



THE PROGRAMMER'S PRICE

Want to hire a coding superstar? Call the agent.

BY LIZZIE WIDDICOMBE

Not long ago, Stephen Bradley, a New York tech entrepreneur, was looking to expand his company, AuthorBee, which aggregates tweets and Instagram posts and puts them together in story form. Instead of following people, readers can follow their interests—“Breaking Bad,” for example, or the New England Patriots. Bradley is not a stereotypical startup founder, a hoodie-wearing college dropout; he’s been working in tech and media for decades. To launch AuthorBee, he raised three-quarters of a million dollars from angel investors and hired programmers in Pakistan and Bangladesh to build a prototype. Now he wanted to build a bigger, better version of the site, so he had to find someone to write the code that would form AuthorBee’s DNA. The guys in Pakistan and Bangladesh were O.K., but the cultural differences and the language barriers slowed things down. He needed “one really good developer” with a mastery of all the coding languages and frameworks that AuthorBee uses: Python, Django, Angular, JavaScript, the Twitter A.P.I. The search for programming talent was the part of building a startup that Bradley most dreaded. “It is a nightmare,” he told me. “And I’m as plugged in as you can be to the New York tech scene.”

He put up a job posting on the Web site AngelList, and was immediately flooded with calls from headhunters and e-mails from offshore companies wanting to set up a “short online telephonic meeting.” “I could have had two hundred résumés on my desk,” Bradley said. But he knew that the people behind those résumés weren’t the ones he was looking for. His dream developer might be buried in there somewhere, but Bradley had come to think that developers were like social media itself: “Ninety-nine per cent of them suck.” He added, “The entire problem is wading through the noise.”

Finally, Bradley received an e-mail from 10x, a talent company. 10x was started by two music and entertainment managers, Michael Solomon and Rishon Blumberg, who for the past nineteen years have represented rock stars, including John Mayer and Vanessa Carlton. Recently, in the wake of the digital revolution and the music industry’s implosion, Solomon and Blumberg have begun serving as agents for technologists. 10x claims to represent digital “rock stars”; the company’s name comes from the idea, well established in the tech world, that the very best programmers are superstars, capable of achieving ten times the productivity of their merely competent colleagues. In HBO’s “Silicon Valley,” a self-effacing character named Big Head compliments his friend’s coding skills by saying, “Richard’s a 10xer. I’m, like, barely an xer.”

Computer programmers with agents: Bradley was interested. So one day last month he found himself in the 10x headquarters, in midtown Manhattan, talking to Michael Solomon. Solomon has a rock-and-roll vibe: he wore jeans and a metal bracelet, and he projects a mellow air. His office was decorated with guitars, gold and platinum records, and posters signed by Green Day and Bruce Springsteen.

Bradley asked about 10x's talent pool: did it really include "the top developers in the world," as Solomon claimed?

Solomon dropped technological achievements the way one might talk about album sales or duets with Lady Gaga. He said that one of his clients had overseen user-experience design for Apple's iCloud. "Have you heard of Django?" he added. Django is a framework that was used to build Instagram. "The guy who co-created Django is a client."

Bradley was impressed.

"What's your stack?" Solomon asked, referring to the layers of code that make up a Web site.

Bradley ran through the various languages and features with which the site was built. "It's all running on Amazon," he said, meaning the company's cloud-computing service.

Solomon leaned back in his chair and flipped through a mental Rolodex of his clients. "I definitely have some ideas," he said, after a minute. "The first person who comes to mind, he's also a bioinformatician." He rattled off a dazzling list of accomplishments: the developer does work for the Scripps Research Institute, in La Jolla, where he is attempting to attack complicated biological problems using crowdsourcing, and had created Twitter tools capable of influencing elections. Solomon thought that he might be interested in AuthorBee's use of Twitter. "He knows the Twitter A.P.I. in his sleep."

"What kind of price range are we talking about?" Bradley asked.

"Ballpark, for this role you're talking a hundred and fifty to two hundred and fifty dollars an hour."

The rate was significantly higher than what Bradley had paid the workers in Pakistan. (Offshore developers charge as little as twenty-five dollars an hour.) But Bradley decided the upgrade was worth it. "And that includes your fifteen per cent?" he asked.

Solomon said that it did, and they shook hands.

