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HIRING & RETAINING GREAT DEVELOPERS

FINDING CANDIDATES WITH A TRUE ENGINEERING MINDSET

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Introduction

In a recent roundtable with tech leaders from the North West, we uncovered two main issues businesses are currently experiencing when hiring software engineers and software developers.

The first is that lots of developers choose companies primarily based on their preferential tech stech, which means companies who are in the middle of transformations, migrations, or who are using outdated tech will struggle to hire top developers. Here, the struggle is convincing developers to look beyond the tech stack, and consider the other opportunities available to them and the overall value add of your product.

The second, ties in closely to the first issue. And that is finding candidates with that 'true engineering mindset', who is passionate about solving problems, increasing efficiency, and using creativity to deliver value. It's then about nurturing this type of talent to retain them at your business.

The following document explores what employers can do to attract, hire, and retain software engineers with that true engineering passion, regardless of the current utilised tech stack.

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Tech Stack Preference

A lot of developers are looking for jobs, with a focus on what technology businesses are using rather than what the impact of the technology and the wider business is. Stack Overflow recently reported that "out of over 80,000 respondents in our recent survey, 54 percent of them said that the programming languages, frameworks, and other technologies they'd be working with were the biggest criteria for choosing an employer."

Companies generally want to hire people who are passionate about problem solving, finding solutions, and working towards the common company goal. They want developers who care about the value that they can add to the business, even if that means stepping outside their comfort zone and learning something new. Here, creativity, problem solving, and logical thinking all become desirable skills, and perhaps more important than the actual tech specialism of a candidate. The difficulty for businesses though, is attracting developers of languages and seniorities. To do this, businesses need to be able to create excitement around the role and company, and not just the technology in use.

Selling Your Business

Know what to highlight during hiring

Regardless of what technologies your team does use, to be a place where developers of all skill levels want to work, you need to create an open, collaborative space where your development team can discuss and share new programming languages, frameworks, and tools that they see potential in, and then support them in training their teammates on how to use them.

You can't stop developers choosing what company to work for on the basis that of their preferred tech stack, but you can make sure you are offering other benefits that would make them consider your business. According to a thread made by developers, the following can help attract developers to work with non-preferential tech stacks.

1. If this is a long-term prospect, emphasise the job stability and longevity which could include having a clear progression route.
2. A higher salary can help persuade a developer that their efforts will be valued and can help make up for a less desirable tech stack.
3. Offer something similar to Google's 20% time, whereby developers are given time during their work hours to spend on innovation for whatever they choose. Gmail was actually created by Paul Buchheit on his 20% time!
4. Do you offer flexibility or remote working? These can be really attractive to some candidates and could make your offer more appealing than other workplaces. Consider other benefits you are also able to offer. This might include stock options or healthcare provisions.
5. Training and development are key. Make sure you are creating a collaborative space for developers to share ideas and develop naturally, whilst also offering specific training.

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Enable Investment

Let developers really understand the business

Some companies may be setting themselves up for a challenge. Businesses want to employ people who understand the full business vision, scope, and goal and to become invested in the value that the business wants to add to society. But some companies have a structure which is counter-intuitive to this.

For example, tech leaders will often modularise work and make sure everything is neatly separated before assigning teams to very specific work tasks. The team is then so focused on their specific role, that they have no need to explore further than that, leaving them with little to no information on how their work truly impacts the business as a whole. Leaders sometimes then put in an additional layer of architects who have to look at everything from that higher level, but this shields the development teams from doing so.

The solutions architects will feed down to the developers a specification of what is needed, stalling any creativity and preventing the need for developers to think of the bigger picture. Because that's all done for them.

In order to keep developers engaged and aligned with the business's overall vision, values, and goals it's important to allow them to be part of the bigger picture. You need to allow developers to understand what they're building, why they're building it, and the value that the product will be adding. To do this you should:

- Ensure effective communication at all times and set time aside to fully explain objectives, rationale, and specifications with developers, always linking it back to the overall business goal

- Remove barriers to communication and remove unnecessary layers in the internal structure so that everybody receives the same level of communication and information

- Be transparent about the repercussions of not completing the work and the benefits of completing it so that they have a full understanding of the reasoning

- Ask the developers for their input and get them to pitch to you the best way to get the tasks done within the given time frame, to a high standard

- Take the time to explain why your business has chosen to use the specific tech stack that you use and help mentor developers who aren't used to using it

- New starters might have also done a lot of research on new technologies which has convinced them that they must use those new tech stacks to be successful which isn't often the case, so it's important to take the time to explain the why's and why nots

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Be Open Minded

Average Tenures aren't always the best indicators

Some businesses may actively search for developers with a longer average tenure at their previous jobs rather than a developer that has moved every 1 to 2 years. This is sometimes more prevalent in start-up cultures where loyalty is rewarded in the long-term rather than in the short term, and in order to get people invested in the business, it's important to sell them that long-term dream.

However, this could be cutting out a lot of exceptional candidates. The average tenure for software developers, tends to be shorter. So rather than just looking at the average time in any one job, there are other focal points which might be more beneficial to your candidate search, including:

- Rate of progression
- Achievements and indicators of a true engineering mindset (a passion for solving issues)
- Tech stacks used – if they've used a variety it suggests they are not tied to a specific stack

Remember that every good programmer has a place within an engineering team so look for skills that compliment and fill in skill gaps within your existing team.

The Journey

Be honest and transparent about where you are

Be exciting in your adverts. Talk about your tech stack and your mission with a passion. Explain your business vision and goals. But also, be transparent about where you are on your journey: the tech opportunities that are and aren't there. This might put some candidates off, but it will only put the wrong candidates off. If you accurately depict your company and your company journey in the first instance you will only be receiving applications from candidates who are passionate about joining your business in its current state.

The job advert shouldn't just focus on the tech stack or list technology. Whilst this is important to create an informative advert, it's equally as important to include the desired soft skills such as problem solving, a true engineering mindset, and creativity. You want the advert to list the type of engineer you want to hire, not just the skills you want to hire. Great success has been seen by companies who have used their adverts to focus on culture and mindset rather than primarily technology.

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Summary

The difficulty of candidate attraction will vary from business to business depending on a variety of things including size, branding, tech stacks, product, vision and available benefits packages. Some candidates will always be better suited to certain sectors. However, there are some steps that businesses can take to ensure they are widening their candidate search as much as possible to find that perfect candidate who is passionate about problem solving and engineering.

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For help building your tech teams, or for more information on the validity of tech tests, please get in touch for a confidential chat: stephen.ashbee@maxwellbond.co.uk.

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