# Wharton

## WHARTON ALUMNI INNOVATE TO IMPACT THE JOB MARKET

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Got a Talent Agent?

UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA

# ISN'T IT TIME YOU GOT A TALENT AGENT?

Rishon Blumberg, W'94
10x Management — Partner



Bloomberg | RISHON BLUMBERG
10X MANAGEMENT CO-FOUNDER

" From a macro view, we see statistics that, soon, freelancers will make up 50% of the workforce. By 2040, 40 million baby boomers will be replaced by fewer millennials, meaning the supply of workers will be smaller, and the demand for highly skilled workers will be higher. And the workers entering the labor market now want a different quality of life. The traditional 9-to-5 job isn't interesting enough.

Instead of interviewing for a job, maybe you should try something different. Agents represent quarterbacks, goalies, singers, babies, chefs … even collies! **Rishon Blumberg**, W'94, through his firm 10x Management, represents top tech talent. Who would have thought?

### What does a talent agent do?

Our origins are in representing musicians, songwriters, record producers and such. Our philosophy is to protect the talent, making sure things run smoothly for them.

We took that same representation concept from entertainment and brought it over to tech.

By aligning with the talent, we make their lives easier by taking all the business elements off their plate, which gives the companies a better experience. The talent makes more money and, because of this, are more dedicated to their performance.

### Why did you start 10x Management?

Our firm had hired freelance programmers for years, and observed this inefficiency on both sides of the market. The freelancers wouldn't stay on scope and communicated poorly. On the other hand, we seemed to get the better end of the deal financially. The freelancers didn't have a sense of their actual market value.

### Are coders bad negotiators?

I don't think it's unique to coders or people in the tech world at all. When it comes to pricing things out and advocating for themselves, most people would benefit from having an agent.

### How does this type of representation compare with a recruiter?

Our position is diametrically opposite to that of a recruiter. Recruiters are typically hired by a company to fill a specific position, and they go and try to find a candidate to match that company's need. We, on the other hand, represent candidates, and go with them wherever they go. Our goal is not to unload them on a company, but to work with them over the long haul. Plus, our focus is on freelance or contract work only, as opposed to W-2 placements, which are the bread and butter for recruiters.

### What is the difference between entertainers and coders?

Each group's egos are developed in different ways. Let's say, for example, you play the guitar, starting at an early age. Your family and friends keep telling you how brilliant and amazing you are! It's the opposite in the tech world. It's a much more introspective pursuit. No one is sitting over your shoulder telling you, "Oh, my God! Look at that code! It's immaculate, the way you phrased that line." You don't get those strokes to the ego. If anything, it's the opposite. It's more like, "Johnny, can you go outside and do something? What's wrong with you?" Thus, with coders, by and large, there is no ego.

### What is the benefit for the coder of being represented by an agent?

We remove all the business elements from their plate —contract negotiations, invoicing and collections — and we help ensure projects run smoothly. For example, our clients don't need to worry, "Is this contract phrased correctly?" or "Is this nondisclosure agreement going to tie me up in some shape or form?" They can focus on what they do best, which is coding.

### What do you vet for, beyond the ability to code?

Communication. Oh, and problem solving. You can be a super-talented coder, but if you can't communicate, we won't work with you.

When we drop programmers into a company's ecosystem, they must be able to communicate effectively with the people with whom they are working. If you're a decent coder and a great communicator, then you're likely to have a better engagement than if you're an incredible coder, but a terrible communicator. We are constantly reinforcing the need for effective communication.

The ability and the discipline to communicate and the quality of our clients' minds set them apart from lesser freelancers. Even if you have all the credibility in the world as a coder, the company must know what you're doing.

PARTICIPATING IN A PANEL DISCUSSION ON "THE FUTURE OF WORK," AT WCNY: JON YOUNGER; JASON HOROWITZ, C'93; RISHON BLUMBERG, W'94; MELISSA BRECHER, C'95; JAY GALLUZZO, C'96; AND AMY EPSTEIN GADSDEN, GR'05.

**What could an up-and-coming programmer do to be perceived as a rock star?**

Starting out, don't focus on the money. Accept internships, do spec work and try to find mentors for things that you might not learn in other environments. Build a resume that gives you a diverse skill set and differentiates you. When we show your profile to a company, they need to see your tangible value. In terms of the clients that we choose to work with, most came in through a trusted source. We're trying to build a community, so we use our clients to do the technical vetting.

