

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work In Progress. I'm Ramona this, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work In Progress, explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Miriam Cortés, Ada Developers Academy graduate:

I had that, when you're in your 30s and you're just like, "What am I even doing?" One of those panic attacks. I have no money right now. I can't afford rent.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The panic Miriam Cortés felt isn't too different from that of many other professionals who want to make a mid-career switch, but aren't sure that they can do it. She got a BA and a master's, but the timing was wrong after school, unable to find work in her chosen field, engineering. She started teaching, but it was hard to pay her rent on her salary of around \$50,000 a year, especially when she was still paying off student loans. About five years ago, Miriam decided something had change. That's when a friend told her about Ada Developers Academy, an 11 month free program with the goal of, quote, "Preparing women and gender-expansive adults to be software developers." At first, Miriam was skeptical about a free school that made such big promises.

Miriam Cortés, Ada Developers Academy graduate:

And then I actually started researching Ada and it felt this is not a real thing. There's no way that there's a free program that helps you find a job, or an internship, and then if that doesn't work out with the internship company, it helps you find a job further on and you don't owe them anything. That's not real.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

But it was real, and Ada enrolls a lot of women like Miriam, who have reached a dead end in their careers and need to try something new. Miriam new developers were in demand, and because Ada is free, if it didn't work out, at least she wouldn't add to her debt. She applied, got in and started learning the hard skills right away. But she learned a lot more than the technology.

Miriam Cortés, Ada Developers Academy graduate:

The tech was I think, Ruby and Ruby on Rails, and then some old school JavaScript stuff, but really Ada teaches you how to teach yourself. It's really hard at the beginning because you're like, "I just have all these questions and I need somebody to answer them for me." But you're getting into an industry where that's going to be your reality for however long. You're keeping a job in tech. I have since learned Python and Java, and some other stuff, but essentially your most used skill is the learning how to learn on your own, or learning how to figure out the right questions to ask.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Part of the Ada program that Miriam found most helpful was the paid internship. She did hers at Zillow, the online real estate hub. Then Zillow hired her as a full-time software developer. It's fulfilling, she says, and there's room to grow.

Miriam Cortés, Ada Developers Academy graduate:

Part of me is like, "I want to move up the ladder." Then I've paused myself from that kind of thinking, because I really want to just focus on stuff that I enjoy. I've really appreciated that at Zillow, I've mentioned this to my manager and he said, "Maybe this is something you want to try. Do you want to manage an intern?" So there's been micro ways of figuring out what I want that next step to be for me, without feeling like I'm just doing this because I feel like I have to be the woman in a visible role, so that others can see like, "Hey, this can happen to you too." So, I've tried stepping back from that and I just, I want to be good at my job. I feel very lucky now.

Miriam Cortés, Ada Developers Academy graduate:

I talk about this with my husband where I'm like, "Oh, this is what privilege feels like, where you're not stressed about you can't make rent and you're wondering how are you going to do the unexpected bill when it shows up." I can enjoy a hobby without thinking twice about it and all of that is just new.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What's also new is the high salary. At \$118,000 a year, she earns more than double what she was making as a teacher.

Miriam Cortés, Ada Developers Academy graduate:

And that seems insane to me. It is insane to me, no human needs this kind of money. At the same time, it's given me the opportunity to just help my parents and help family. In my wildest dreams, I was like, "I'm going to have the money to tell so and so, 'Oh, you need this? Yeah, don't worry about it, just here it is.'" I find I have a lack of word sometimes about it just because I sit back and I'm like, "Remember when you were teaching and you thought the only way to get a real living wage was by marrying somebody, and that was the only way you were going to afford rent?"

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Miriam admits that software development isn't for everyone, and that this male-dominated field can be especially difficult for a woman. Although Zillow made her feel very welcome, Ada prepared her for companies that might not be as enlightened.

Miriam Cortés, Ada Developers Academy graduate:

I remember one thing Ada told us was don't be the person to bring cupcakes and sweets to the office parties or whatever, because then you get pigeonholed into doing the girl job or whatever. When I heard that, I was like, "But I like cupcakes and sweets and I'll make them, I'll bring them." It wasn't until we hired a senior software dev, who is also a woman and she also enjoyed baking and it was one of those moments of a light bulb went off in me where I was like, "Oh, I can bring my full self to work and I don't have to just be this one thing that shows up and does code, and is heads down in this ... I don't know, a dark room with the code running, like it's the matrix or whatever. I could just be me and show up and do the work as well."

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I spoke about Miriam's success story with the CEO of Ada Developers Academy, Lauren Sato. She explained that Miriam was exactly the type of person Ada can help, smart and motivated, but stuck in a career that for whatever reason, isn't right for them.