The world is being rebuilt in code. Hiring computer engineers used to be the province of tech companies, but, these days, every business—from fashion to finance—is a tech company. City governments have apps, and the actress Jessica Alba is the co-founder of a startup worth almost a billion dollars. All of these enterprises need programmers. The venture capitalist Marc Andreessen told *New York* recently, "Our companies are dying for talent. They're like lying on the beach gasping because they can't get enough talented people in for these jobs."

The computer science taught in colleges still focusses more on theory than on commercial application; the business of teaching practical coding skills has the whiff of trade school. So-called coding “boot camps,” such as General Assembly, founded in 2010, are trying to fill the gap, teaching crash courses in how to design Web sites and write code. But Jake Schwartz, the co-founder and C.E.O. of General Assembly, told me, “There’s simply not enough senior people in the system.”

In Silicon Valley, where businesses are fuelled by venture capital, the “talent wars” have reached epic proportions. Andreessen said, “The motivation to go find talent wherever it is is unbelievably high.” The Google campus is famous for its playful amenities: nap pods, ball pits, massages, dry cleaning, all-you-can-eat buffets. Facebook recently announced that it would pay for its female employees to freeze their eggs. The “precation”—a sabbatical before starting a new job—has become commonplace.

The biggest companies frequently get into bidding wars over the best talent. Twitter’s senior vice-president of engineering, Christopher Fry, was paid more than ten million dollars in stock options in 2012, second only to what the C.E.O. received. To prevent a programmer from defecting to Facebook, Google paid him three and a half million dollars in restricted stock options. Facebook has also become known for the “acqui-hire”: paying millions of dollars to acquire a company in order to poach its tech talent. The company gets shut down, and the engineers work for Facebook.

Startups don’t have the money to compete with the giants. They can offer equity, but, Bradley said, “the market’s flooded with startups trying to do the same thing.” Plus, the most desirable developers—those with creative skills—often have entrepreneurial ideas of their own. “In their minds, you’re not just paying them to do their job,” one tech executive told me. “You’re paying them for the opportunity cost of not becoming Mark Zuckerberg.” In response, many startups have devised offbeat measures for luring candidates: offices that resemble a Chuck E. Cheese’s, with a music room (at Dropbox) and an indoor tree house (at Airbnb). Scopely, a mobile-game publishing company, rewards a new hire—or anyone who can deliver one—with eleven thousand dollars wrapped in bacon, an oil portrait of himself, and a harpoon gun.

All this may seem ludicrous, but, given how much money is sloshing around in the system, some people argue that the best technologists could be getting even more from their employers. Todd McKinnon, the C.E.O. of Okta, a cloud-computing company, told me that top engineers are worth “way more than what we’re paying them.” A good office worker might generate two or three times the revenue of a mediocre one, but, he said, “you could have a good engineer who’ll come up with an algorithm that will support ten million people, or a great engineer who’ll come up with an algorithm that supports a *billion* people. You’ve just 1,000x-ed the revenue for your company.” In Silicon Valley, the average engineer’s salary is around a hundred and thirty thousand dollars a year, according to a recent analysis by the Brookings Institution—cheap, when compared with the potential profits. Apple makes more than two billion dollars in revenue per employee each year. Google makes almost sixty billion dollars in revenue annually. “Google has ten thousand engineers. So they get people’s dry cleaning, which costs them a couple of thousand dollars a year,” McKinnon said. “That’s nothing!”

Enter the agents. Solomon describes himself as an equalizer. In creative industries, he told me, “there’s always this pattern that the creatives start out at the bottom of the food chain and are exploited.” In the early years of recorded music, label owners persuaded blues and R. & B. musicians to sign away their master recordings or publishing rights for paltry sums. (In 1959, Richard Berry sold his rights to “Louie Louie” for seven hundred and fifty dollars.) In Hollywood, film studios like M-G-M and Twentieth Century Fox signed actors to multiyear contracts that paid them a fixed salary, even if the actor became a star. In a blog post on 10x’s Web site, Solomon cites Shirley Temple, who was locked into a low-paying contract with Twentieth Century Fox, even as her films made millions for the studio. “I see the exact same trend emerging with the tech industry,” he argued. “A lot of things can go wrong when a person just signs on the dotted line.”

