


Behavioral interviews are critical  
... but most engineers suck at them 🪦

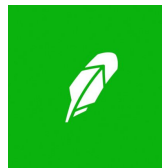


me during interviews:

"Yes, I work well with teams and  
love company outings"

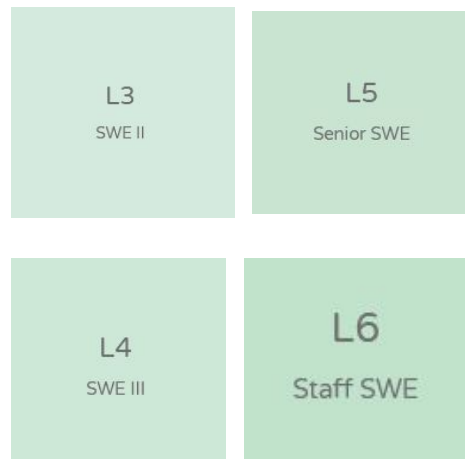
# I'm Alex

- My goal: **Teach you how to master the tech behavioral interview** 
- High-performing tech lead across Course Hero, Meta, and Robinhood
- \$85k TC -> \$750k TC across 7 years
- Studied <5 hours to pass Meta/Robinhood behavioral rounds
- Coached 1000+ engineers to jobs at FAANG, top startups, and more



# I Have Interviewed A **Lot** Of Engineers

- 250+ interviews across 4 very different top companies
- 50+ behavioral interviews
- 100+ mock behavioral interviews (to massive success)
- Extensively involved in candidate leveling, especially at FAANG





Take  
behavioral  
interviews  
seriously  
and pass

Grind DSA  
Pointlessly  
And Keep Failing



Engineers Who  
Can't Land A Job



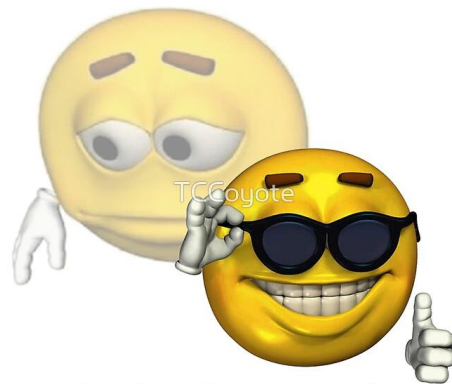
(Alex IRL 🥲)

y tho

# Behavioral Interviews Are Greatly Misunderstood






- ... which often leads to them being hated 😬
- Engineers perceive behavioral as some “fluffy”, useless interview type
- This leads to most engineers over-indexing on more straightforward types
  - Usually DSA (LeetCode)
- This is **bad** ☠️

Oh, I totally get it



(I don't get it)

# Objectives

-  Have the right **mentality** to answer *any* behavioral question well
-  Understand **good** vs. **bad** behavioral answers
-  Use the right tactics to **prepare** properly
-  Possess the skills to **vet the company**
-  Know what behavioral performances look like **across different levels**

You're (Probably) Sleeping On Behavioral

**THAT MOMENT WHEN**



**YOU REALIZE BEHAVIORAL IS  
THE MOST IMPORTANT INTERVIEW TYPE**







**Hiring someone with poor skills is  
annoying.**

**Hiring someone who doesn't truly  
understand the culture is deadly.**



# Behavioral Interviews Do Everything, Everywhere

- ✓ Every company does at least 1 behavioral round
- ✓ They can screen you out early (often at recruiter stage)
- ✓ They're used for leveling
- ✓ You can't fail them and survive
- ✓ Best opportunity to vet the company