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

We have over 500 alums now at Ada and another 5.3 million women who left the workforce over the last year, who can attest to their career, not being a good fit, whether it's because they just ended up not liking it, or it wasn't a good fit for their families and their family decisions, or it didn't provide the benefits they needed to take care of themselves, or the flexibility they needed to manage their lives. We have heard so many different reason that women start in retail jobs, or I mean, we've had accountants come to Ada and they realize that they want more flexibility, they want better benefits, they want to be paid what they're worth. So they end up at Ada and build these incredible careers that really work with their lives.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

A lot of the people who come to you don't have tech backgrounds. So, what is it that you're looking for in that student that makes them a good fit to try this career?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

Right. Actually we don't admit students who have tech backgrounds. So, we're looking explicitly for folks who have grit, who are community-minded, collaborative learners, and who have a demonstrated ability to solve problems strategically. That problem-solving ability is really a critical skill as a software developer, and so that's one of the things that we look for in our admissions process. In addition to that grit and community mindset.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You probably got a lot of people applying, so how do you prioritize who you're going to admit? what group of people are you choosing from?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

Yeah, our acceptance rates average between 10% and 20%. So, we do have quite a few people who are interested in the program and do have to prioritize. We have chosen to focus over the last several years on prioritizing admitting folks from the BIPOC community specifically, and those from low income background or the LGBTQQI+ communities, specifically the trans community, because we know that those are the groups that stand to benefit the most from having access to these careers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The tech community has a reputation of being a boys club. I think that's changing, I've talked to a lot of people over the last two years and that seems to be changing, but it feels that there are differences in how workers of color, or women, or members of the trans community are treated. What is your experience with that, and how are you preparing your students for that world?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

I wouldn't necessarily label myself as an optimist. I feel like I have a pretty realistic view on the situation that our students are going into, particularly because I have been a part of the tech industry, and I held a VP level role within the tech industry and folks would come to visit our office and assume that, somebody that reported to me two levels down, that I was their secretary. So, I've experienced it firsthand and it's pretty terrible. I do think it is getting better though, and I think we're seeing evidence

of that. Organizations are starting to set explicit goals against things like this. They're starting to hire folks whose job is to focus on changing this within the companies.

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

But it's a really big shift to turn. There's so much institutional inertia around maintaining that bro culture within tech. So, it's something that we have to be very real with our students about. While we're preparing them, we're also working with our companies to do internal training and manager prep, to try to minimize it as much as possible, those negative experiences for our students, but they're going to encounter them. So, we do equip them with the tools to handle that when they get in there as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Miriam called that out in particular because she thought that was so useful. How do you do that? What do you talk about? Are you talking about examples? Are you just talking about the culture in general?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

Yeah. We focus on some really tangible actions for folks. So, interrupting bias, how to be an active bystander when you witness something that's happening to somebody else. How to advocate for yourself within the structures of one of our partner companies. How to build community or find an existing community that can support you as you move through your career. These are the top three things that we really focus on in addition to training around microaggressions, the more standard DEI kind of training.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The first six months of the program, is that in class actually learning the hard skills you need for software development?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

That's right, yeah. Our students spend six months with us in the classroom, learning full stack software development skills. Then they also, at that same time are going through a social justice curriculum that helps prepare them for the environments they're going into. Then they spend their second six months at an internship at one of our corporate partners being a hands-on developer, getting involved directly in writing code and deploying products.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Taking a step back, you mentioned that you do not accept applicants who have any tech training in the background. So, you're teaching people code from the start. Is there any certain kind of mindset that you need to be able to learn coding or can anybody really learn it?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

Coding is not for everyone, I'll be really explicit about that. It does take a pretty unique mindset and really a great deal of resilience. Coding is incredibly frustrating and you can work on a problem for hours and days and then have to delete pages of code and start over. It's very frustrating. So, really when we say we screen for grit, we're very serious about that because it's such a critical skill for developers. The other thing that makes people really uniquely successful in this field is being driven to solve problems, both being able to identify where a problem exists, and then to create multiple different solutions and

then test to find the best one. Those are skills that are really critical in the space, that if you're not really excited about those things, this kind of work could really wear on you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think I would be excited to try it, because I like organizing things, I like things to work, but I would be very frustrated if they didn't and I'd have to start all over again. It would drive me crazy.