Tech companies can’t always be trusted to look after their employees’ interests, either. In 2010, a group of tech employees filed a class-action suit against a group of Silicon Valley giants, including Apple, Google, Intel, and Adobe, charging that between 2005 and 2009 the heads of these companies suppressed pay by agreeing not to poach one another’s employees. In March, 2007, Steve Jobs forwarded to Eric Schmidt a recruiting pitch that a Google employee had e-mailed to an Apple engineer. “I would be very pleased if your recruiting department would stop doing this,” Jobs wrote. The recruiter who sent the e-mail was fired, and Schmidt berated his human-resources department, writing, “We have a policy of no recruiting from Apple.” Several of the companies, Apple and Google among them, attempted to settle the case out of court—offering the tech workers more than three hundred million dollars—but in August a judge ruled that the settlement was too low. (The companies are appealing that decision.)

Solomon and Blumberg have been friends since elementary school. In 1995, they started a company called Brick Wall Management. They had a solid roster of clients, but Solomon grew disillusioned with the music business, where “every conversation was about how bad things were, who’s getting laid off, who’s going under,” he said. Solomon is the “idea guy” in their partnership, with an entrepreneurial streak. Besides music management, they did V.I.P. ticketing for Bruce Springsteen shows and started charities. Solomon said, “There was a little part of us that felt like, since tech was a big part of eating the music industry’s lunch, let’s go make some money there.” They came up with two ideas for apps. One was a digital boxed set, to be sold on iTunes. In addition to an artist’s albums, it would give you “extensive liner notes, photos, videos”; you could also record karaoke versions of your favorite tracks. The other was a series of set-list apps. If you were at a Bruce Springsteen concert, Solomon said, “you could say, ‘Oh my God, he just played “Candy’s Room.” When was the last time he played that?’ ” and your phone would tell you.

Through friends, they hired a group of freelance Web developers. One of the experiences “was a bit of a disaster,” Solomon said. The developers completed ninety per cent of the boxed-set app, but, when they ran into problems with the karaoke feature, they went AWOL. “They stopped responding to e-mails for weeks at a time,” Solomon went on. “We were saying to ourselves, ‘Gosh, who do we call? How does the world operate like this?’ ” Solomon had also been struck by the developers’ lack of business savvy: when he hired them, they didn’t negotiate; they just took the first offer. He and Blumberg realized that they were dealing with “a really familiar personality type”: talented people with zero business skills. “We were, like, ‘This is a musician! This is what we’re used to!’ That was the light-bulb moment,” Solomon said.

Recruiters are the traditional middlemen of tech; companies hire them to fill openings. But the profession doesn't have a good reputation among technologists: the promise of easy money, combined with a low barrier to entry, means that it's full of "pikers," as one recruiter told me—opportunists who treat the talent search like a truffle hunt. Recruiters generally don't have backgrounds in tech. Instead, they're competitive types, jocks pursuing nerds. A blog called *Shit Recruiters Say* features excerpts from ham-handed recruiter e-mails. **David Hansson, the creator of the programming framework Ruby on Rails**, once published an e-mail he'd received from a recruiter from Groupon "looking for folks with solid skills."

For short-term projects, consulting firms and so-called "dev shops" employ engineers, taking a cut of their hourly rate. But freelancers aren't always happy with the arrangement. One developer I spoke with told me, "I can think of at least one notable consulting company that bills two hundred and fifty dollars an hour and pays their people less than a hundred." Another complained that the system is too impersonal: "We call them 'body shops,' because they are just hired to fill up a project with warm bodies."

Solomon and Blumberg decided that they wanted to align with—and to be paid by—the programmers rather than with the companies doing the hiring. But to get clients they needed an entrée into the tech community. They found one in Altay Guvench, a 2003 Harvard graduate and an engineer who is also a musician. His band, the Great Unknowns, once toured with the Indigo Girls.

