

Steve Bloom ('87) on the value of a philosophy major in the work world
A conversation with students in Philosophical Methods, Spring 2019
April 9, 2019

Steve Bloom is CEO of Pragmatek. He graciously skyped in to our methods class to talk with students about how uses skills and knowledge of his philosophy major in his career.

Academic Biography: Steve took his first philosophy classes because he was a little bored with some of the other things he was studying, and wanted to try something different. He got hooked on classes taught by Deane Curtin and George Georgacarakos and ended up majoring in philosophy and management. He was a serious hockey player as well. He graduated knowing he wanted to work in sales, something he realized in part as a result of an internship as a buyer with Dayton's. His first job was at IBM--a job he described as "winning the lottery."

Steve's conversation with us: Four students crammed into Lisa's office for a skype conversation with Steve. He began by asking students to introduce themselves. Here's what one student (Mike O'Neill) noticed about what he did with those introductions:

When he was speaking to us, I noticed that he made small notes while we were introducing ourselves. Then, when he was talking with us later on, he made specific references to each of our interests. I recall that he mentioned Dan's interest in fly fishing, my business background, and of course Franky's hockey. This was just a small thing, but I think it showed that he valued us and cared enough to address us by name. I thought that was very impressive, and definitely something that we should do when talking with potential employers or anyone really.

How Steve's philosophical study has helped him in his work

In a nutshell: what he found valuable in philosophy courses

- Exposure to the sometimes crazy ways philosophers think and carry out their lives.
- Opportunities to write to explain himself. While multiple choice tests seemed designed to trick you, writing a paper is a chance to give an answer and justify it.
- The power of interpretation.
- The capacity to ask unusual, provocative, challenging questions in a way that keeps people engaged with you.
- Effective writing: getting your points across powerfully, cleanly, and with humor.
- Practice in thinking through the steps needed to make your case well.
- Effective communication
- Specific philosophical ideas: several philosophical ideas inform the way he does business:
 - The unexamined life is not worth living
 - I think, therefore I am
 - The lessons of Machiavelli's *Prince*, a.k.a. "you don't have to be a jerk to be an effective boss."

How in the heck did *he* land that first IBM job?

- He was effective at communicating with people much older than he.
- During a job interview, *he* asked the interviewer questions. Philosophy gave him practice and a comfort in asking provocative questions.
- He could get closer to people, by asking them for their views, in an effort to understand an issue from more angles
- He was not so quick to judge others' ideas; he was willing to consider them from all angles.
- He was an effective writer; he could deliver a message powerfully.
- He asked open-ended questions

How philosophy made him a better negotiator

Steve thinks philosophy taught him some essential skills and insights for negotiation, which also carry over into other areas of work.

- Don't rush to get the answer from the other party. Navigate your way to a final answer
- Calmly and patiently and articulately state your case
- Both parties are trying to reach the place in which both are happy and unhappy in equal measures.
- Be curious and to ask a lot of open-ended questions
- Find out the other party's impetus to act or to change and keep that in focus. Help the other party to keep that in focus as well.
- Be firm and clear in your convictions, while also continuing to listen

And Steve's concrete advice for job seekers

About that interview, what does he mean by "ask questions during it?"

- Your goal isn't to be aggressively challenging, but curious and confident. He suggests that, when you ask questions during an interview, everyone--you and the interviewer--can calm down and engage in a conversation. "Nervousness and desperation go away when you're in a dialogue."
- Let the interview get rolling before you start asking questions--but don't wait till the point in the interview when they ask you if you have questions. "It's over by that point." Instead, in reply to one of their questions, say "that's a great question, but before I answer it, may I ask *you* one?"
- What kind of questions? Relevant and pointed--but polite--ones. Here are some ideas:
 - What do you hope to get out of this hire?
 - What are you looking for in this position?
 - What would you be expecting of this person?
 - How many hires will there be?

How do you *get* the interview in the first place?

- Realize, as a philosopher, that you have a "special sauce," and present it as such.

- Emphasize the skills you have, specifically from philosophy. Here are some:
 - You seek to understand, without judging
 - You are a good team member because you want to understand what's in it for the other members of your team
 - You are able to negotiate

Where to aim, in your first years out

- Find an organization in which you can learn
- In your first three to five years, focus on mentors. If you're not finding them at work, seek them out elsewhere. To the extent that you can, make *this* your focus, more than money.
- Figure out how to sort and weigh your priorities as you make an initial career choice. Figure out who you are and be true to that.
- Ask yourself what you want to accomplish, and come back to it as a touchstone.