

Why the Co-op Program is More Awesome than Sliced Bread (But Probably Still less Awesome than Bacon)

I was asked to write up a short paper on what the advantages and disadvantages of doing the co-op program are. I won't be doing this. There is simply no comparison – if you're really considering not doing the co-op program, and you have no professional work experience in the industry, you're making a huge mistake.

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but having a stellar GPA and amazing technical abilities isn't sufficient to get you a good job as a software developer. Relevant experience and being engaging and successful in interviews is. This is a reality that sinks in during the first one or two work terms in the co-op program for most students, but I suppose it sinks in for new graduates that didn't do co-op as well upon their first job hunt. They don't understand why the other guy was hired over them, because they don't understand how important soft skills are in a job. People want to work with someone who they get along with. They also want to hire someone who can demonstrate their abilities by answering interview questions confidently, and that comes with good work references to back up their technical claims.

This is why the co-op program is so important – soft skills, or everything about your work that doesn't involve you sitting in front of a monitor writing lines of code. Ignoring the fact that co-op typically prepares your technical abilities better than academic classes; it's still worth it to go into co-op just on the merit of resume improvement, work references, work experience, and interview practice. There is no “COMP 4800 – How to get A Job!” Universities are all about preparing you to be a research monkey, and maybe you learn a bit about writing code along the way. It's not that they don't care it's just not a priority of most academic programs. The professional expertise of your co-op coordinator and the experience of applying and networking with real companies are simply phenomenal.

Put yourself in a prospective employer's shoes. You have two aspiring computer science graduates apply at your company. One student has a stellar GPA, while the other has only a good GPA, maybe even a mediocre GPA, but did the co-op program and has a full year of experience in the industry. You know he has some idea of how companies work, and he seems to have a diverse background coming out of the co-op program. This already has you biased towards hiring the second student (experience is everything) but you decide to interview them both anyway. The first one seems awkward, stressed, and unprepared, while the other seems calm, answers your questions well, and seems to just “get it” when it comes to the job hiring process. You know he's smart enough to learn the technical skills on the job if he doesn't have them yet, and he's personable and you like him. He did a lot of things at his second job that are an awful lot like your company, and you called up a couple of his references and they had nothing but good things to say about their experiences with him.

Who would you hire? It's really not a tough decision. The second student has had the benefit of a full year of work experience, and the expertise of the co-op program coordinators nitpicking his resume, interview conduct, and preparing him for potential tough interview questions. It's not even close, the first student is going to get blown out of the water, and may very well end up spending over a year leaning these skills on his own to catch up.

Doing co-op isn't a tough decision either. You get to have amazing experiences, visit foreign locations, take advantage of your summers when there aren't many good course offerings anyway, and make a lot of good friends. In a community as small as Winnipeg, you will probably end up working with one or more of them at some point. The people in the co-op program get paid to help you be successful, and they do a pretty damn good job at it. Anecdotal accounts don't always mean much, but I personally know a lot of people having trouble finding jobs, or are stuck in bad ones, simply because they didn't go through co-op. Do yourself a favour, go have a chat with the Computer Science co-op coordinator and see what you're missing. You'll be glad you did.