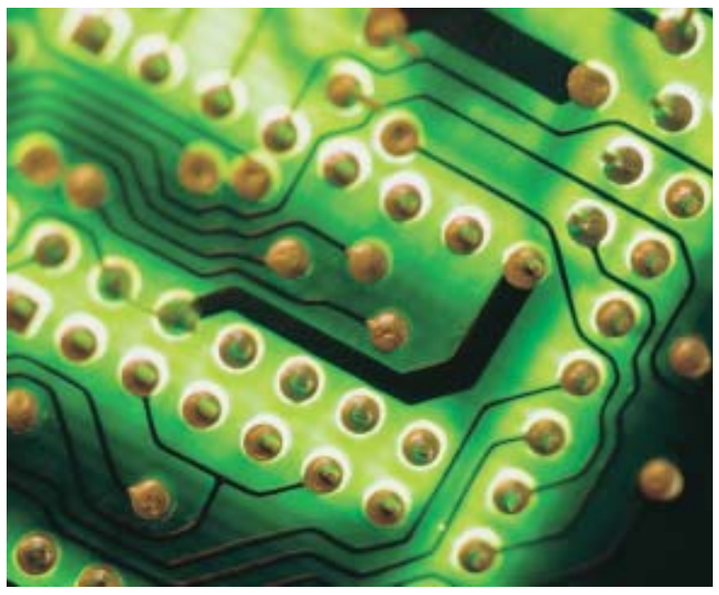
That's the path Carl Joekel took. He graduated from Villanova with a degree in electrical engineering and took a job with John Hancock. After working for a while he decided to attend Boston University's Metropolitan College for a certificate in software engineering. "I found that as I moved into a more management position I wanted a broader technical background," he says.

The certificate has already paid off for Joekel. "It opened up a couple of approaches to doing projects that I was able to incorporate at work," he explains. The certificate can be rolled over into a mater's degree as he takes more courses. "It's an industry that is always changing. It's important to keep up."



However, not everyone who is a software engineer has a formal degree in computers. Mario Gonzales is a programmer at Tufts University in Medford and an adjunct professor at Wentworth College in Boston. He started out as a chemistry teacher before he got turned onto computers.

"People get into this field for a variety of reasons and come from all different backgrounds. Usually, they start because they like to play with computers. You can teach yourself a lot by going online and learning about programs and languages," he asserts.



Gonzales agrees, though, that education is key to staying competitive. "You can't beat the classroom experience. At Wentworth, students will come to me with projects they are working on at work and we apply what we're learning directly to their projects."

Nigel Stuart, a recent Wentworth graduate, is another example of how experience and education can land you the right job in the industry. He currently works as a software engineer at EMC Corporation in Hopkinton and credits his success to the experience he gained in Wentworth's co-op program working at Raytheon and Parametric Technology. "That experience prepared me for what this is all about," he says.

What is it all about? Well, it's a lot more than sitting in front of a keyboard writing computer codes all day. "Software engineers need to have a range of skills," says Braude. "They have to be familiar with programming and have to have an eye for the world around them to be able to participate in all phases of creating the system, from determining what the customer needs to building prototypes to testing."

Although there has been some fear lately about jobs being sent overseas, or "off shoring," Braude isn't worried. "Off shoring lets you put together international teams. That opens up new possibilities," he says. "We're taking on more than we could before when we were limited by the number of programmers available."

Strategically positioning yourself is still important. "Off shoring is a changing factor in the industry. Software engineers now have to be familiar with the business side and working with customers," Braude explains.

Topi agrees. "If you're creating business systems you need to know business," he says. He advises looking for programs that provide strong technical capabilities with core business courses.

"It's an industry to be in if you like to keep learning,' says Gonzales. "At Tufts, trying to stay current to give students, faculty, and staff the cutting edge in technology, we're always looking for new methods."

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