A little Yelp goes a long way

Silicon success story.
A U of T grad talks about hard skills, learning outside of the classroom and the importance of failure

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For those aspiring to work in the technology industry, working in Silicon Valley is a dream.

Brad Menezes, who graduated from the University of Toronto's mechanical engineering program in 2012, was once one such aspirant.

Today, he's working for the uber-popular website, Yelp. How did he manage it?

What's your role at Yelp and how did you get there?
I'm a product manager. I got to Yelp in the most roundabout way possible. Got an intro to the recruiter. Two phone interviews. One design test. Five in-person inter-

Yelp is a user reviews and recommendations social networking site that helps people find local businesses. ISTOCK

views, including one with the CEO.

All interviews went well, but I still got rejected.

They said they'd never hired a new graduate as a product manager and it was risky.

I convinced them to place a bet on me and let me intern instead. While interning, they promoted me to a full-time position.

So in short, it took a little perseverance and a lot of luck.

What have your top three life experiences been, and how can you relate those experiences to your career?
I'll give you one experience that repeated in many forms throughout the past years: failure.

I brought on a team for Nspire — a non-profit organization dedicated to fostering the next generation of leaders in business and technology — and a bunch of people quit. I went to a bunch of interviews to become a PM, got rejected from all of them. I had a startup, it tanked.

This is very important because after a while you can look back and realize that the missteps or mistakes were all necessary to move forward. Whenever you try to push your limits really hard, this will happen. But I figure it's better to push your limits than to remain within your comfort zone.

Looking back, one could say that it was a very clear path that I took to get to where I am today at Yelp, but going through it, I really had no idea where I would end up.

The three things Brad Menezes always wished someone had told him when he was in school:

- Develop hard skills, there is no substitute. Again that's engineering, design, product. This goes far beyond what you're learning in school. Start building things yourself and start hanging out with people who are better than you in these aspects.

- Get some experience in the Valley as early as possible. Facebook, Google, Twitter, Zynga, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Evernote, Netflix, Dropbox, Airbnb, Square, Yelp and so many others are unbelievable places to be right now. Each have some of the smartest people you can ever work with and nothing beats that when you're early in your career.

- Don't be afraid of failure and do not settle. Disregard anyone who tries to tell you that you're not qualified or capable. If you hit some bumps in the road along the way, don't sweat, just keep going.

What skills and experiences would you recommend for students to develop while in school?
If you want to succeed in the tech industry, make sure the majority of your time is spent learning hard skills, primarily engineering, design, and/or product. The best way to do this is to build something yourself or with friends. Soft skills are very important in certain roles (project management being one of them), but there is still no substitute for good hard skills.

Design, engineering and product skills will give you extremely high leverage as finding people who really excel at this is not common. If you can really hone your skills in one or more of these areas, you can be damn successful in tech.