Hacker schools offer students a different path to tech jobs

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Aaron Groch had a bachelor's degree in English and was already writing for the Web when he went back to school to study computer programming. But Groch said after two years of computer science at Georgia State, he dropped out because he felt he wasn't learning to write code fast enough, the skill he needed to land a better job.

The Atlantan then turned to an alternative that was billed as quicker, cheaper and effective. He went to hacker school, not a place where you devise ways to crack Defense Department security but where people learn code in a hurry and don't have to take anthropology.

In eight weeks at Tech Talent South in Atlanta, he had the skills he wanted. Then he got an internship at a local Web developer.

"It was a great experience," Groch said.

Hacker schools are an emerging niche education option, helping fill a need in an important industry.

There is a shortage of qualified job applicants in the computer software category, said Tino Mantella, director of the Technology Association of Georgia. A recent TAG survey found nearly 4,000 open positions in Georgia alone, and some industry executives say it can take six months to fill some top jobs.

That is where hacker schools hope to come in. Tech Talent South was

the first to enter the local market, launching its first two-month program last October with 15 students. Its current group numbers 22.

The Iron Yard, another hacker school based in South Carolina, opens shop March 30 in Atlanta and is also expanding into other cities. More than 60 students have graduated from its Greenville, S.C., campus.

Hacker schools don't offer certificates or diplomas. But some, such as The Iron Yard, guarantee job placement in six months, or students get their money back. The Iron Yard hasn't yet had to issue a refund, the school said.

Tech Talent South does not make job guarantees, saying it does not want to push its students into a job that might not fit a student's goals.

While the schools have received compliments from students and employers, some observers caution that they are not regulated by independent or government monitors. They also say students at traditional four-year programs get a deeper, more rounded education that helps their problem-solving capabilities.

But hacker schools appeal for different reasons. Some students are working in other fields and want to make a career change. Some hope to deepen or sharpen their skills and land a better, higher-paying job.

Dr. Jenny Grace turned to Tech Talent South after 18 years an ob-gyn. "Burned out," she closed her practice in Alabama and moved to Atlanta looking for her next big thing. She found she liked writing code but "didn't have the luxury" of taking two to four years to study computer science.

After eight weeks at Tech Talent South, she was able to code and landed an internship with a local software developer.

Shane Pike, president and CEO of Atlanta-based EngineerJobs.com, an online classified advertising site for engineering job ads, said the schools are helping meet a need.

"People have been seeing this shortage for a long time," he said. "That's the reason these alternative schools are popping up. I've been hiring software engineers since 1998. It's always been hard to find good ones."

Drew Sussberg, vice president of recruiting and sales for Workbridge Associates, a tech staffing firm with offices across the U.S., has placed hacker school students in jobs. But he said some employers won't even interview them, believing they lack fundamental computer knowledge and training.

There appear to be dozens of hacker schools spreading across the U.S., with a heavy concentration in high-tech markets like San Francisco, New York and Boston.

Veteran Atlanta tech entrepreneur Cummings, who is familiar with hacker schools, said, "I think they're great."

In most cases, a hacker school education won't replace a college degree, said David Cummings, who is CEO of Atlanta Tech Village, which houses technology companies. But for those without a computer science degree, hacker school can help them make a mid-career change into the field, he said.

Employers who have hired students from hacker schools gave them high marks.

William Haynes, CEO of Sabai Technology, a South Carolina router manufacturer, hired a programmer from The Iron Yard.

"We have a huge need for inquisitive and smart programmers who can create a structure rather than conform to one," Haynes said. "When you hire from one of these schools, you get an enthusiastic and focused individual who has just spent their most recent months focused on learning, creating and developing in areas where they've never been before."

Jacob Glide, senior creative technologist at Organic Inc. in South Carolina, hired two Web developers from The Iron Yard.

"It's been a great experience so far," Glide said. "They're quite technically capable and catch onto new technologies quickly."

Added Glide, "Qualified front-end developers are in very short supply right now, and the technologies a more formal educational institution might teach may not be completely applicable four years after a student enrolls."

The Iron Yard partner and chief strategy officer John Saddington said the school wants to "teach (its students) how to learn ... make them into thinkers, not just doers, who are dynamic and who also can teach themselves."

The Iron Yard program take three months and costs $9,000. Tech Talent South's two-month program costs $6,250 for full-time students and $4,250 for part-timers.

For now, hacker schools are operating under regulatory radar, raising a concern. Cummings said there is the risk of a "fly-by-night" school opening.

"It's so easy to say, 'We'll teach you something that will get you a job,' " he said.

Richard Simms, co-founder at Tech Talent South, said: "Programs like ours are unique in that they don't confer or claim to confer degrees of higher education or professional or occupational licenses. So, like in many aspects of tech, there may not be a neat fit with the existing regulatory framework. (We) will be prepared to adapt to any regulatory developments in our part of the country."

Charles Isbell, a professor and senior associate dean in the College of Computing at Georgia Tech, said: "I applaud any effort to find ways to educate people for less money." Still, he is concerned that "people are popping up and promising jobs." Oversight is needed, he said. "It's a matter of protecting students."

At Georgia Tech, he said, the goal "is to provide you with enough experience and infrastructure and framework so you can be a problem solver. It's very hard to do that in eight weeks, even if it is intense."

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