

GUN.IO

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# HEURISTICS FOR TECHNICAL HIRING

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**THE KEY SKILLS  
ENGINEERING  
LEADERS LOOK FOR  
BEYOND THE TECH.**

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*Researched and Compiled by Gun.io*



# THE DNA OF A GREAT ENGINEER

*an introduction*



Hiring for any kind of technical role is never without risk. And let's face it, it can be daunting to assess the nuances of talent and team fit in a few simple interviews plus a code exam. So how *\*should\** we think about the value differences between:

- *A great engineer and a decent one*
- *An experienced senior engineer or a talented junior*
- *A unicorn from a yak*

## WE ASKED THE EXPERTS

So we asked some experts. 38 of them, actually. As part of every interview on our Frontier Podcast, we asked successful engineering leaders what they most look for in an engineer, beyond technical acumen.

*"When hiring a senior engineer what are the factors you most look for? What are the heuristics?"*

# 1 A COMMITMENT TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The answer or theme we heard more than any other was "a commitment to professional development."

Leaders want engineers interested in constant and ongoing learning, in both technical and non-technical realms.

Christine Spang of Nylas summarized it well...

*"It's not just learning the next new technology. It's also adapting to the changing ways that software engineering organizations are run and the different kinds of skill sets."*  
- Christine Spang, Founder & CTO of Nylas

## PUT A RING ON CONSISTENCY

Looking for someone that consistently learns new technologies and implements them into their workflow is a valuable asset for the long term of your team and future projects.



## SAY "I DO" TO "I DON'T KNOW"

Finding an engineer committed to their professional development, with 7 to 10 years experience, doesn't mean they know everything. A great engineer - no matter how many technical years under their belt - should still be comfortable with the phrase, "I don't know". Why?

- *No one knows everything, period.*
- *Saying "I don't know" is the sign of a great leader.*
- *A lack of knowledge leaves room for curiosity and passion to take over.*

*"A special type of developer is comfortable navigating the unknown...They're not worried if they know all the technologies. They just enjoy the fun of getting them there, tracing things, and learning."*

**- Kelly Stevens, VP of  
Engineering of OneSpace**

### **key takeaway:**

Look for someone that doesn't know everything, but has the willingness to try.

# SOFT SKILLS

Historically, developer jobs don't hinge on good communication skills. The average dev could clock in, never talk to anyone, and leave for the day having gotten the job done. But, frankly, those days are gone. We need customer empathy, we need clearly articulated logic for architectural decisions, we need good stakeholder relationships, and the list goes on. We call them soft skills, but they are really professional skills, and great developers have them.

*"It is very important that you can communicate your technical abilities and the solutions that you're proposing to other people and how you're able to relay that information."*

- Shawn Kuenzler, Co-founder & CTO  
of Manatee

## PAINTING THE RIGHT PICTURE

**What communication should look like from a senior engineer:**

- *Clearly communicating their process and solutions to everyone, technical or not.*
- *Speaking up on their opinions about a project by concisely relaying how they think it can be better.*
- *Consistently sharing updates to managers, stakeholders, and clients on projects when milestones are reached.*



*"I've seen engineers who are really good at problem solving but they struggle with communicating. Engineers need communication so that skill in problem solving flourishes. "*

*- Rahul Garg, SVP of Engineering at Pypestream*

### **key takeaway:**

*Communication is key to streamlining productivity, quality and deployment.*

## **THE TRUE ART OF COMMUNICATING**

In looking for communication skills, it's not just about how they talk to stakeholders or clients.

A huge part of communication is how they talk with a team.

### **Questions to consider:**

- *Do they ask teammates for help to expedite troubleshooting?*
- *If working parallel with other engineers on a project*
- *Do they maintain a weekly, daily or monthly time to align on progress, updates and helpful feedback?*



# 3 DIVERSE EXPERIENCE

Engineers who consistently learn new things and stay committed to professional development will inevitably increase the depth and breadth of their technical ability.

How? They put their work to practice, capitalize on it and implement their knowledge into new projects.

## DIVE DEEP

Deep technical depth helps engineers make educated code-level decisions, and can help lead a team when the rest of its members lack experience and require mentorship or guidance.

Great engineers who diversify their experience are more prepared to handle challenging situations in a variety of business contexts - a key differentiator between good and great.

*"You do need to have a good amount of depth technically. If you don't it's not anywhere good enough because you can't really make informed decisions and you can't lead a team. I think you have to have some depth.*

*-Jim Nasr, VP of Tech & Innovation at Synchrogenix*

## SOLID WORK ETHIC

A decent engineer can stick to a couple technical skills and stay in their comfort zone. A great engineer consistently goes above and beyond to study, implement and practice new technologies to be as valuable as they can to their team.

That isn't an easy ask and the more diversity in an engineers portfolio is a testament to their work ethic.

*"It's the engineer who takes the time to continue to stay fresh. A good mix of work ethic, curiosity, a solid knowledge base and a decent dose of experience, in my mind, makes a good engineer."*

*- Mike Talbot, VP & CTO of Veracity Consulting*

## CURIOSITY

Curiosity is fueled by passion and when an engineer is curious, they are simply feeding their interests. A great engineer does not look at deepening their wealth of technical knowledge as more work, in fact they don't think about it all- it comes to them as second nature.

### **key takeaway:**

The greater the depth of technical knowledge and experience, the better decision making, work ethic and problem solving.



