



FEATURE



## Giving New Life to the Mainframe

[By Kristine Harper]

Most people don't know what a mainframe is, and lately, even fewer are making it their life's work. Understandably, I get a lot of questions about how I chose the mainframe as a career — and I think the fact that I am a 24-year-old female has a lot to do with it.

While the call to develop code in Assembler language was very strong (wink wink), it all started much before that. Both of my parents are Assembler mainframe developers, and I attended my first SHARE conference while in utero.

Fast forward 18 years: I was an eager freshman at the University of Arizona (UA), and whether from genes or osmosis, I knew I wanted to work in the mainframe industry. Preparing for that career would be easier said than done. My college classmates told me I was nuts for choosing a career on a "dead" platform, and my professors weren't much more optimistic. I found only one Assembler language class to prepare me for the job I would take upon graduation.

While at college, I surveyed all the computer science (CS) students at UA. In this survey, I asked questions like:

- "If you had to describe the mainframe in one word, what would it be?"
- "Do you think the mainframe is still useful/important today? In the future?"
- "Would you say you know a lot, some, a little, or nothing about mainframes?"

- "Have any of your professors ever mentioned the mainframe?"
- And similar questions for Assembler.

The results of the survey were what I expected, just not what I was hoping:

- 91% of the students that responded had little of no knowledge of the mainframe
- 95% said no CS professor had even mentioned mainframes to them!!!
- The most common "one word" description of the mainframe in the replies was "old"! Old! Yes, of course they are old, but only a few replies mentioned that they are an important part of our daily computing world!
- Most students were pretty confident that mainframes are a dying breed— that their end is near and few companies use them today.
- 97% said they hadn't/wouldn't consider a career on the mainframe.

From my professors, I heard, "Well, that's not where the money is" or "That's an odd area of CS to pursue."

Don't get me wrong — my years in school were some of the best of my life, but my professional education and development really took place during the internships I completed each summer with NEON Enterprise Software, where I am currently a developer. Each summer, I was fortunate enough to attend SHARE conferences, work with seasoned professionals (the best in the field), and absorb real-life applications of what I was learning in school.

Now, with just over two years of full-time work under my belt, I'm learning more about the mainframe and Assembler programming, and I've seen that there will always be something new to learn to better my career. I've also noticed that there are not a lot of young professionals joining the ranks at my company, and I don't see many people my age at industry tradeshows or conferences.

As is true with many technology industries, the mainframe industry is experiencing a serious shortage of skilled workers. My struggles finding proper training to work as a developer on the mainframe weren't the cause of that problem, but rather, one of the results.

With the graying of the workforce that we are seeing now, by 2010, there will be no one to support the mainframe. Considering that 95% of Fortune 5000 companies continue to operate on the mainframe, the job security in this industry is quite compelling.



FEATURE

Fortunately, several industry leaders have joined together to ensure that I won't be working alone in ten years. Through the Academic Initiative, NEON is working closely with local colleges and IBM to create mainframe programs and host career fairs at colleges across the country in order to educate students about this industry and its promising future. Schools participating in the Academic Initiative teach a set of courses on the mainframe, and participating companies provide internships to give students real-world applications for what they learn in the classroom.

I am very invested in doing my part to ensure that more students have the opportunity to choose the mainframe — in 2005, I became

the project manager for zNextGen, a user-driven community that aims to connect peers and facilitate shared experiences among emerging mainframe professionals.

Fortunately, I found a company that is just as committed as I am to increasing the flow of new expertise to our industry. When you are making the decision about which technology path you want to follow, consider the mainframe. After all, job security, good pay, and challenging work are not a guarantee in every field.

**About the Author**

Kristine Harper is a developer for NEON Enterprise Software and works as an

Assembler programmer in the area of research and development on IMS projects. NEON is the technology leader in enterprise data management software and services. As the rules of business change, our solutions let you efficiently control, protect, and manage your data with confidence. Founded in 1995, NEON Enterprise Software is headquartered in Sugar Land, Texas, and serves customers worldwide with its dedicated team of industry experts. For more information about NEON Enterprise Software, visit [www.neonesoft.com](http://www.neonesoft.com).

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