HOW TO
IDENTIFY
GREAT
DEVELOPERS

What separates a great developer from a good developer?

PREPARED BY

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INTRODUCTION

We contacted 14 senior leaders in software development to discuss how to identify the great software developers and engineers amongst good ones.

Whilst each participant had their own ideas of what characterises a great developer and methods of identifying them, there was concurrence amongst most participants when it came down to passion, character, culture and attitude. Noticeably, most of the points raised evolved around soft skills, such as communication, collaboration, and mentoring abilities and the attributes of consistent and effective delivery, rather than specific programming languages.

The following whitepaper highlights the key attributes that make a developer great, rather than just good. Read more below!

PASSION

A great engineer is passionate about engineering. They should love engineering and see it as more of a hobby than just a job. A great engineer would have a fantastic attitude towards work and would never clock watch. They'd be excited by their job and what they are working on, and would be willing to put in the extra time if possible and when needed. Of course, it's not all about who works the longest hours, but rather who has a buzz about them, who is eager to maximise their time at work, and who has a heart for their role and the delivery of the product. However, this isn't a silver bullet, developers don't have to be extremely passionate about their job to be good at it.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

A great candidate should want to continuously learn, grow and develop their skills so they are consistently ahead of the market and up to date on the tech skills required of them. This means not just hiring 'rockstar developers', but rather looking for developers who like a challenge; and will utilise their knowledge to execute a skill. Great developers should want to give anything a try and would be willing to learn new skills in order to meet the requirements of the brief. It's about striving for technical mastery over whatever technology is present. Whilst great managers can assist with this, a great developer should be willing to improve themselves without managerial encouragement.

FULL PROCESS OWNERSHIP

Great engineers are prepared to take full ownership of project delivery, end to end, ensuring a seamless delivery, consistently. Something to really look for is evidence of consistent delivery. This includes being honest about setbacks, challenges and delays so that other engineers can step in to offer assistance and support in order to always deliver on time.

CULTURE & CHARACTER

You're not just looking for great developers, you're also looking for great people, who will fit into your team and collaborate well with others. You need to build a team you trust, and sometimes this means not hiring the best technical engineers (putting character before competency). This includes looking for somebody who is transparent when they can't do something or is unable to deliver and are happy to raise and share problems in order to ensure delivery. Empathy is another important attribute; the engineer should care about how their actions impact other people. You need people who are empathetic, accountable, and passionate.

ADDING VALUE

A great developer will not only want to develop themselves, but will also want to enable and empower others to progress. You can think about it in the context of the x10 rule. Each developer should have the ability to influence ten others. and help them by adding value to their lives and objectives. Also, in wider business terms, how have they previously made an impact, to the team, or to the overall business success?

ACCEPTING FEEDBACK

Great developers are open to constructive feedback, are open to other people's ideas, and can accept that there is often more than one way of doing things. It's all about collaboration. The right way to one person might be another person's right way. There isn't really one right way, there's only good ways.

UNDERSTANDING THE WIDER CONTEXT

It can be easy to over engineer processes for the sake of doing it. Great developer's will keep things simple and will have a thorough understanding of the basic skills as well as the wider business context and the impacts of their actions. They will be able to question and evaluate the benefits of projects and accurately allow and reject proposals and ideas based on their alignment with long-term and short-term business goals. Good developers might spend time worrying about 100% code coverage or sensibly named variables and automation testing, but the great devs will be asking; why are we doing this? Does this align with business goals? What is the value add here? How will this help the business achieve targets? This also separates coders (great with the tech) from developers (problem solvers).

IDENTIFYING GREAT CANDIDATES IN INTERVIEW

When you're hiring developers, you don't just want good candidates, you want great ones. But how can you identify these great developers in early interview stages? Primarily you must rely on gut feeling, but there are a number of open questions you can ask in order to determine the candidates character, motivators, passion, skills, and culture. These questions can include:

- What do you do in your spare time?
- What are your hobbies/ what do you care about?
- Do you attend any events in order to help you grow, learn and develop?
- Do you have an example of how you have previously handled conflict?
- Do you have an example of how you have overcome a challenge in a previous delivery?
- Reflect upon your previous project; what would you have done differently?

These questions help an interviewer identify the passions and motivators of a candidate. Passions and hobbies don't have to be directly related to engineering; passion is transferable. These questions also give the interviewer an insight into the character and potential cultural fit of the candidate.

RED FLAGS

As well as asking these open questions, there are a number of 'red flags' to look out for that shouldn't be ignored. These include:

- One word answers to open questions
- Minimal information
- Lack of preparation
- Inability to demonstrate their value adds
- Poor answers to questions around conflict management
- Talking detrimentally about their old boss, colleague or company

GENERAL TIPS

Bias in the process could exclude people that are good just because they are a bit different to the interviewer. You should avoid building up a team that are just like you. It's important to aim to bring a range of people in with different psychological profiles that compliment each other and fill in each others skill gaps. You don't need ten 'Tony Starks of Development'. The priority should be finding diverse team members who (as long as they have the tech skills) will be honest, will have the right approach, will want to develop and perfect their skills.

It's also important to build the team that's right for the business. For example, start up companies will often benefit from a team of great 'generalist' developers, whilst much larger teams are more likely to invest in great niche and specialist developers. This changes from business to business.

THE DIVERSITY CHALLENGE

Tech is traditionally dominated by white males, and despite many companies acknowledging this and attempting to put processes in place, many businesses are still struggling to attract diverse candidates. Some businesses have:

- Tied diversity targets to company bonuses
- Evaluated their onboarding process and their brand personality
- Headhunted diverse candidates

However, many struggle with finding the candidates in the first place or hiring diversely without falling into positive discrimination. There is also the question of neurodiversity, which isn't necessarily quantifiable but is still a facet of diversity. What is needed, is a change in the mindset around hiring diversity, and also a push for diversity in tech at a grassroots level (like in schools and colleges) to get the next generation of people interested in IT. Then we might see a levelling out in terms of candidate profiles and diversity.

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Get in touch today for more information on upcoming events, further resources and guides, or our market leading staffing solutions for businesses across the UK.

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