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A first career that's built to last

By Stacy Teicher Khadaroo | **07.07.09**

When the job market overall is terrible, it helps to be graduating from a college that stays in tune with employers' needs.

Before finishing his final quarter this June, Jason Staten had his job lined up. And that's not uncommon among graduates of Neumont University in South Jordan, Utah, which specializes in bachelor's degrees in computer science and a project-based curriculum.

"The whole reason Neumont exists is to educate students so that when they graduate they are productive immediately on Day 1," says Aaron Reed, associate vice president of employer relations. "Historically [that has been] a problem … especially in the computer science field, because any manager who's hired people right out of college will tell you that they require a lot of training and hand-holding."

Neumont students work in teams to learn the whole software development cycle. First, they do team projects for fictional clients (their professors). Then they move on to real assignments for companies such as eBay. The majority of graduates soon land jobs with starting salaries topping $60,000, according to the school's website.

One of Mr. Staten's projects was to create an application for managing IBM meeting schedules. "Every day we'd be on a phone call [with an IBM supervisor] explaining what we were working on … and any issues that had come up," he says.

Mr. Reed regularly meets with employers, locally and in places such as Silicon Valley, to get their views on where the industry is headed. Because the school is small and "agile," he says, it can respond quickly to firms.

While many of his high school classmates were sleeping in and taking two classes a day at traditional colleges, Staten had a full-time schedule, with short breaks between quarters but no full summer vacation. The payoff: He finished in just over two years. Since he's always loved computers, it was easy to choose a school with a narrow focus, he says, and he took classes ranging from finance to music composition in order to round out his education.

Now working on desktop applications at a medical insurance company in Utah, Staten is feeling pretty good about his choice as he sees what's happened in the economy. "There's always going to be a need for technology. … So I believe that computer science is a really good field for me to be in right now," he says. "I know the skills I'm learning, the specific coding languages may not apply 10, 15 years into the future, but [I've gained] the ability to learn how to learn."