The Path to Success

Here in the Bay Area of California, home of Silicon Valley, there is a well-known destination for entrepreneurs named Sand Hill Road. This famed road is lined with the densest capita of investors in the world. It is synonymous with venture capital, and most successful technology entrepreneurs will at some point visit one or more of its firms.

Venture capitalists are quick to say that they invest in people first and a business idea second. They sit across the table from aspiring leaders and look for the best CEO and the best heads of research, engineering, and technology. From that small nucleus, many companies are built. Some of them become household names, while others quickly go away. But there is always a draw and mystique to this ecosystem that attracts newcomers.

I speak with many College of Liberal Arts students and graduates who wonder how they can join the start-up culture and where they fit into the future of business.

There is good news:

- Today we are seeing start-ups leaning more to public relations efforts to launch their companies than marketing spending. We are in the social media age, and knowing how to create and leverage viral PR is an in-demand skill.
- Web 2.0 companies are dependent upon understanding how technology can connect people and create social graphs that are meaningful and relevant. Those who are skilled at creating and maintaining both organizational and personal relationships are needed to interpret and progress the technology.
- The “next big thing” is always unknown, but we do know that the Internet and technology continue to lead us to more personal connections and deeper interactions with people we know and meet. The human side of technology will be the missing ingredient in what software should do.

Liberal arts graduates have a place in the new economy, but they must immerse themselves in technology, know and understand what is new, and leverage their education to fill the needs of a start-up — from interpreting how the technology is best accepted and what it should do for people to creating the content that consumers want. Those who can straddle technology and the liberal arts will be in demand for Web 2.0 and beyond, and may soon find themselves in one of those early meetings on Sand Hill Road.

Rusty Rueff has been a senior executive in Silicon Valley for over 10 years and most recently was CEO of the venture-backed company SNCAP acquired in April 2008. Today, he is a corporate and philanthropic board director and consults, advises, and invests in technology start-ups.

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