Guvench took a circuitous route to programming. He ran a recording studio in college, and then got involved with a startup that attempted, he says, to "disrupt the marketplace for live touring." The company failed, and Guvench recognized that the problem was on the tech side: **"We had a co-founder who's this brilliant coder but was more excited about computer-science problems than about business problems. He was coding in this obscure language."** In 2006, Guvench moved back to his home town of Falmouth, Maine, and began living in his parents' basement. He couldn't bring himself to find a new job. "I'd failed pretty hard and was recovering," he said. He decided to teach himself computer programming, starting with the **languages that make up the "front end" of a Web site—the things that you see in your computer browser: HTML, CSS, JavaScript.** Guvench found that programming's intricacies reminded him of music. "I'd always been a nerd, so I took to it," he said. He landed a job coding for L. L. Bean's Web site, and began teaching himself Ruby on Rails at night. "It's quite a rabbit hole," he said. "There's always something new to learn."

Guvench met Solomon and Blumberg through a charity that Solomon started, called Musicians on Call, which brings music to the bedsides of sick people. By then, he had moved to California, and worked as a freelance programmer for several years, playing music on the side. But he was tiring of his new life. He wasn't good at selling himself, or at billing clients. "Like many freelancers, I liked building stuff," Guvench told me. "All that other stuff"—the business—"seemed like a necessary evil." When Guvench met Solomon and Blumberg, he had been approached by a company that made pharmaceutical software. He recalled, "I was, like, 'Why don't you try to negotiate my contract?'" Guvench briefed Solomon on the terms he wanted. Guvench said, "Twenty minutes later, he called me up and was, like, 'Here's what we got.' The money was better. He raised my rate fifty per cent. I was charging a hundred dollars an hour, and he got me up to a hundred and fifty." The agents also took care of his contract and handled

invoicing. After a few months, Guvench noticed that his life style had changed: “I was getting paid more, and I was doing less grunt work. My friends started saying, ‘How do I get an agent?’ ” He called up Solomon and Blumberg and said, “I’m done being your client. I want to be your business partner.”

Guvench and I were having this conversation in San Francisco, where he lives; his home is 10x’s West Coast office. He’d asked to meet at a coffee shop run by the Long Now, a nonprofit that tries to foster creative thinking for “the next 10,000 years.” It was decorated with a mechanical model of the solar system and a digital painting by Brian Eno. “I like this place, because clearly they love technology, but they’re taking a measured approach to it,” Guvench said. He is burly but gentle, with a closely shaved head, a short beard, and an eyebrow piercing. He describes himself as a “techno-hippie.”

10x now has almost eighty clients. Though they are mostly in North America, one lives in India, a handful are in Israel, and one codes from beaches in Thailand. The roster includes only three women, which Solomon said he is “bummed” about. 10x works mostly with freelancers, which Guvench told me is a strategic choice. “This aligns our incentives,” he said. “If we don’t keep the talent happy, they stop working with us, and we go out of business.”

The three partners have separate roles. Blumberg handles his and Solomon’s eleven remaining music and entertainment clients, and takes care of back-office matters: “Accounting, invoicing, collection, payouts. Everything that’s the bane of most people’s existence.” Guvench vets new talent. Potential clients have to fill out a questionnaire that one programmer compared to “the most complicated dating Web site ever.” Then Guvench and Solomon conduct **interviews, to screen for communication skills**. (I heard one potential client say, during a meeting in Solomon’s office, “We don’t want people who just write code and drool.”) **Guvench also does code reviews—testing Web sites that aspiring clients have built, and reviewing the programs they’ve written.**

Code can be “elegant,” Guvench said, but it’s not a poem—it’s a set of instructions to a computer. He doesn’t consider himself an expert in many programming languages, but, he said, “I’m really skilled at jumping into things and getting to the ninety-per-cent mark.” When he’s reviewing code, he looks for several things. **The first quality of good code is that it’s “readable—both by computers and by humans.”** Humans, after all, might have to fix it at a later date—when it crashes and there are thousands of angry customers on the phone.

He also looks for concision. “There’s a programming principle called DRY,” Guvench said. “Don’t Repeat Yourself.” A bad programmer might copy and paste a command—“Make this wiggle”—a hundred different times. But a good programmer would turn the command into a handy little function. **If a line of code looks repetitive, Guvench told me, “people will say, ‘The code smells.’ ”**

Good code also works fast. Say you have a spreadsheet with hundreds of voter names, and you want to check each name against a cache of data and assign people to parties—Republican or Democrat. “A bad programmer might write a function that makes a hundred different ‘calls’ to the database,” Guvench said. I could almost see the dreaded spinning beach ball on the screen. A good programmer would find a more efficient way, or “hack.” “He could write a function that

would just ask the database one question: ‘Give me these hundred people, along with this data about them.’ ”