	DSA	Practical Coding	Behavioral
Big Tech			
Startups			

**I'LL CRUSH THE  
ON-SITE WITH 500+  
LEETCODE PROBLEMS DONE**



**SCREENED OUT  
AT THE RECRUITER  
BEHAVIORAL STAGE**



Mid-Level



Meta

E4

\$306,684

Incredible DSA  
Performance

Still Mid-Level



Meta

E4

\$306,684

Mid-Level 😊

Meta

E4

\$306,684









Incredible Behavioral  
Performance

Senior 😎

Meta

E5

\$475,444

	DSA	Practical Coding	Behavioral	Offer?
Candidate #1				
Candidate #2				

**Spoiler:** Candidate 1 was Alex!

# The 3 Keys To Behavioral Interviews



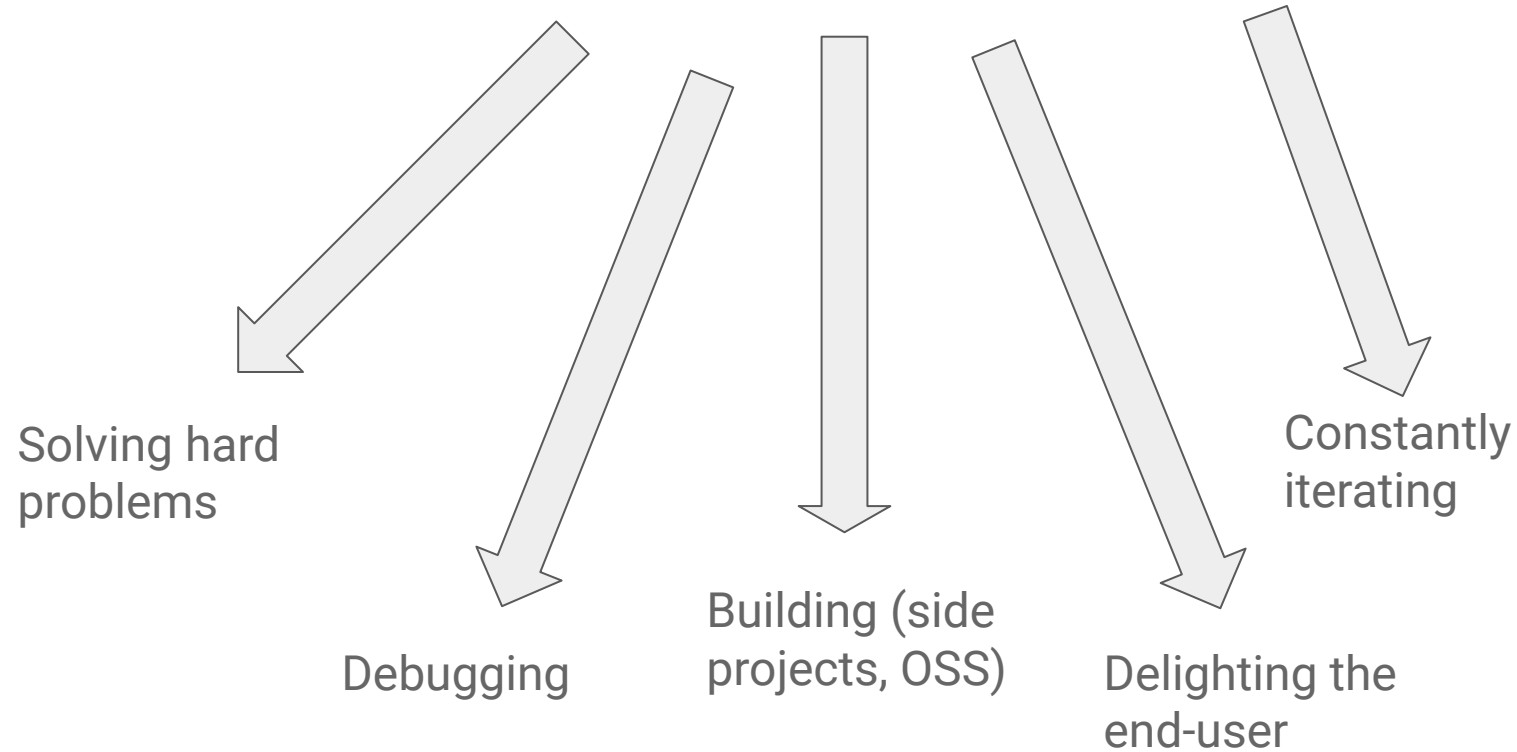
# The 3 s

① You are passionate about software engineering.

② You are passionate about the company you're interviewing for.

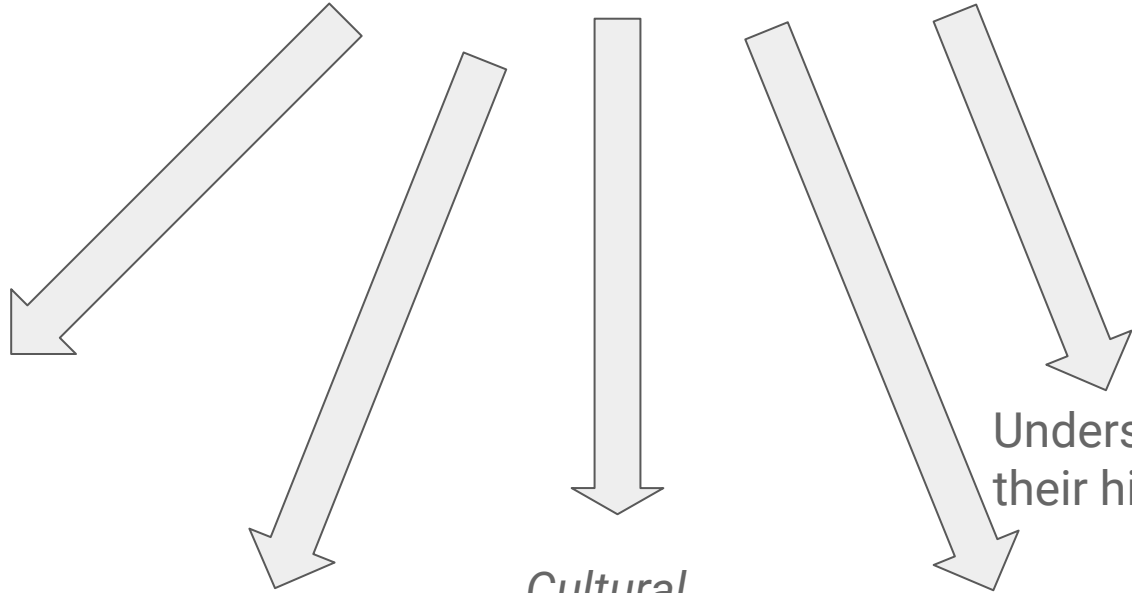
③ You are passionate about fostering strong  
teams.

