The Global Profession

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To embrace the global profession, we must listen to our colleagues around the world and offer support.

When the email arrived, I could easily recall the day I met its sender, Maya, at a student conference in India. Along with two or three dozen other students, Maya had gathered with me in a classroom to talk about the global nature of computing and the roles she and her colleagues might play in the computing and software industries.

Maya’s email was a continuation of that conversation, with questions about what she should study in graduate school and how she might prepare for her career. Academic advice is easy to give, but that advice too often tells the student to either follow the path we took or do the things we would like to have done. To be useful, we need to understand the nature of our advisees and the world in which they’d like to work.

The Indian software industry is an extraordinary industrial sector. It began in the 1960s, when India aspired to be the leader of what were then called the “nonaligned nations”—the countries that were attempting to build their economies without taking sides in the Cold War. During the 1970s, India started coding software for American and European computer firms. It was the kind of programming work that we now refer to as back-end development.

However, the Indian software industry truly began to grow in the 1990s, when it provided much of the labor to correct the Y2K problem. The Y2K problem shone “an international spotlight on the Indian software companies,” explained Subramaniam Ramadorai, former CEO of Tata Consultancy Services. However, this spotlight encouraged these companies to expand in a specific, narrow way to meet the immediate need. The “Y2K problem did not call for pure programming talent,” he explained. “We were able to adopt a factory assembly line approach towards correcting the legacy Y2K approach.” They developed a set of tools that allowed their staff to “quickly identify the fields that needed to be converted, a process that would have taken the naked eye much longer.”

In our correspondence, Maya confirmed that she and her peers lived with the legacy of these software factories. “Most of my friends from college joined service-based companies,” she wrote. Once they found these jobs, they quickly started looking for jobs in what she called “product-based companies,” firms like Microsoft and Amazon and Indian startups. She proclaimed that these companies gave workers more control over their schedule, tasks, and even their wardrobe.

Maya enjoyed a certain subfield of computing but worried that she might not be able to find employment in it. She was right to be concerned. We pretend that far too many courses can lead to employment even when we know there’s not a big market for electronic game designers or autonomous drone programmers. Yet, we’re still blessed, for the moment, with the knowledge that most of the skills we teach are transferrable. Taking courses in one field won’t preclude you from practicing in another. One specialty might even give you unique insight into another.

Ultimately, any advice I could have offered was less important than the action Maya took to contact me. If you’re a student or a professional, you live in a community. You give what you’re able to that community and in return, you ask that community for its ideas, support, and guidance. Maya felt, all too much, the distance between her community branch in India and the more established branches in North America and Europe. She noted that she and her peers often lacked access to the most modern equipment, that her teachers were often learning the material as they taught it, and that the costs of belonging to and participating in a professional society were very high. Yet she did what a professional does—she reached out to a member of her community and asked for help. To embrace the global profession, we must listen and offer support.

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