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Alumnus of BATEC's Tech Apprentice Program Builds His Own Business from this Formative Experience

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Kostian Iftica's experience as a Tech Apprentice shaped Brilliant Geeks, the technology services company he operates in Boston.

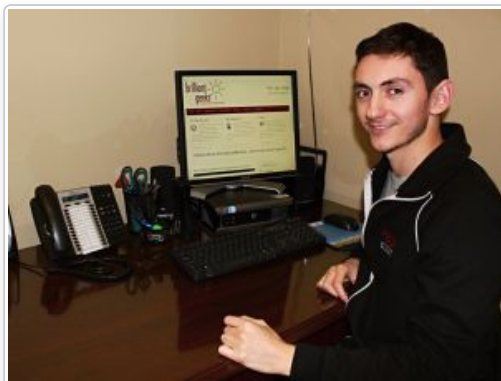
Conversations with New England Baptist Hospital physicians as they adopted electronic healthcare records during his Tech Apprenticeship in the summer of 2007 were among the seeds for the business he started two years later while attending college full time.

Tech Apprentice is a model internship program developed by the Broadening Advanced Technological Education Connects (BATEC), an ATE National Center of Excellence for Computing and Information Technologies at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, in partnership with Boston Public Schools' Office of Instructional and Information Technology TechBoston unit and Boston Private Industry Council.

"The doctors and everybody there [at New England Baptist Hospital] wanted me to explain to them in simple terms what this new technology is going to do for them, how it is going to help them. When they had problems they wanted to know how to solve it themselves,"

Iftica said. Eventually he figured out that if physicians needed this sort of help other people could use this type of guidance too.

"We try to simplify things and make it easier for people to use technology in a meaningful way to make their lives better," Iftica said of the primary goal of Brilliant Geeks. As a sole proprietor he repairs, installs, and maintains desktops, laptops, mobile devices, and other advanced technologies such as networked appliances. After he completes the technical work, Iftica explains to customers in plain language how to operate



*Kostian Iftica, Tech Apprentice alumnus,
and owner of Brilliant Geeks, a computer
services company.*

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their equipment and how to avoid problems in the future. He has found that being responsive and taking the time to explain technical issues is a winning combination for word-of-mouth, organic growth of his business. He currently has 200 residential, commercial, and healthcare customers.

Kate McAulay, practice manager for **Greater Boston Orthopedic Center**, has known Iftica since he was a Tech Apprentice and highly recommends him and his company as dependable and trustworthy.

"Kostian is always there when we need him, he is always able to fix whatever it is that we manage to break, he fits right in to our office and is conscious of our patients, doctors and staff time. He has also done work for me and my doctors at our home offices. There is nothing IT-related that I would not trust him with!"

McAulay added that he has helped with a variety of information technology (IT) tasks including choosing new equipment and backing up critical information. "He has finesse in the area of healthcare, which requires a lot of forethought and pre-planning so that downtime does not mean lost revenue," she said.

Most Tech Apprentices Enroll in College

Tech Apprentice places tech-savvy high school students from Boston Public Schools in seven-week paid IT internships with large and small companies in the Boston metropolitan area. In 2013, Tech Apprentices were placed with business stalwarts like **John Hancock** and **State Street Corporation** and startup companies like **Divya Energy**.

Since the Tech Apprentice program in 2006 administrators have secured 758 paid summer internship placements. Some of the 597 students who have participated have had multiple internships. Sixty-three percent of the racially diverse interns have been male; 37 percent have been females.

Of the 123 Tech Apprentices in 2012, 47 were seniors, and all 47 went on to college. Of the 131 students placed with employers in 2013, 54 were seniors and 98 percent of them were enrolled in postsecondary education by the end of summer. This is an extremely high college-going rate for students from the Boston Public School district, which had a four-year high school graduation rate ranging from 59 percent to 66 percent between 2006 and 2012.

Immigrant's Embrace of Technology Leads to Entrepreneurship

Iftica describes his Tech Apprentice experience as "very fulfilling."

His connection with the program actually began the year before his placement at New England Baptist Hospital. As a junior taking a webmaster class at **John D. O'Bryant School of Math and Science** in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston he signed up for an after-school IT skills training opportunity offered through TechBoston.

"That kind of sparked my interest even more, even though I liked computers to a certain extent, this gave me more confidence because I kept learning new things." he said.

Iftica got his first computer shortly after his family immigrated to the U.S. from Albania in 2001; he was 13. "I just kind of fell in love with computers," he said. Having a personal computer at home helped him learn English. He also taught himself how to fix the machine when it broke down.

Fortuitously, his Tech Apprenticeship coincided with New England Baptist Hospital's transition to electronic health records. Because the hospital was an early adopter of this technology, Iftica was immersed in the IT staff's work planning the new network, devising data processes, dispersing equipment to physicians, and establishing secure servers.

"I got to see a lot of things I never thought I could do," Iftica said, explaining he was initially worried about keeping up. Iftica credited Felicia Vargas, TechBoston director, with reassuring him that he had an internship, not a job. "Felicia kind of pushed me to be more confident, to ask questions, and learn more instead of trying to work. That made me enjoy the internship even more," he said.

In an email, Vargas wrote that as a high school student Iftica "was very eager to learn everything he could about technology. He would show up every week at our after-school training sessions for students." She not only encouraged him to become a Tech Apprentice she wrote a recommendation for another organization's \$1,000 renewable scholarship that he won.

"He has a positive outlook and we knew that employers would want that kind of person on their team," Vargas wrote.

By the end of the summer of 2007 the hospital CEO and the CIO were so impressed with Iftica that they offered him a job. "It gave me a confidence boost," Iftica said. He worked part time at the hospital during college breaks until 2010, when he had a two-semester college internship at a financial institution. When he completed his bachelor's degree in management information systems from the University of Massachusetts-Boston in 2011, the hospital offered him a full-time job. When he declined that offer in order to pursue Brilliant Geeks full time, the hospital became a client.

McAulay, the practice manager of the Greater Boston Orthopedic Center (which is associated with the New England Baptist Health Services), wrote in an email that during his internship at the hospital she observed Iftica quickly absorbing the knowledge that a brilliant hospital IT employee shared. Also that he adjusted to the nuances of working in healthcare. McAulay has been a Brilliant Geeks client since Iftica started the company.

Brilliant Geeks has five-star ratings on YELP.com and consistently positive comments on the business review website. Vargas points out that she still calls Iftica when she needs technical assistance. She also calls on him to talk about his Tech Apprentice experience, and he is one of several apprentices featured on a [video](#) highlighting some of the program's individual success stories.

In the past two months, Iftica has spoken at three education conferences in Massachusetts. One of them—Pathways to Prosperity at [Harvard University](#)—was for representatives of educational institutions that want to adopt the Tech Apprentice internships model. BATEC has received NSF support to help other community colleges replicate the internship program.

Vargas reports, "Kostian has impressed each of the audiences with his thoughtful insight into how internships can really change a life and launch a career in technology. He is living proof."

Categories: *business, education, medicine, and software.*

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