

THE EFFECTIVE ENGINEER'S

Interview Prep Guide

Includes a comprehensive prep checklist
and a vault of questions you can use to grill
your interviewers.

theeffectiveengineer.com

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DOUBLE YOUR IMPACT

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KNOW THE COMPANY, TEAM, AND PRODUCT YOU'RE INTERVIEWING WITH

- Take 10-15 minutes to skim through the marketing materials on the company or team's website.
- Google for [COMPANY competitors] to understand how they fit into the market.
- Google for and read through 2-3 interesting engineering blog posts, Quora answers, or Medium posts written by the team.
- Note down 2-3 interesting tidbits you might use as talking points with your interviewers.
- If you're interviewing for a consumer product, sign up for an account – it's surprising how many people make this obvious mistake.
 - Go through any new user tours.
 - Brainstorm one change you could make to improve the onboarding experience.

KNOW YOURSELF

- Review your own resume – it's easy to have added an accomplishment or proficiency years ago that you've completely forgotten about.
- Practice your elevator pitches for the most common questions about your experience – make sure you can provide a clear, 90-second explanation on each of:
 - The accomplishment you're most proud of, including details of why you're proud of it.
 - The most challenging project you've worked on, including details of what made it difficult.
 - The specific contributions you made on your most recent project.
 - The specific contributions you made on the project most relevant to the company or team you're interviewing with.
- Know why you're leaving (or thinking about leaving) your current job. Never make this about bashing your existing team – focus on what new ways you're looking to grow yourself.
- Develop a 90-second pitch for where you think you'll be able to add the most value to the team – the best pitches here get the interviewer thinking, “I absolutely need to have you on my team.”

PREPARE YOUR OWN QUESTIONS

- Ask your recruiter who you'll be interviewing with. This will give you an opportunity to prepare any questions that particular interviewers may be uniquely positioned to answer.
- Formulate 2-3 questions based on notes you might have taken from the company's website or blog posts you've read.
- Prepare 2-3 fallback questions for each interviewer – check the *Interview Question Vault* for sample questions.
- Write down your list of questions in a notebook – you can just consult it during your interview.

PREPARE TECHNICALLY

- Ask if any interviews require coding on a laptop. If so:
 - Ask if it's okay to use your own laptop for the interview, so you can use your favorite editor, environment, and other personal customizations.
 - Ask if it would be helpful to install anything on your laptop in preparation for the interview (e.g., a particular Java version, a specific Python library, etc.).
 - If you have to use theirs, consider uploading any customizations you might have or need to Github or Dropbox so you can download them for the interview.
- Brush up on Gayle's Laakmann McDowell's *Cracking the Code Interview* or some other Q&A bank – regardless of whether you agree that whiteboard coding interviews actually provide signal, the reality is that many companies still ask algorithmic questions on the board.
- Practice writing code on paper. Yes, it's archaic – but until interview culture changes, you're likely going to do some degree of whiteboard coding.
- Refresh basics in your favorite programming language.

DAY BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- Get a good night's sleep.
- Plan to show up early – there's no point in inducing extra stress from traffic, finding parking, or getting lost.
- Remember to talk through your thought processes, more-so than you would do normally. The interviewer can't read your mind, so they can only evaluate the thoughts that you do convey.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- Send a quick thank-you note to your recruiter / interviewers, which also gives you a chance to follow up and ask about next steps.
- Identify any red flags that may have surfaced in your conversations. Remember – they're not just interviewing you. You're also interviewing them.

INTERVIEW QUESTION VAULT

This is a compilation of questions that you might consider asking your interviewer. Make them relevant and hard.

DIG INTO YOUR INTERVIEWER'S EXPERIENCE:

- What's your favorite and least favorite part about working at this company or on this team?
- What's a tough decision you had to make on the team recently, and how did you resolve it?
- Suppose you had an idea for a feature – what's your workflow for getting it launched?
- What was the single, most important factor that influenced your decision to join the company?

LEARN WHAT WORKING ON THE TEAM OR AT THE COMPANY IS LIKE:

- What's your typical work day like?
- How do you prioritize what to work on day-to-day?
- What's the process of taking an idea you have from an inception and shipping it to production?
- What fraction of your time is spent building new things versus maintaining old ones?
- How do product / business / engineering decisions get made at the company?

FOCUS ON THE TEAM CULTURE:

- What's one thing you really like about working at the company and one thing you'd like to improve? What's being done about the thing you'd like to improve?
- What are the core values at the company? What are some examples of how they're used day-to-day?
- How would you describe the culture of the company?

- When there are disagreements about how to approach a technical or product decision, how does it get resolved?
- How transparent is the company or team about what and how it's doing?

DIVE DEEPLY INTO A PRODUCT AREA:

- How did this particular product feature get designed and launched?
- Why did you decide to launch this particular version instead of this other one?
- How has the product evolved since launch based on user feedback?
- How do you measure whether a particular feature was actually useful and good investment of engineering effort?

ASK ABOUT PROFESSIONAL GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES:

- What's the most unexpected lesson that you've learned on the job?
- What is the onboarding or mentoring process like (if any) for new hires?
- What opportunities have you had to work with different people and projects during your time at the company?
- How is knowledge across projects documented and shared at the company?
- What qualities are shared by the most effective or successful engineers in your organization?

ASK ABOUT HOW THE COMPANY OR TEAM IMPROVES ITSELF:

- After an outage or major bug, how does the team ensure that it doesn't happen again?
- What's an example of a costly mistake that the team or company has made in the past year?
- Could that mistake have been avoided? If so, what would've needed to change?

LEARN ABOUT THE CHALLENGES THAT THE COMPANY IS FACING:

- What are the biggest obstacles to this company becoming massively successful?
- What are the current priorities and focus areas at the company? One powerful technique to check team alignment is to compare answers across interviewers.
- Which one area, if improved, would make the biggest difference in the company's success?
- Where would I be able to add the most value if I were to join the team?