# Passion For Software Engineering





# Passion For The Company



Product space

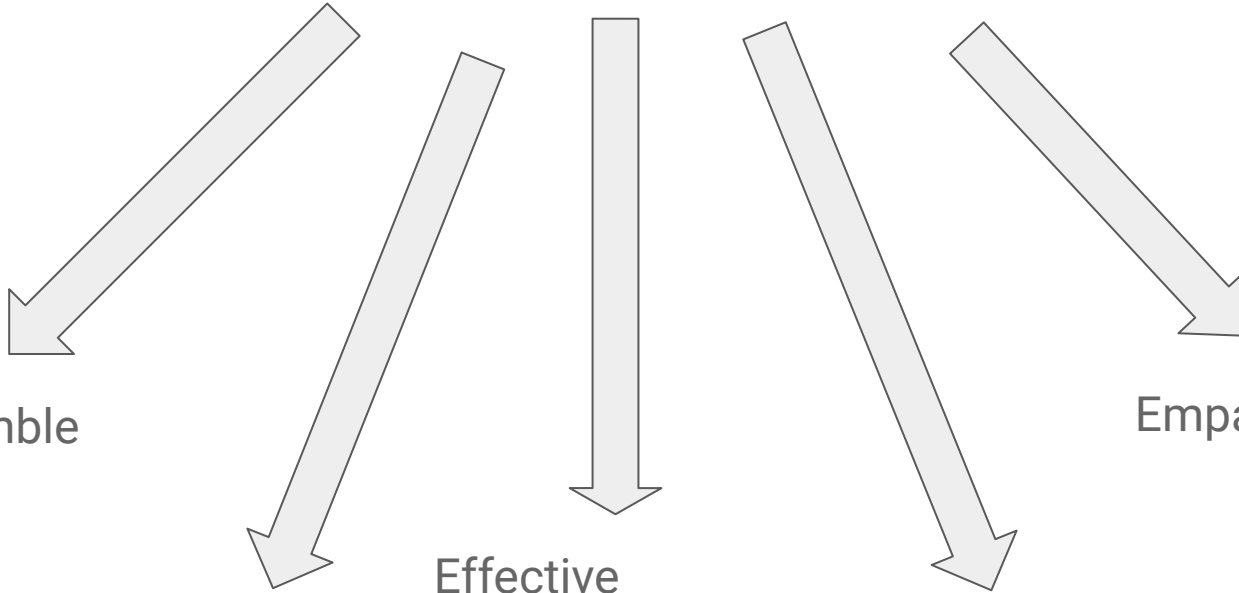
Mission

*Cultural values*

Technical stack

Understanding their history

# Passion For Strong Teams



Being humble

Open to  
feedback

Effective  
Communication

Mentorship

Empathy

“So tell me about yourself.”



Your Interviewer

*“I was born in Ohio, but I moved to the SF Bay Area when I was 4. I went to UC Berkeley in 2007 and graduated with a Computer Science degree. After that, I worked at Facebook, Google, and Amazon. I like to hike, play board games, and cook.”*

“So tell me about yourself.”



Your Interviewer

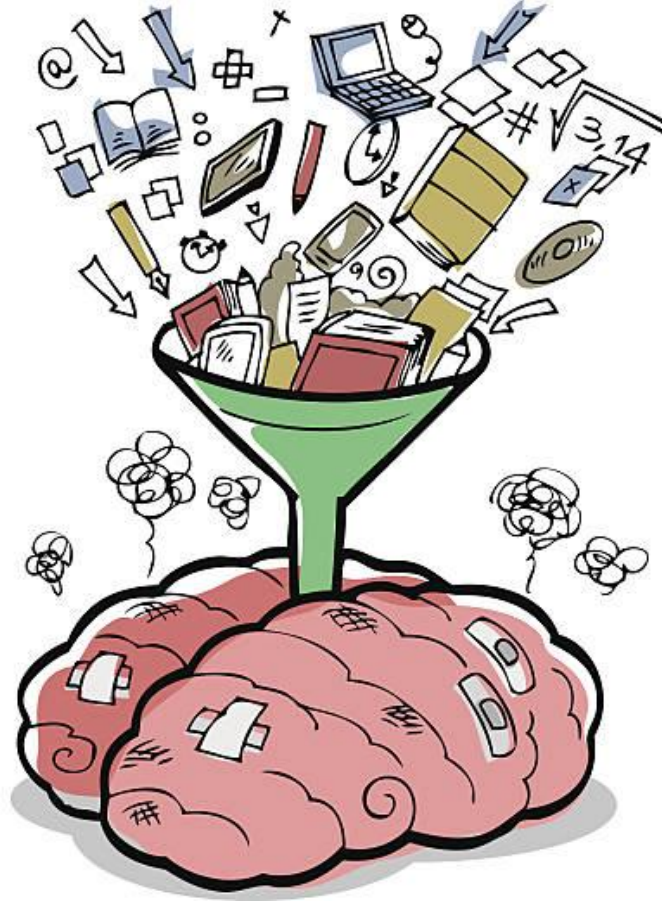
*“I’m Alex, and I’m just a guy who loves to build stuff and help others. I spent most of my time at Meta building Story Ads from scratch, increasing revenue and mentoring engineers to senior in the process. In my spare time, I’ve published 30 Android apps with 5M+ users.”*



**Answer honestly but with purpose.**

# Don't Memorize: Be Nimble

Oh wow, memorizing behavioral interview answers with brute force is a terrible idea!



# You Must Be Free-Form

- *The problem space for behavioral interviews is effectively infinite*
- You can't memorize every possible Q&A pair
  - Do high-level points
- Learn how to adapt on the fly to unexpected questions
- Don't be afraid to try multiple answers



# “Tell me about a disagreement”



“Back at Course Hero, we were designing the core navigation and trying to decide between activities and fragments for each of the core pages. I wanted to do multiple activities for simplicity (performance wasn't an issue as the app was small and only available in the US), but my tech lead wanted to do fragments...”