Guvench said he was surprised to find that he likes being an agent. He’s discovered that he’s a “nerd whisperer.” Since he started, 10x has managed to sign a number of high-profile freelancers. Adrian Holovaty is the client who co-created Django. John Coggeshall, a core contributor to a programming language called PHP*, signed with 10x after reading about it on Slashdot. He’s based in Detroit, and said that the agents have connected him with other specialists who “make my life easy.” “From Day One, they provided awesome value,” he said. Greg Sadetsky, a geo-mapping specialist in Canada, co-founded a company that was bought by Apple. He said that Guvench gives him the feeling of “talking shop with someone who knows.”

“I think I have a knack for finding people who are better than I am and getting them to like me,” Guvench said. He doesn’t mind doing business deals anymore: “It turns out that negotiating is a lot easier when you’re doing it for someone else.”

For 10x’s clients, Guvench said, “part of our goal is to de-risk freelancing and make it more viable.” Short-term work tends to be feast or famine, so 10x agents spread projects around, to accommodate their clients’ life styles. The client in Thailand, Greg Jorgensen, works as a “code doctor”—he specializes in fixing old, broken code—and the rest of the time he travels and scuba dives. Jorgensen told me that he now takes impromptu trips to nearby islands, coding for a few hours each day from a hotel room. “After thirty-five years of cubicle jobs, this is a huge improvement,” he said.

For its customers—especially the nontechnical ones—10x provides access to specialists a Facebook executive might have on speed dial, as well as someone to talk to if problems crop up. Camille Kubie, who runs a design and branding agency, hired 10x developers to create a Web site for a large health-care company. She said the 10x programmers “knocked it out of the park” when it came to coding. She also appreciated that they had been vetted for interpersonal skills. At one point, they had to speak directly with the health-care company’s New York offices. “They were good,” she said. “And it wasn’t embarrassing to let them out of their cave.”

There are a few companies offering services similar to the ones that 10x provides. HackMatch, started by a twenty-one-year-old named Dave Fontenot, helps engineers find startups to join. Fontenot told me, “I’m consistently able to place people for a hundred thousand dollars plus, straight out of college.” A company called OfferLetter.io helps engineers negotiate, and Hired.com lets them market their services, employing “talent advocates” to help them polish their profiles.

In San Francisco, Guvench and I had finished our coffee. It was a cold, foggy day. We walked to Guvench’s home, in the Marina District, to meet some of 10x’s clients. Guvench lives in a “hacker mansion,” a large Italianate house called Sugar Magnolia, because it is owned by a former Deadhead. The living room was littered with instruments: guitar, cello, electric bass, drums, saw, banjo, upright bass. But Guvench’s roommates weren’t home. Instead, we were greeted by a group of polite young men: the talent.

Rock-star developers are, not surprisingly, very different from actual rock stars. Solomon told me, “Generally speaking, the egos are the opposite.” Programmers tend to undersell themselves. (One potential client described himself as “pretty fast”; it later emerged that he’d won a speed-coding competition in India.) Solomon surmised that this has to do with the nature of feedback in the two professions. If you put a product in Apple’s app store, your interaction with customers consists mostly of anonymous griping. Meanwhile, he said, “even a low-level musician is onstage playing to fifty people, and after that show they have ten people who come up and tell them, ‘Dude, your song saved my life!’ ”

But there are similarities, the agents said, including the late hours and the drug of choice (marijuana). And, like actual rock stars, rock-star developers come in a range of personality types. Guvench had briefed me at the coffee shop: front-end guys—designers and user-interface engineers—make products that interact with what he referred to as “normal” people. As a result, “they’re sort of hip,” he said. “Especially designers—they dress nicely.” The further you get down the “stack,” Guvench explained, “the more . . .” He paused. “‘Neckbeard’ is the word that comes to mind.” Back-end engineers, like data scientists and system administrators, “are the most brilliant people,” he said. “They may not be the most fun to talk to at a party, but they’re really fucking good at talking to computers.” Of course, he added, the stereotype doesn’t apply to his clients.