# PASSION

Where there is passion, there is drive. And where passion lacks, there are shortcuts. If your team members are not passionate about what they're working on, it means they are unfulfilled and it's going to show in their work.

*"I do value a lot of the behavioral aspects a bit higher than the technical hands-on skillsets. In terms of the behaviors, I'm more looking at the drive, the passion."*

*Merlin Quintin, Director of QA Engineering at Redbox*

## MAGNUM P.I. THE HELL OUT OF THE CV

You shouldn't have to do too much investigative work to figure out what an engineer is passionate about. A great engineer won't apply to a job they have no interest in the first place. Here are some tips:

### Dig into their CV

- *Do they primarily work on projects related to healthcare*
- *Do they have multiple projects using AI? Do they have a lot of experience designing?*

### Get them talking

*Ask the right questions! You'll be able to tell what project they worked on in the past that they were most passionate about and why by the inflection in their voice.*



*"What I'm looking for is mostly how passionate they are about what they're working on — because it really goes a long way with building a solid team if everyone is on the same page."*

*- Robert Fratila, CTO & Co-founder of Aifred Health*

## THE CASE FOR A TEAM PLAYER

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Interestingly, it seems there is a correlation between passion and being a good team player. Don't see the connection? Consider the opposite, you have an engineer that is not passionate - or even worse - vocal about it to the rest of the team. They will waste more time poisoning the well and interrupting workflow, instead of building up the team and boosting moral so everyone is on the same page to produce the best product possible.

### **key takeaway:**

*Passion is the antidote to mediocre code and a bad team player*

# 5 PROBLEM SOLVER

Lots of our experts mentioned problem solving as a key proxy for performance. Sure, it helps complex logic problems day-to-day, but good problem solvers can also help solve team dynamics challenges, or contribute to business-level strategy questions.

Again, these are the things that separate good from great.

## A FIXER IS NOT JUST FOR POLITICS

*"How do they think?  
How do they problem solve? Is this person the kind of person whom you wouldn't want to go to war with, the kind of person who is going to run through walls..."*

*-Kevon Saber, CEO of GoCheck Kids*

Reliability is important, especially in this industry of unpredictability and things going wrong. A problem solver will face challenges head on (or head down, get it?) to find the best solution possible.

As a manager, It's important to know that when sh\*t hits the fan the people on your team are reliable and will handle a problem carefully, correctly, and in a timely fashion.



## VOTE FOR SELF-MANAGEMENT

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No manager wants a team member who needs their hand to be held. If they can manage problems in a high stress situation, they can manage themselves in a day-to-day setting.

A great self-manager will often feel comfortable taking initiative to proactively solve a problem, without being explicitly asked to go the extra mile. Self-managed engineers have a high ROI.

*"A good developer can solve the problems that may be created.*

*Can they self-manage? Can I give them tasks and they just come back and knock it out, understand the end goal, and be able to deploy that?"*

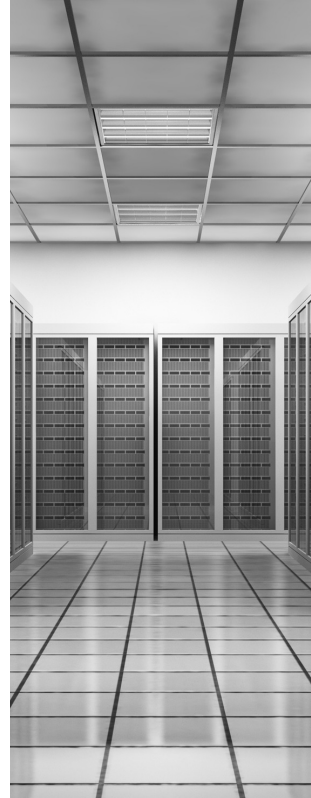
*- Joel Neidig, CEO & Co-Founder of SIMBA Chain*

### **key takeaway:**

*A solid problem solver on the team usually means having a good self-manager on the team.*

# HONORABLE MENTIONS

- 01 cultural fit
- 02 customer empathy
- 03 business acumen



## THE DATA



● Commitment to professional development	18.9%
● Soft skills (like communication)	17.6%
● Diverse experience	14.9%
● Passion	13.5%
● Problem solving	12.2%
● Cultural fit	9.5%
● Customer empathy	8.1%
● Business acumen	5.4%

# THE BREAKDOWN

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Just to point out the obvious here: no one had a specific stack in mind when thinking of the heuristics of the best candidate. Building a great team is much more nuanced than that. It's a deeper set of considerations which often determine the difference between an ok hire and a home run

At Gun.io we spend hundreds of hours in interviews and on calls with clients with the hope of sharpening our understanding of great software engineers.

And we often make our candidate recommendations based on similar themes we heard from our podcast guests.

Team-building is, without a doubt, equal parts art and science. Hopefully the insight shared here will help shape how you think about the softer side of technical hiring.



# HANDY CHECKLIST

- ✓ Being a good coder is table stakes. Dig deeper.
- ✓ Passion is the antidote to mediocre code and a bad team player
- ✓ Look for someone that doesn't know everything, but has the willingness to try.
- ✓ The greater the depth of knowledge and experience, the better decision-making and work ethic
- ✓ Communication is key to streamlining productivity, quality and deployment
- ✓ A solid problem solver on the team means having a self managing and reliable engineer