What's in your brain

“Back at Course Hero, we were designing the core navigation and trying to decide between activities and fragments for each of the core pages. I wanted to do multiple activities for simplicity (performance wasn't an issue as the app was small and only available in the US), but my tech lead wanted to do fragments...”



What you say



# “Tell me about a disagreement”

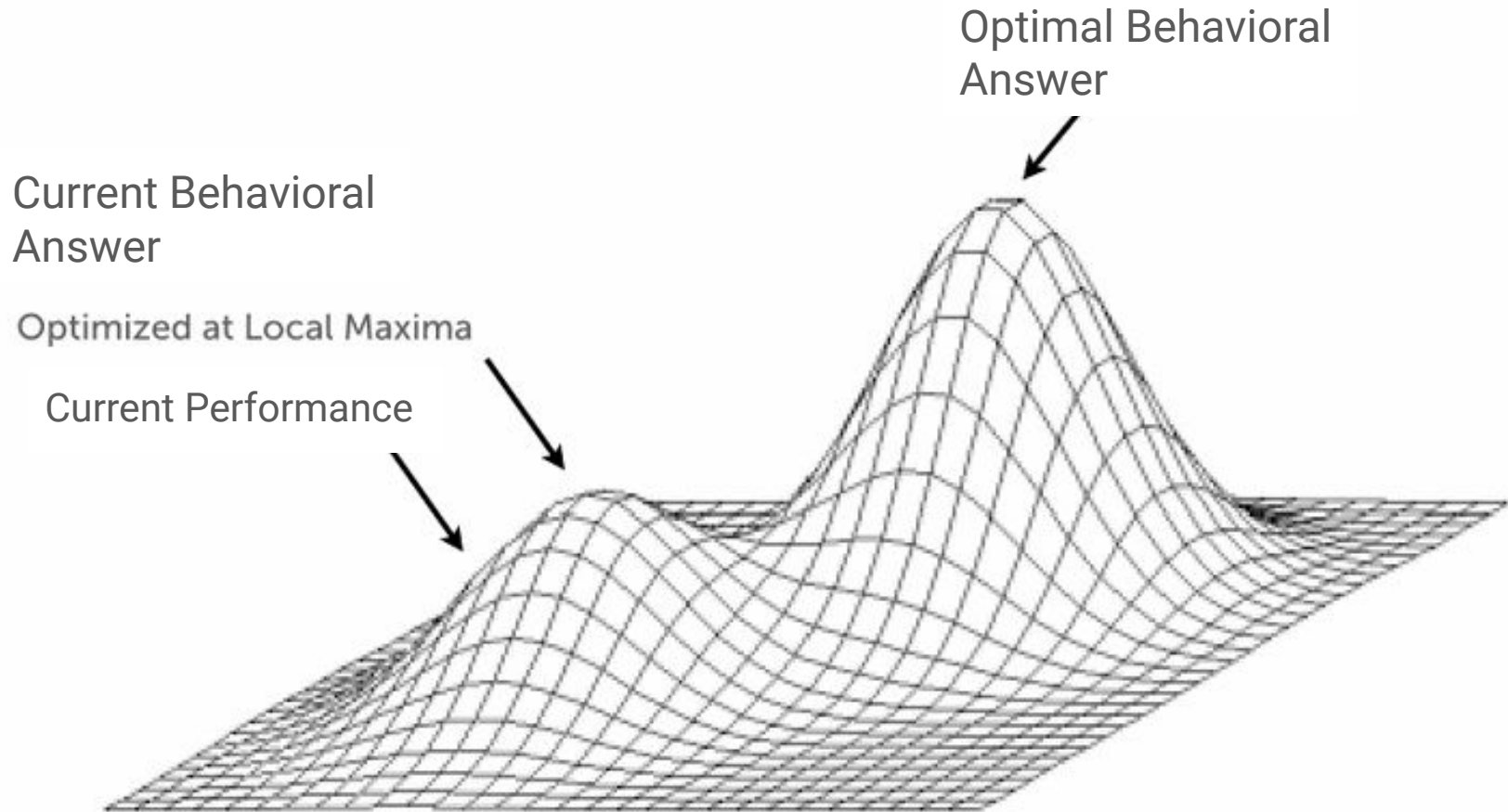
Course  
navigation



What's in your brain

“Back at Course Hero, we were designing the core navigation and trying to decide between activities and fragments for each of the core pages. I wanted to do multiple activities for simplicity (performance wasn't an issue as the app was small and only available in the US), but my tech lead wanted to do fragments...”

What you say



Current Behavioral Answer

Optimized at Local Maxima

Current Performance

Optimal Behavioral Answer

**Be extremely comfortable  
with the unexpected.**

# It's A Conversation



# Behavioral Interviews Should Feel “Normal”

- It's not a test where the professor gives you a problem...
  - ...and then watches you struggle for 30+ min
- *The best behavioral performances feel like a natural back-and-forth*
- Get good at communication (including body language)





💡 Perception is just as important as reality (maybe even more).

😬 If you have bad body language, the interviewer may assume you're lying.

💀 Liars are toxic. They are poison to an organization.

🚫 Interviewers are risk-averse. If you don't seem honest, you will be *instantly* rejected.