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

Oh, absolutely.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Have you coded yourself?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

I have dabbled, but it is also not the career for me. I have so much respect for our students who get into this world, particularly at this late stage in the game, I think I would be a terrible student at this time and just admire our students for plugging back in.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What kind of teachers do you have for these programs? Are they experienced software developers themselves?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

Yeah. We have a really wide range of instructors and I think that's what it makes our team so uniquely successful. We have some folks who have backgrounds in education, who taught K-12 STEM. We have some folks who were software development managers and then decided to move into teaching. We have some folks who worked for other coding bootcamps. So, we pull from all of the different skill sets that our instructors get from having those different backgrounds, and it makes the education really well rounded here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And how do you go about placing the students in the internships? Who are you working with? What kind of companies are they getting a chance to work side-by-side with actual professionals?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

We have a really robust matching process and we have a really wide range of corporate partners, and we do that very intentionally. So we could sell all of our internship seats to Amazon, they would take them in a heartbeat. They've asked us for that. But we aim to have the kind of seats that reflect the diversity of students we serve. So, we work with companies ranging from incubation labs, so very, very early stage startups, all the way to the big Microsoft, Amazon, Google kind of organizations and every thing in between, small to mid-size, and our students really reflect that diversity. So, some folks want to go in and be a part of a big machine and some folks want to be in it with a company from the ground up. Our goal really is to aim, to offer those different experiences. The matching process itself is really complicated.

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

It's like the biggest Sudoku puzzle you've ever seen, trying to find just the right fit for everybody in the community. Our students are incredible. They go through this process over the course of a week where they interview with six different companies. They provide ratings for the companies, the companies provide scores from the interviews and then we put it all together and try to get everybody in the best possible seat for their learning needs, which is what we really prioritize, and then for the experience they're aiming to get from it as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And that experience, is it in-person? I know because of COVID, things have changed in a lot of programs. Are you back to being in-person?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

We were an entirely in-person program as of February 2020, March, 2020, we flipped to an entirely digital program. That has been really surprisingly successful and it's created much more accessibility for our program. Historically, 25% of our classes would move to Seattle from all across the country and now they don't have to, we can meet students where they're at, which is really exciting. But right now, we are still fully digital. We have a Seattle campus and a digital campus right now, but both of them are learning online until we really and truly get over this Delta hump, and then we'll bring our Seattle campus back in person. Right now, that's looking at about November of this year.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And in the internship experience, are they a part of a specific team? Are they going to the meetings? Are they helping work on real projects?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

Yes. Yeah, that's actually a requirement. We vet our managers as they're coming in and make sure that they have the time to dedicate to mentoring our students, that they've assigned a peer mentor, that they have a clear project that's the right scope for our interns, and that they have a clear expectation of what our interns are able to do, and that that has been fit into the sprint team that they're managing, their project plan. So, we are really, really working to make sure that we find just that sweet spot where folks, our students, are getting in and they're able to write code, deploy it, really participate in the process, get that applied learning, but not be overwhelmed or just tossed into the deep end, and that's something that we continue to hone over time.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you help at the end of this year to help someone find a job or do you connect through network? What is the next step for that student?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

At our last several graduations, I think we've averaged about 90% of students already have job offers by the time they graduate. I think in the last cohort, 40% or 50% of them had competing job offers. So, we're seeing pretty high conversion rates with our corporate partners through internship. Then our students are also leveraging those offers to get other offers elsewhere, which is really, really exciting.

That's probably our favorite part, is when we start to see our students have that economic power and ability to make those choices.

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

We do have a really phenomenal career services team to support folks, both as they get that first role, but then as they look for subsequent roles and we also do continued learning because the best thing for us is to see our students advance in the industry. We have, I think two or three alums, who are CTOs now and they're in these roles where they can impact how the whole organization operates, how they hire, how they develop talent. That's where we know this work is going to live on so much longer than any of us will. So, we really drive towards that with our career and alum support.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So Lauren, how critical is the support system around the students?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

We have probably 300 volunteers for every class of a hundred students, and they really make the student experience so much more rich and supportive. We have incredible tutors and TAs and mentors. So, as we are really pressing down the gas on our growth, that's the community that we're really focused on growing with us. So, if anybody out there has a few hours to give each week and would want to spend some time with our students, we'd love to have you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Sounds like this one year in ADA can change your life forever, in moving you into a career that's going to be fulfilling and pays well?

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

Absolutely. I think one of the things that I get really excited about, is knowing that the market is driving that to continue to be the case because there just are not enough software developers, there's just an insatiable need for talent in this market. So, companies are constantly competing to hire folks, which means the benefits keep getting better. The opportunities for advancement keep getting better and that's what makes me really hopeful that the students that we're serving today are actually going to end up the leaders of the industry down the road.

Lauren Sato, Ada Developers Academy CEO:

One of the things that's really concerning for us is that the historical dropout rate for women in tech is I think 51% or 52% versus 17% for our male colleagues. We are so resolved to see that shift. I think that we're starting to really feel the impact of that work over time, which is exciting.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You in listening to a special edition of Work In Progress, expanding opportunities in tech, creating a more diverse and inclusive workforce. This series is produced in partnership with Cognizant Foundation. For WorkingNation, I'm Ramona Schindelheim.