“Do you want a drink?” one of the 10xers asked, and they all introduced themselves. First came the aesthetes: Shawn Feeney, who has bright-blue eyes (in terms of rock stars, he looks like Billy Corgan), does Web, app, and logo design. “I also do freehand vegetable carving,” he said. He’s a world-renowned pumpkin carver, who’s in the Guinness Book of World Records for Largest Fruit Sculpture. He has carved jack-o’-lanterns for George Lucas and the White House. Andrew Price and Matt Wood, who are part of a three-person team called Arsenal, looked like geeky lumberjacks, in flannel shirts and work boots. They are user-interface specialists, who worked on Shopping Express, Google’s FreshDirect competitor. In their spare time, they make furniture. Todd Siegel is an iOS developer—he designs and creates prototypes for mobile applications. Tall and shy, with a baby face and a few long, dark strands of hair swept to one side, he runs a poetry-reading series. “I’m kind of a wordsmith,” he said.

Then came the back-end men: Ben Yee, who wore a polar fleece and glasses, said that he was a veteran of the Silicon Valley scene. Guvench told me that he had worked for eBay, improving its payment system by rebuilding old code. He’s also a dev-ops specialist. He spent some years at the gaming company Kabam, where he ran the back end for the official Hobbit game. “It was his job to make sure millions of people could play the game without it crashing,” Guvench said.

Max Nanis, a twenty-four-year-old, was the developer Solomon had mentioned to Bradley in New York. Guvench told me, “Max does fucking everything.” Nanis looked as if he had walked out of a computer-science-themed Harlequin novel: he wore glasses and a leather jacket, and had long red hair that fell down his back. His shirt was unbuttoned low, showing off a pale, bony chest. Nanis told me that he likes to work on “anything that’s really hard. I prefer it if somebody comes to us and says, ‘Two people have failed at this. Can you get an M.V.P. functional?’ ” (M.V.P. stands for “minimum viable product.”) He’s also a sculptor, and, as Solomon had noted, has a day job in the Scripps Institute’s molecular-and-experimental-medicine department.

“We’re using computers to help solve biological problems,” he said. (He sleeps three hours a day.) He added, “I don’t do any Web-site *design*. I don’t like that stuff.”

The 10xers told me that **being a sought-after technologist isn’t as fun as it sounds**. Star developers don’t have the brand-name recognition of Brad Pitt or Bono; as a result, **when they work for nontechnical clients they often feel unappreciated**. Frequently, they run into misunderstandings about the scope or the requirements of a project. Nanis described one huge project, for a railroad contractor, building an app that would allow surveyors to evaluate rail-crossing safety using iPads. He had almost finished a prototype, he said, when he received an e-mail from the train company saying, “Oh, yeah, the people in the field won’t have an Internet connection.” He had to scrap everything he’d built. “That hurt,” he said. “That was before 10x.”

Have you ever read ‘Hackers and Painters’?” Nanis asked, citing a book by Paul Graham, the co-founder of the startup incubator Y Combinator, who has studied painting. In the book, Graham compares software to Leonardo da Vinci’s portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci— noting the care with which da Vinci painted each leaf of a juniper bush in the background. **“Great software, likewise, requires a fanatical devotion to beauty,”** Graham writes. “If you look inside good software, you find that parts no one is ever supposed to see are beautiful too.” Nanis agreed with this assessment, and many of the 10xers seemed to appreciate the music world’s labelling of its stars as “artists.” Nanis said that when he builds a Web site from scratch he has to go through a laborious creative process: “When somebody pitches me a design spec and says, ‘I want this to work,’ there are no tutorials for making that M.V.P. There are a million ways to get there.” He said that it was like approaching a blank canvas.

After a couple of hours, the 10xers went up to the roof of Guvench’s house and finished their drinks in the fog. It was the first time many of them had met in person. To an outsider, the conversation was somewhat difficult to penetrate. It involved phrases like “You’re a scrum guy?” and wandered from Das Keyboards to the iOS prototyping tool Proto.io. Siegel mentioned that he’d given a talk about the language at Xerox PARC. “Oh, sick!” Nanis said. “To me, Xerox Parc is the most old-school, cool tech place to be.” Another 10xer said that he appreciated the group’s band-of-outsiders camaraderie. “We should do this more often,” he suggested to Guvench.