**The words you say are just as  
important as *how* you say them.**

# Answering The Questions



# STAR

**S**

**SITUATION**

SET THE  
SCENE

**T**

**TASK**

DESCRIBE  
THE  
PURPOSE

**A**

**ACTION**

EXPLAIN  
WHAT  
YOU DID

**R**

**RESULT**

SHARE  
THE  
OUTCOME

# It's All About The Presentation

- STAR is a format that forces you to tell stories with a proper narrative flow
  - It's not a made-up mechanism for interviews
- Find inspiration from great storytellers and match them against the STAR format
  - Can be your friends



# Situation

**Layman's terms:** Give all the context so the interviewer isn't completely confused by everything you say afterwards.

## **What to include:**

- What your team and company do
- Explanation of terms (company-specific, tech-specific, acronyms)
- Status quo of team

# Task

**Layman's terms:** Describe the problem you're trying to solve (arisen from the situation).

## **What to include:**

- The delta between desired “after” state and “before” state
- Scope (technical, organizational)
- Due date

# Action

**Layman's terms:** Go through what you actually did to accomplish the task.

## **What to include:**

- The hard technical problems you solved
- The blockers you hit
- The people you aligned/led

# Result

**Layman's terms:** Explain why S-T-A weren't a complete waste of time and left your team/company in a better place.

## **What to include:**

- Success metrics (revenue, efficiency, bug count)
- Culture change (relationships deepening, behavior shift)
- Growth (engineers getting better)

**Situation:** Worked on Instagram Story Ads, and we couldn't test new UI formats fast enough (need to do Android/iOS each time).

**Task:** Make it easy to test new ad designs faster.

**Action:** Used Showreel Native (a cross-platform library) to allow designers to ship designs straight to prod, aligning 3 XFN teams in the process across MPK/NYC/London

**Result:** \$50M+ yearly revenue gain as testing new formats went from weeks to days



# The #1 Behavioral Interview Question

**YOU  
MUST  
KNOW**



**“What’s the most challenging project you have ever worked on?”**

“What’s your favorite project that you’ve worked on?”

“Tell me about the project you’re most proud of.”

“Walk me through the hardest project you’ve ever shipped.”

## Translation: Show Me At Your Best 💪

- Every behavioral round will have this question
- Always choose the most impressive project, even with the “favorite” wording
- *Your answer to this particular question is used extensively for leveling*
- So what makes a project “impressive”? 🤔



DAZZLE ME

# The 6 Project Axes (From Promotion Course)

① Impact 🎯

② Technical Complexity 🧑💻

③ Organizational Complexity 🤝

④ Depth Of Contribution 💪

⑤ Quality Of Delivery 👉

⑥ Attribution 💡

# Timing



First be effective and  
then be efficient.


Ron Kaufman

# Speak Concisely

- *Your goal is to communicate as much meaning as possible with as few words as possible*
- Behavioral interviews are a marathon
  - Minimum 3 questions, usually 5-7
- Keep responses down to 5-7 minutes each



## Trim The Fat

- ✗ In-the-weeds technical details
- ✗ Stuff you didn't do
- ✗ Anything that isn't related to the 3 s
- ✗ Anything that can be removed and not harm the narrative
- ✗ General linguistic inefficiencies

“We needed a faster way to test new ad layouts than having to code each UI change natively on iOS and Android. To solve this, we integrated a cross-platform framework called Showreel Native (SN). SN is powered by Keyframes, a library using an ExtendScript script that extracts image animation data from Adobe After Effects.”

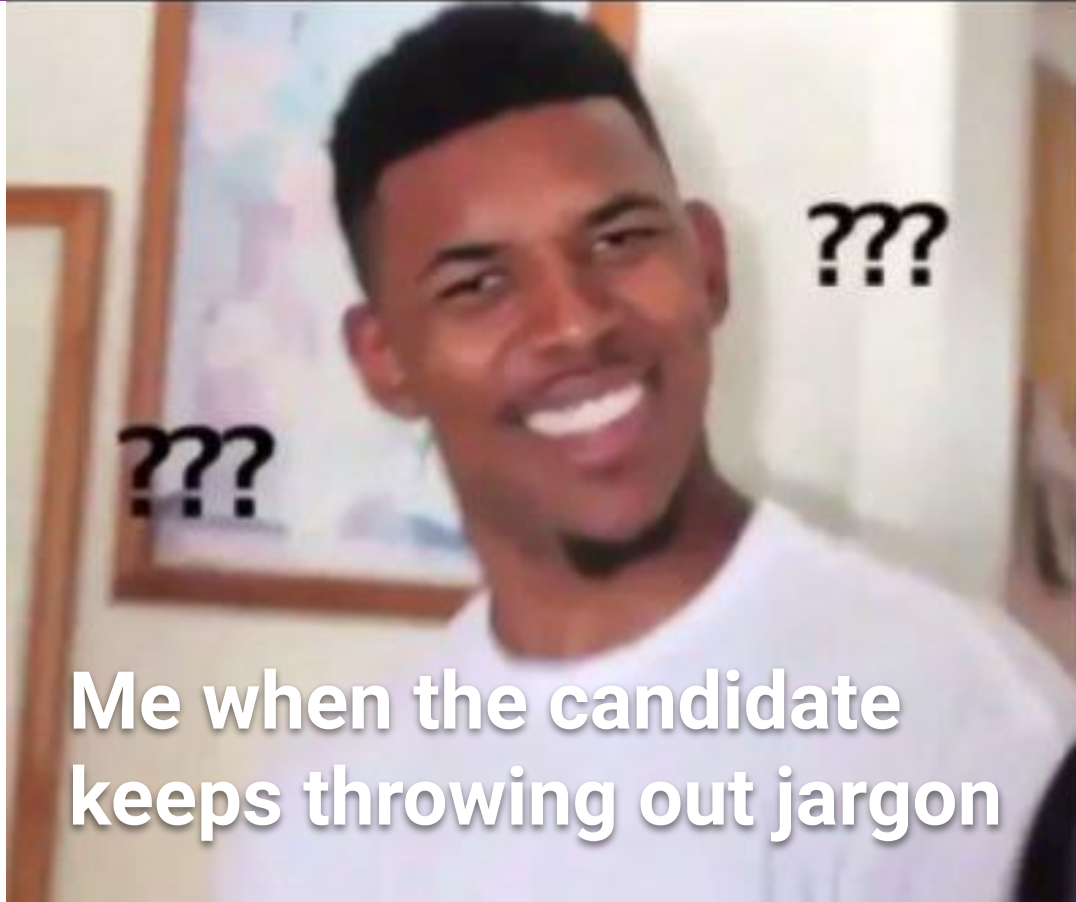
- Technical fluff 🗑️
- Wasn't done by me 🙄