**Is there a social aspect to your clients leaning on one another at 10x?**

We have a Google group that all our clients use for talking to one another. We host four events in New York City and four in San Francisco that we encourage our clients to attend. We do things for our clients beyond social relationships. For example, we make press opportunities available for our clients to help them build their bona fides.

We also incentivize them to look out for opportunities for one another. As an example, let's say you're a Python specialist, and a friend of yours says his company has a Ruby project. We offer a commission for you to pass that lead along to us so that we can bring it to one of our Ruby people.

**How do potential clients square with coming out of the corporate world to become freelancers?**

When coders have a skill set that is in demand, the way they counter not having the benefits package is by making more money. Also, they can work when they want, on what they want to work on. Last year, we had a client who wanted to work 80 hours a week for eight months. And then he took four months to travel the world.

From the company's perspective, there are a variety of benefits in working with a freelancer — the company doesn't have to worry about the training costs, and it doesn't have to pay for the office space, computer, 30% benefits cost or vacation time. It doesn't need to worry about the 15% payroll tax. And it can add capacity and technical expertise at the snap of a finger without adding to the overall head count.







RISHON BLUMBERG, W'94, MEETING WITH ONE OF HIS CLIENTS, DANIEL GERLANC

**RISHON BLUMBERG, W'94, WITH SINGER-SONGWRITER VANESSA CARLTON**

### How receptive are companies to hiring freelance programmers now, and where do you see it going?

We started 10x five years ago. I remember the first company we worked with. Our client told the company, "Can you talk to my agent? He'll work out the terms of the deal." The company said, "Agent? What do you mean agent? That's ridiculous!" We don't hear that anymore. I think companies are more receptive and have set up structures in their companies to deal with freelancers — because good freelancers are bringing their cumulative experience of all the projects they have worked on. You can say that a blended workforce (one that utilizes both W-2 employees and freelancers) gives companies a competitive advantage.

From a macro view, we see statistics that, soon, freelancers will make up 50% of the workforce. By 2040, 40 million baby boomers will be replaced by fewer millennials, meaning the supply of workers will be smaller, and the demand for highly skilled workers will be higher. And the workers entering the labor market now want a different quality of life. The traditional 9-to-5 job isn't interesting enough.

### What role will agents play in the future?

Perhaps other professions will be represented. For example, chefs now have talent agents. Being a talent agent is being a curator. We filter out a lot of the noise from those who claim to be good but won't be the right fit for a company's project. Then we curate the coders who are truly good, and help companies to quickly match these people with the problems needing to be solved.

### What are good qualities to be an agent?

In the entertainment world, there is a laid-out process for becoming an agent. Typically, it starts in a mailroom. But what we are doing is so new that there isn't a blueprint for finding and training a new agent. It's certainly helpful to accumulate life experience. You need to understand how to present value to someone who doesn't know what to look for. For example, Tom Cruise is great. When you watch him in a movie, you don't see him acting. You see only the character. When you can identify the difference between good and great, it's easier to sell that as an agent. You will fight for that person, and you'll go to the mat. And I have had to go to the mat for some of our tech clients. A company might say, "Well, I don't know if this person is right for us." And I'll say, "Trust me on this … you're missing it. This person is next level; you will be blown away."

### What role does education play in the new economy?

Let's make a distinction between education and knowledge. For almost any highly skilled job, it helps to have a degree from an Ivy League college, especially for that first job.

For me, what I got out of Wharton was networking, just associating with people as brilliant as they were.

But I do think the role of education is changing. Knowledge, however, is more important than ever. If someone has a great education but little knowledge, he or she will be at a disadvantage. And someone who possesses deep knowledge, but little formal education, can attain a great deal. So, make sure to obtain as much knowledge as you can as you progress in your education — you get out of it what you put into it!

### What did you learn at Wharton that still helps you today?

My experience at Wharton and Penn in general, was transformative. I entered not knowing what I wanted to do with my life and left with *very* clear direction. I ran the social planning and events committee and concert committee for three years while at Penn. Between that and my studies of entrepreneurial management (my major), I obtained valuable real-world experience, mixed with a solid educational foundation. It was through my work with the concert committee that I landed my first job out of school working for a famed concert promoter in New York City. It was through my studies of entrepreneurship that, a few years later, I started my own business — managing artists and others. From a practical standpoint, my learning at Wharton about financial modeling and spread-sheeting proved an invaluable tool for me. Though I never studied finance and didn't have a ton of accounting or statistics classes beyond the intro courses, I've always been the go-to guy for anything that touched on finances for my companies. Wharton has in so many ways made me the businessman I am today. ♦

— Kenso Trabing