In the United States and around the world, an IT talent shortage continues to increase, even while many recent college/university graduates are challenged to secure gainful employment. This global employment gap reflects not only employers’ increasing demand for coders and other tech talent but also a growing skills gap—the gap between education achieved and the skills demanded by the jobs of today and tomorrow.

With the skills needed for employment changing faster than ever before, the jobs that many people will have five years from now may not even exist today. Traditional skills development approaches—colleges/universities and human resources (HR) departments—cannot alone solve the issues facing this rapidly evolving job market. The mission at edX, an ed-tech nonprofit start-up focused on helping to shape the future of education, is to increase access to education and cutting-edge learning content so that students around the world can gain the skills needed to advance their lives and careers in a fast-moving world.

We’ve experimented with a number of pilot programs and partnerships since our founding in 2012, and we will continue to explore many more. Innovative, and at times even surprising, collaborations between colleges/universities, nonprofits, businesses, and community groups are being forged to experiment with different models of learning content creation, skills-based education, and job placement. Our experience with two different pilot programs, one successful and one not, may prove useful to other organizations seeking to develop similar collaborations.

Soon after we had completed our first run of edX courses in 2012, we experimented with a traditional job-placement pilot that involved recruiting high-performing edX students and matching them to technology companies such as Google, Amazon, and others through traditional HR channels. Unfortunately, this effort did not result in job offers. We found that HR departments at most companies were still looking for traditional degrees when vetting candidates. We had to figure out how to get employers to recognize nontraditional educational experiences and other types of certificates as valid credentials.

When edX launched in 2012, some hailed MOOCs as the great disrupter of education and asked if many colleges and universities would close their doors. Instead, we’ve worked hand-in-hand with our institutional partners to increase access to education for everyone and to reimagine what education can look like. We’ve charted new pathways instead of destroying old ones. So, after the failure of our first attempt to connect students with jobs, we began a collaboration with an energetic start-up that could help us rethink job placement.

LaunchCode, a St. Louis–based nonprofit that creates pathways to employment in computer programming, reached out to edX soon after we launched the first free online offering of Harvard’s “Intro to Computer Programming” course, CS50x. EdX had never before partnered with a firm like LaunchCode, which focused on an intriguing model for addressing the skills and employment gap.

LaunchCode offers free educational resources, including edX computer science courses, to its applicants, many of whom have no traditional education in computer science. It then offers a support network and contacts with St. Louis area employers, who agree to interview LaunchCode applicants for paid internships. If an internship works out, the employer transitions the applicant into a full-time job. To date, the edX/LaunchCode collaboration has successfully placed more than 100 employees in paying jobs. We plan to work with LaunchCode to expand to several more U.S. cities in the coming year.

What’s interesting about this collaboration is how it differs from our earlier job-placement pilot. LaunchCode provided a direct connection to companies—a connection that edX did not have. Another key factor to our success in this program has been the flexibility and our ability, through the collaboration, to quickly respond to students’ interests and needs.

When Harvard Professor David Malan learned about how LaunchCode was using its CS50x MOOC and heard about its mentoring program, he joined twelve members of the course team in traveling to St. Louis for an all-night hackathon. Nearly 300 students and dozens of local mentors showed up for the hands-on study session and Q&A with the course team.

Moreover, this partnership is delivering real results. Meet Pablo, an edX and LaunchCode success story. Pablo graduated from college in 2009 with a B.A. in philosophy. After college, he focused on his art and paid his bills by working service jobs. He wanted to learn computer programming but was unsure where to begin. He connected with LaunchCode, earned a verified certificate in CS50x, and now has a full-time job with a marketing firm in St. Louis as a computer programmer.
Collaborations that can quickly assess and respond to changing landscapes and that can leverage resources, expertise, and connections will continue to be the most effective. What’s more, unexpected partnerships often produce exciting and innovative ideas and results—such as free education followed by real employment—since precedent and tradition do not restrict them.

Through these and other collaboration experiments, edX has learned a few key lessons for success:

- **Don’t be constrained by what has been done before.** Feel empowered to think differently and experiment with unexpected partnerships across varying disciplines and industries. Explore multidisciplinary partnerships across industry, government, nonprofits, and academia.
- **Focus on strengths and consider all resources.** No organization can do everything well. Assess the organization’s value-add and where it needs support. Knowing what expertise it can offer and where it needs input will help the organization identify unique collaborators.
- **Be nimble.** Today’s landscape is changing fast. Organizations and collaborations need to be flexible and adaptive. Seek partners and partnerships that can move quickly and that can change when needed.
- **Celebrate wins, big and small.** Success stories not only honor individual collaborators but also help raise awareness for the partnership overall. Celebrating achievements strengthens partnerships, fosters organizational focus, and sets future goals.

Most important of all: **Think big.** What is working now, and how can that be expanded? Having audacious goals is a way to heighten all collaborations and partnerships.

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