“We needed a faster way to test new ad layouts than having to code each UI change natively on iOS and Android. To solve this, we integrated a cross-platform framework called Showreel Native, which allowed designers to deploy their designs straight to production.”

- Layman's terms 😊
- No more waste 🗑️



# The Interviewer Isn't You



Me when the candidate keeps throwing out jargon

## Have Empathy

- *Don't talk **at** someone. Share information **with** them.*
- Put yourself in their shoes:
  - What are they likely to know?
  - What are they likely to *not* know?
- Engineers mess this up everywhere all the time (resume, promotion, etc)



*Please Explain...*

Our goal was to increase the CTR for DR ads to achieve a lower CPM. So we used an ExtendScript keyframes framework...

Engineer Who  
Sucks At  
Behavioral

I'm an engineering manager who has never worked in ads, and I haven't coded in 10 years. I have no idea what you're talking about.



Hiring  
Manager

## How To Not Be Confusing

- ✓ Explain tech-specific, company-specific, and product-domain specific terms preemptively
- ✓ Avoid acronyms as much as possible
- ✓ Just remove confusing terms
- ✓ Try out your stories on non-technical friends/family

# When You Don't Have An Answer

לֹא יָדָעְתִּי (יֵשׁ)



Hiring  
Manager

Describe a time where you had  
a serious disagreement with  
someone.

I'm SW1 - I just get tickets and  
do them.




Oh...



Junior  
Engineer

**Honesty is the best policy:** Tell them that you don't have a corresponding story.

After that, propose the following options:

-  How you would react hypothetically
-  Telling a story that's somewhat similar
-  Telling a story that matches  
but isn't career-related

# Questions To Ask



# Interviews Are A 2-Way Street





Do you have any questions for me?

Oh, let me think about that - I didn't come prepared with any.

Oh...

