The Specialists Guild (TSG)

- Nonprofit founded 2012 to provide technical skills training to adults with Autism
- Almost immediately saw the need to add soft skills to training curriculum – now 60% tech, 40% soft skills
- Typical student mid to late 20’s, main-streamed, some college, little or no work experience
- 55 people trained in person in San Francisco, 150+ via live video nationwide
- Received a Next Gen Coder grant to create online content, based on TSG curriculum
Observations about online courses

• **The good** – increases the reach and reduces the cost of education, provides flexibility and self pacing for student

• **The bad** – like the rest of the internet, online courses are mostly crap
  • A poor teacher is worse online
  • A good teacher is worse online
  • The information presented is out of date, wrong or no longer relevant
  • Help for students is often not available

Still, better than nothing.... Or, are they?
Challenges to creating online courses

• What are we doing – giving someone a fish for dinner or teaching them to fish?

• Learning styles
  • Tailor the material to your audience
  • How to reach right audience?

• Keeping the content relevant and up to date

• Support for learners
  • Keeping students motivated, focused and engaged
  • Not all students will “get it” – who answers questions?
The successful online learner profile

• According to a Minnesota State University study:
  • Strong motivation and persistence
  • Executive function processes are “particularly critical”
  • Effective time management and independence
  • Effective and appropriate communications skills
  • Access to a good study environment
Students are individuals and have different challenges, but some commonalities emerge:

- Typical student presents with low self esteem about their abilities and their ability to learn new skills
- Self esteem can be repaired by repeated acknowledgements of success by an unbiased (i.e. not a parent) observer
- Low motivation to explore solutions to problems (unless in area of great interest e.g. games)
- Executive functions are immature (impacts time management and persistence)
- Soft skills are weak due to lack of opportunity to practice
Tailoring online hard skills training to people with Autism

• Most will not do well without scheduling, supervision and mentoring

• The online component still allows self pacing by the student

• Lots of examples, visual aids and practice opportunities

• The “obvious” needs to be stated AND explained

• Emphasis on how to find and apply information, rather than learning the facts

• Projects which allow the student to learn in the context of existing areas of interest
It’s more important to hire for:

- 92% of companies hire for soft skills

Bad hires usually lack:

- 89% of bad hires lack soft skills
Teaching soft skills

Practice is key:

• **Interactions**
  - Group readings and discussions
  - Team work, helping each other
  - Presentations – research, create message, present

• **Out of your Comfort Zone**
  - Physical – commute, noisy busy building, crowded open office
  - Personal – ask for help, approach a stranger, cold calls

• **Expectations**
  - Can’t succeed unless you try
  - It’s Ok to fail and learn
  - This is how to do better next time

• What to do, what not to do, and how to know the difference

All of these instruments are heavily based on group interaction and discussion
Teaching soft skills online

• People have different challenges – a good teacher will tailor the material to help EACH individual

• By necessity, the same lessons are presented to everyone online – can we tailor to individual need?

• How to create the opportunities for practice?

• Mentorship of the individual is also key – but how?
  • Online office hours with instructor – cost, scaling
  • Local individual mentors – local AS groups?
  • Online chat group interactions – moderators?
  • ??
We need your help

Please contribute your ideas about soft skills training at:

https://forms.gle/wFiAjgqGVDXiifVZ8