Later, Guvench and I took an Uber to his next destination: a barbecue for alumni of Y Combinator. The barbecue was in a warehouse owned by the startup Move Loot. It was full of forklifts and plastic-wrapped couches, and youthful entrepreneurs milled around tables displaying trays of smoked meat. I took out my notebook and noticed that two young programmers were staring at me. Finally, one of them came over and introduced himself. His name was Paul Cretu, and he and his partner were working on transcription software that records everything you say, leaving you with a searchable record of your thoughts and conversations. He wanted to hear all about my reporter’s notebook and how I was using it. “We’ve never seen anyone taking notes in the wild,” he said.

There are plenty of people who are skeptical about 10x’s model. Chris Fry, the senior vice-president of engineering at Twitter from 2012 to June of this year, told me that bringing an agent into meetings would be “socially awkward.” He also didn’t need help finding programmers. “At Twitter, you get the best résumés on your desk already,” he said. “There’s an internal recruiting

department, and you have all your referrals from the people who work there.” Sam Altman, of Y Combinator, said that, in the small world of Silicon Valley, the very idea of talent agents presents a “negative-selection problem”: “The actual 10x engineers don’t need or want an agent; people quickly discover they’re great, and they end up picking where (and especially with whom) they want to work. In my limited experience, the engineers that get agents are bad.”

But Guvench argued that his clients don’t need help finding work; rather, they need people to help them navigate their options. “Tom Cruise doesn’t need help finding work, but he has an agent,” he said. Which leads to another potential problem: wouldn’t 10x’s nascent business be crushed if some major Hollywood agents decided to open a tech division in San Francisco? (Cruise’s agents, C.A.A., have diversified into other industries, such as video games and sports.) Guvench told me that he’d already confronted this scenario. Last year, not long after a *Bloomberg Businessweek* article came out about 10x, representatives from U.T.A., a marquee talent agency, got in touch. Guvench arranged a meeting with the Hollywood team at his house in San Francisco. “We were afraid of them,” he said. “I was really nervous going into this meeting. I was kind of playing things close to my vest.”

But U.T.A.’s message was not what he had expected. “They said, ‘We need to hire programmers. We can’t find any. Can you help us?’ ” Guvench told me he realized then that Hollywood didn’t pose a threat. For the most part, he said, “they’re in a very different world.”

Jeremy Zimmer, the C.E.O. of U.T.A., told me that this wasn’t completely true. In recent years, he said, agents from his company have been trying to acquire a “real, working knowledge” of Silicon Valley’s ecosystem—that’s why they flew up to San Francisco. Zimmer said that he liked the idea of tech stars having agents. “So much power currently lives in the hands of the major tech platforms that having somebody who can come in and disrupt that a little bit makes a lot of sense.” He added, “I think it’d be too soon to say it’s something we wouldn’t do.”

The rise of agents and managers hastened the collapse of the Hollywood studio system. “They’re also involved in ‘exploiting’ the act, so to speak, but they’re doing it as a partner,” Solomon told me. And, while Hollywood agencies started out representing actors, they eventually took on people up and down the food chain—writers, directors—until they began selling entire film projects with a team already in place, a practice known as “packaging.” 10x hopes to do the same thing in the tech world. Guvench told me that, ideally, if a company comes to 10x with a proposal, the agents can offer “concepting, designing, building, user experience, testing, optimizing, branding, and marketing.” The company gets the product, and eliminates the costs associated with taking on full-time employees. Guvench said, “Everybody wins.”

The 10x agents recently found their first nontechnical client: Mark Mian, a branding and marketing specialist. Mian was in Guvench’s living room, looking buff, in a black shirt with a beard and a tribal earring. (Along with his branding and marketing work, he used to run a boutique gym where he worked with Muay Thai fighters and other martial artists.) He told me that he and Guvench met through “the community of techno-hippies loosely revolving around” the Phage, a “sciencey” camp at Burning Man. When he met Guvench, Mian told me, he was feeling exhausted, after working at the San Francisco offices of Interbrand and freelancing for many years. He specializes in “humanizing tech.” He didn’t like the forty-hour workweek and felt that the corporate life style was “not conducive to respecting the mistress of creativity,” he

said. “Creativity is a fickle mistress, but when the booty call comes in you’ve got to go.” He approached Guvench, wanting to rebrand 10x to include all kinds of talent. The agency took him on.