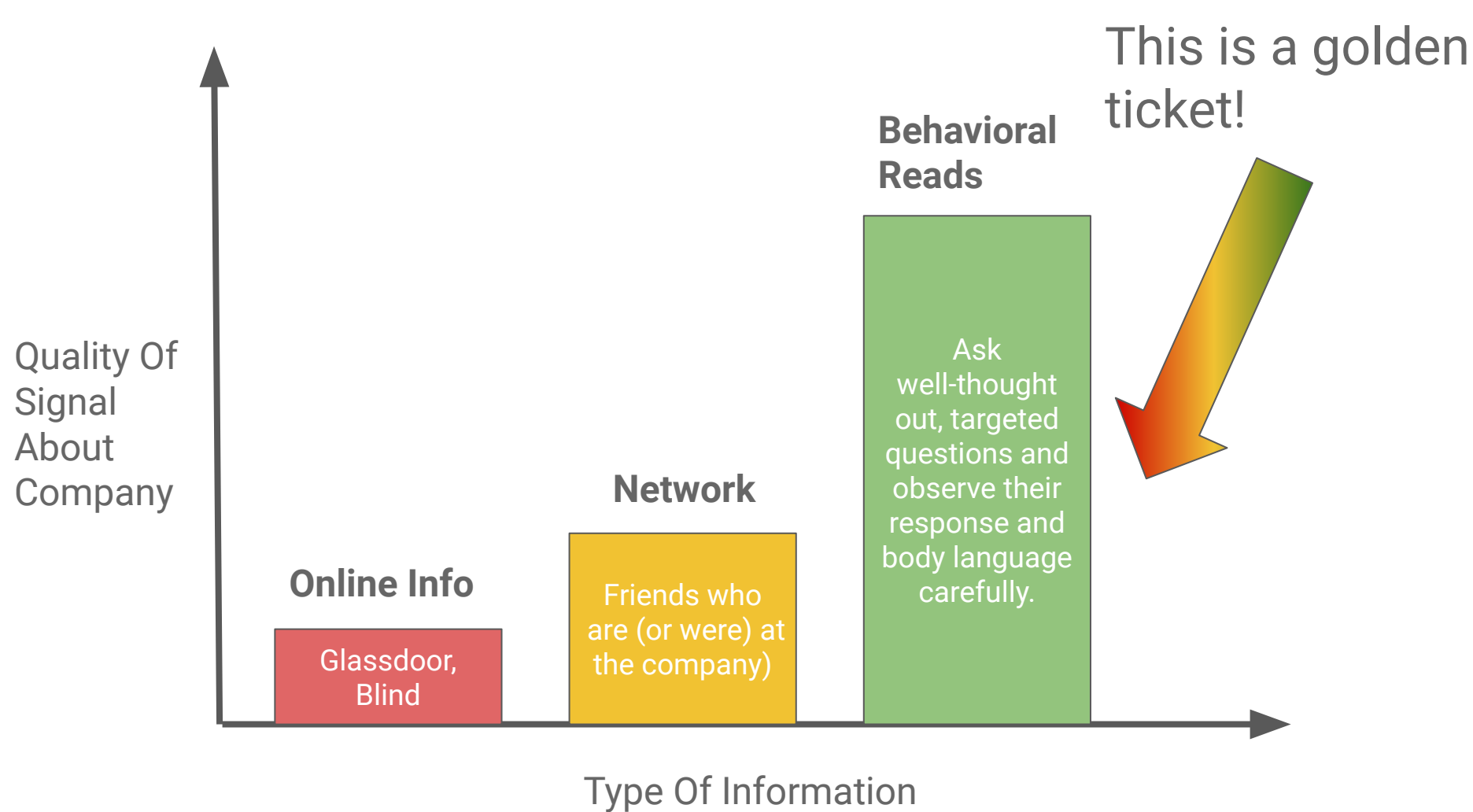


Interview  
Candidate

Good engineer vs. bad team? 🦊

The bad team wins 99.9% of the time 😓





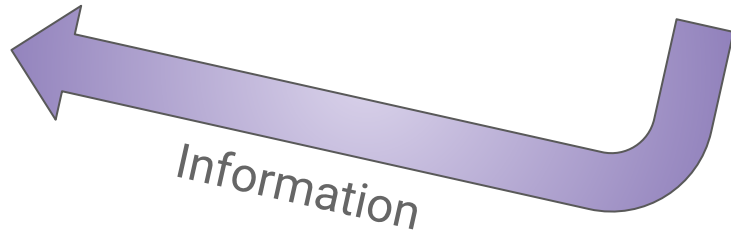
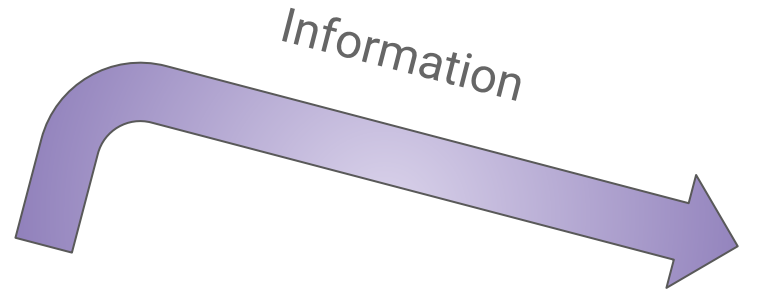
**In any interview, you should also be interviewing them.**

# Double Dip





You



Hiring  
Manager

Your questions shouldn't just extract information...  
...they should also convey information about yourself! 🤖

(Remember the 3 🔑s)

## We now have 2 failure modes:

- ① You ask a question that only extracts information
- ② You ask a question that portrays you positively but extracts useless information



# Good Vs. Bad Questions To Ask

**DO THIS**

**DON'T DO THAT**

**CAN'T YOU READ THE SIGN?**

“What’s your favorite thing about working here?”

↑ Conveys information  
(excited about company)

↓ Extracts no information  
(too generic and shallow)

Good





Bad



“What’s the biggest challenge the company is facing?”



 Conveys information (you are thinking about how to improve the company)

 Extracts real information (an honest look at culture + market challenges)


“What’s the pay for this role?”


Good



Bad





 Conveys *negative* information (greed)

 Extracts non-useful information (should come from recruiter/online)

“Your company just released [X]. What’s the 5-year vision?”





 Conveys information (excited about company, did your homework)

 Extracts real information (product direction)

“What’s your favorite way that you’ve grown here?”



 Conveys information (you want to improve yourself, growth mindset)

 Extracts real information (how you can grow at the company)

# “How’s the free food?” (Meta)

Good



Bad



⚠ Conveys *negative* information (focusing on the wrong things)

⬇ Extracts non-useful information (you shouldn't make a decision on this...)

# Leveling



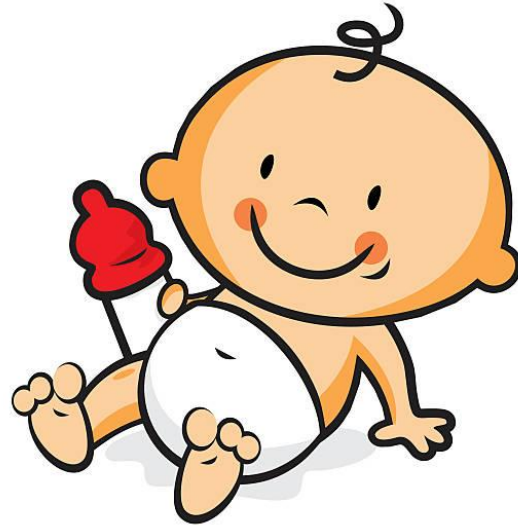
# Junior Engineer

L3

SWE II

## Can You Do... Anything?

- **Expectation:** Mostly a check to make sure you have basic problem-solving and communication skills
- **Skills:**
  - Low to medium complexity tasks ( $\leq 1$  month)
  - Can function mostly independently



## Example Stories

- Got a slightly ambiguous task and talked to someone to clarify
- Learning to ask questions + build relationships
- Stepping up to talk more in meetings
- Fixing a tricky (but quite local) bug
- Shipping a feature without major help

