The Unexpected Way Philosophy Majors Are Changing The World Of Business

The Huffington Post | by Carolyn Gregoire

Posted: 03/05/2014 1:51 pm EST Updated: 03/06/2014 8:59 am EST

Dr. Damon Horowitz quit his technology job and got a Ph.D. in philosophy -- and he thinks you should too.

"If you are at all disposed to question what's around you, you'll start to see that there appear to be cracks in the bubble," Horowitz said in a 2011 talk at Stanford. "So about a decade ago, I quit my technology job to get a philosophy PhD. That was one of the best decisions I've made in my life."

As Horowitz demonstrates, a degree in philosophy can be useful for professions beyond a career in academia. Degrees like his can help in the business world, where a philosophy background can pave the way for real change. After earning his PhD in philosophy from Stanford, where he studied computer science as an undergraduate, Horowitz went on to become a successful tech entrepreneur and Google's in-house philosopher/director of engineering. His own career makes a pretty good case for the value of a philosophy education.

Despite a growing media interest in the study of philosophy and dramatically increasing enrollment in philosophy programs at some universities, the subject is still frequently dismissed as outmoded and impractical, removed from the everyday world and relegated to the loftiest of ivory towers.

That doesn't fit with the realities of both the business and tech worlds, where philosophy has proved itself to be not only relevant but often the cornerstone of great innovation. Philosophy and entrepreneurship are a surprisingly good fit. Some of the most successful tech entrepreneurs and innovators come from a philosophy background and put the critical thinking skills they developed to good use launching new digital services to fill needs in various domains of society. *Atlantic* contributor Edward Tenner even went so far as to call philosophy the "most practical major."

In fact, many leaders of the tech world -- from LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman to Flickr founder Stewart Butterfield -- say that studying philosophy was the secret to their success as digital entrepreneurs.

"The thought leaders of our industry are not the ones who plodded dully, step by step, up the career ladder," said Horowitz. "They're the ones who took chances and developed unique perspectives."

Here are a few reasons that philosophy majors will become the entrepreneurs who are shaping the business world.

Philosophy develops strong critical thinking skills and business instincts.

Philosophy is a notoriously challenging major, and has rigorous standards of writing and argumentation, which can help students to develop strong critical thinking skills that can be applied to a number of different professions. The ability to think critically may be of particular advantage to tech entrepreneurs.

"Open-ended assignments push philosophy students to find and take on a unique aspect of the work of the philosopher they are studying, to frame their thinking around a fresh and interesting question, or to make original connections between the writings of two distinct thinkers," Christine Nasserghodsi, director of innovation at the Wellington International School in Dubai, wrote in a HuffPost College blog. "Similarly, entrepreneurs need to be able to identify and understand new and unique opportunities in existing markets."

Flickr co-founder Stewart Butterfield got his bachelor's and master's degrees in philosophy at University of Victoria and Cambridge, where he specialized in philosophy of mind. After the highly profitable sale of Flickr to Yahoo!, the Canadian tech entrepreneur began working on a new online civilization-building game, Glitch.

"I think if you have a good background in what it is to be human, an understanding of life, culture and society, it gives you a good perspective on starting a business, instead of an education purely in business," Butterfield told University of Victoria students in 2008. "You can always pick up how to read a balance sheet and how to figure out profit and loss, but it's harder to pick up the other stuff on the fly."

Former philosophy students have gone on to make waves in the tech world.

Besides Horowitz and Butterfield, a number of tech executives, including former Hewlett-Packard Company CEO Carly Fiorina and LinkedIn co-founder and executive chairman Reid Hoffman, studied philosophy as undergraduates. Hoffman majored in philosophy Oxford before he went on to become a highly successful tech entrepreneur and venture capitalist, and author of *The Startup Of You*.

"My original plan was to become an academic," Hoffman told Wired. "I won a Marshall scholarship to read philosophy at Oxford, and what I most wanted to do was strengthen public intellectual culture -- I'd write books and essays to help us figure out who we wanted to be."

Hoffman decided to instead become a software engineer when he realized that staying in academia might not have the measurable impact on the world that he desires. Now, he uses the

sharp critical thinking skills he honed while studying philosophy to make profitable investments in tech start-ups.

"When presented with an investment that I think will change the world in a really good way, if I can do it, I'll do it," he said.

Philosophers (amateur and professional) will be the ones to grapple with the biggest issues facing their generation.

Advances in physics, technology and neuroscience pose an ever-evolving set of questions about the nature of the world and man's place in it ; questions that we may not yet have the answers to, but that philosophers diligently explorethrough theory and argument. And of course, there are some questions of morality and meaning that were first posed by ancient thinkers and that we must continue to question as humanity evolves: How should we treat one another? What does it mean to live a good life?

The Princeton philosophy department argues that because philosophers have a "better understanding of the nature of man and his place in the world," they're better able to identify address issues in modern society. For this reason, philosophy should occupy a more prominent place in the business world, says Dov Seidman, author of *HOW: Why HOW We Do Anything Means Everything*.

"Philosophy can help us address the (literally) existential challenges the world currently confronts, but only if we take it off the back burner and apply it as a burning platform in business," Seidman wrote in a 2010 Bloomberg Businessweek article. "Philosophy explores the deepest, broadest questions of life—why we exist, how society should organize itself, how institutions should relate to society, and the purpose of human endeavor, to name just a few."

Philosophy students are 'citizens of the world.'

In an increasingly global economy -- one in which many businesses are beginning to accept a sense of social responsibility -- those who care and are able to think critically about global and humanitarian issues will be the ones who are poised to create real change.

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, philosopher, novelist and author of the forthcoming *Plato at the Googleplex*, recently told *The Atlantic* that doing philosophical work makes students "citizens of the world." She explains why students should study philosophy, despite their concerns about employability:

To challenge your own point of view. Also, you need to be a citizen in this world. You need to know your responsibilities. You're going to have many moral choices every day of your life. And it enriches your inner life. You have lots of frameworks to apply to problems, and so many ways to interpret things. It makes life so much more interesting. It's us at our most human. And it helps us increase our humanity. No matter what you do, that's an asset.

This global-mindedness and humanistic perspective may even make you a more desirable job candidate.

"You go into the humanities to pursue your intellectual passion, and it just so happens as a byproduct that you emerge as a desired commodity for industry," said Horowitz. "Such is the halo of human flourishing."