According to Guvench, 10x is riding the wave of a “macro trend.” The combination of the nascent digital age and the global recession has led to a rise in independent contractors. Some people call this new world the “gig economy” or the “1099 economy,” after the tax form used by freelancers. “I think it’s the future of work,” Guvench said. Mian agreed. “I think everyone should have a manager,” he told me. “Not just creative people—everyone. It’s cool to have an advocate and a confidant. We can all be rock stars.”

David Autor, an economist at M.I.T., wasn’t so sure. He said that the rock-star model makes sense only for people with “unique talents, which most people do not have.” Talented coders are like heart surgeons: “I’d rather have one really good heart surgery than three mediocre ones. This is what an economist would call indivisibility.” Like Tom Cruise and heart surgeons, the best programmers will probably always be in demand. The rest of us are more replaceable, Autor said, which means that, in general, given the choice most of us would probably choose to have an employer shield us from the vicissitudes of the marketplace.

By many measures, the star system didn’t work that well for Hollywood: it made moviemaking more expensive, which made studios more risk-averse, which led to inferior creative projects. And programmers are not movie stars—not yet, anyway. “Movie stars have their own brands,” McKinnon, the Okta C.E.O., said. “People will go to see a movie just because it has Tom Cruise in it. But programmers don’t really have that. No one’s going to pay for a product just because James Gosling built it.” (Gosling is one of the inventors of Java.) “Well, geeks like me will. But most people won’t. They pay for a service.”

Solomon told me that he and Blumberg recently went over their year-end accounting numbers, and found that their clients’ earnings had doubled between 2013 and 2014. 10x technologists are working with a variety of customers: Live Nation, a virtual-reality startup, and an N.B.A. player who has an idea for a social-messaging app. Solomon admitted, however, that this list is somewhat random—it consists mostly of people who found 10x through Google, or whom he or his clients know personally. He has hired a salesman, to pitch 10x to companies. “Exactly how we tap into the pipeline of companies and startups that need us is still something we’re nailing down,” he said. “We haven’t figured out where the fire hose is.”

As for Stephen Bradley, the head of AuthorBee, he hasn’t found his star programmer yet. Nanis wasn’t right for the job—Bradley wanted someone who could one day become AuthorBee’s C.T.O. “He and I had a call, and he was, I would say, a fantastic candidate, but he wasn’t quite the right fit for what I needed,” Bradley told me.

Nanis wasn’t bothered—he’d just begun a new freelance gig, which he said he is “super into.” He will be building a social platform for selling art, called Available Works, started by Asher Penn, who runs the New York-based publication *Sex Magazine*, and has received funding from an angel investor. 10x didn’t help Nanis to get the job, but it did help him to negotiate his contract, which he said was critical, since the art people didn’t seem to have a clear idea of what they wanted. “Normally, that’s a red flag,” Nanis said. He put them on the phone with Solomon,

who spent two weeks hammering out a detailed contract and a plan of action, which, Nanis said, has made everything smoother. “It’s super refreshing for me to do cool, socially and demographically relevant work.” He was getting ready to pull an all-nighter, hoping to be done with the project by January. The plans for the Web site had come into focus and, he said, “I’ve had two calls with Asher, and we only discussed, What is best for the artist?” ?

*An earlier version of this article misidentified the programming language that John Coggeshall contributed to.

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Gifts for programmers this 2018 holiday season. We've organized them by price and how special your developer might be to you. This year I was asked to write the 2018 Gift Guide for Programmers. While in my day job I'm not a programmer, I do consider myself a developer, I'm pretty versed in most things tech and I'm exposed to cutting edge technology on a daily basis. Plus my main circle of friends and associates frequently discuss new waves in tech. So I thought, "Why not me". Universal Programmer Adapters and IC Sockets, All programmers come with ZIF (Zero Insertion Force) Car Ecu Programmer. auto key programmer. Q: hi i was interested on buing a programmer S100 but i could not find the list devices that may be read from the programmer your link isnt good to see that and i'd like to know in case if it is can be updated as you say from the original factory without trouble and also all the device it can. The Programmer's Price. Want to hire a coding superstar? Call the agent. "What kind of price range are we talking about?" Bradley asked. "Ballpark, for this role you're talking a hundred and fifty to two hundred and fifty dollars an hour."