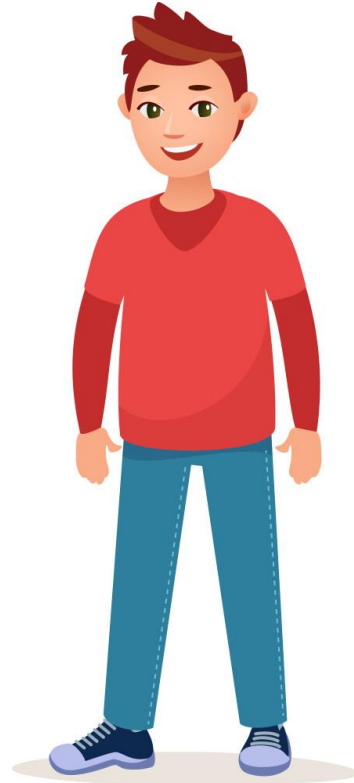
# Mid-Level Engineer

L4

SWE III

# A Proven Executor

- **Expectation:** Rock-solid problem-solving & communication, decent charisma, quality work
- **Skills:**
  - Working on medium to high complexity tasks (1-3 months)
  - Completely independent on 95%+ of tasks



## Example Stories

- Solving an extremely difficult bug (cuts across stacks/teams)
- Shipping a feature with high technical complexity
- Small leadership efforts (automated tests, mentoring intern)
- Resolving a substantial conflict (local to team)
- XFN communication

# Senior Engineer

L5

Senior SWE

# Leader Setting The Example

- **Expectation:** End-to-end ownership, high charisma, multiplicative impact
- **Skills:**
  - Leading 4 to 10 engineers (1 team)
  - 3 - 6 month projects
  - High technical complexity
  - Proactive





## Example Stories

- Leading a difficult project (full-stack, XFN blockers)
- Coming up with a project and getting it funded onto the roadmap
- Owning SEVs (resolution, prevention)
- Overhauling a system (e.g. component refactor)
- Aligning multiple teams to unblock a project

# Staff Engineer

L6

Staff SWE

# Visionary. Hero. Sage

- **Expectation:** Cornerstone of team, Charisma: 100, solves impossible problems
- **Skills:**
  - Leading 15 - 50 engineers (2-5 teams)
  - 9 - 24 month time span
  - Defining/owning goals
  - Always creating scope
  - Can learn anything *fast*



## Example Stories

- Making everyone around them get promoted lightning fast
- Adding a critical process/technical layer (oncall, CI/CD)
- Changing the entire technical/product direction of a team
- Creating scope out of thin air to hit most (if not all) of team goal
- Getting buy-in from multiple teams for a hit project

\* Staff Engineers are weird due to archetypes

# How To Get The Level You Want








Throwback From Master Job Searching Course



**Step 1:** Understand the behavior of your target level 🤔

**Step 2:** Show that behavior 💪

## Tips To Max Out Your Level

-  Be extremely good at the #1 question
-  Get honest feedback on your charisma, energy, confidence
-  Climb up the ladder at your current job
-  Follow negotiation tips (get leverage, hide level)
-  Just become a better engineer

# Preparation



# Cultural Values



# It's All About The Culture

- Any big tech company (>1000 employees) should have this
- *Memorize these and try to **genuinely** understand them*
  - What would it mean if it was all opposite?
- Weave the cultural values into your answers
  - Can also be inverted





# AMAZON LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

**Customer Obsession**

**Ownership**

**Invent & Simplify**

**Are Right, A Lot**

**Learn & Be Curious**

**Hire & Develop**

**Highest Standards**

**Think Big**

**Bias for Action**

**Frugality**

**Earn Trust**

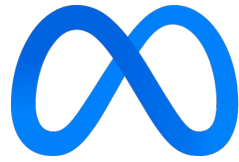
**Dive Deep**

**Have Backbone**

**Deliver Results**

**Earth's Best Employer**

**Success and Scale**



# Meta 5 Core Values (Old)

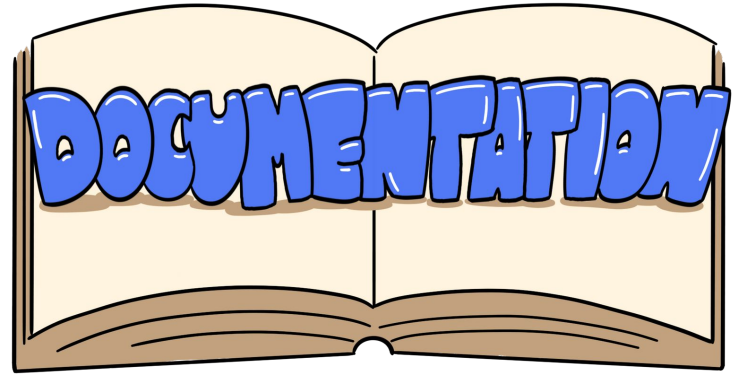
- 1 Be Bold
- 2 Focus on Impact
- 3 Move Fast
- 4 Be Open
- 5 Build Social Value

# Write Stuff Down



## Create A Q&A “Database”

- Write down behavioral questions with your answers
  - Make sure to have the #1 question
  - Questions you have failed are important too
- Organize in STAR format
- *Do not write out full scripts to memorize*



# “Tell me about a disagreement”

Course Hero core navigation

“Back at Course Hero, we were designing the core navigation and trying to decide between activities and fragments for each of the core pages. I wanted to do multiple activities for simplicity, but my tech lead wanted to do fragments...”

Remember This 

Do Not Memorize This 

# Record Yourself





# Behavioral Questions Are Easy To Simulate

- Record yourself answering questions
  - Do video to capture body language
- Go through questions you are unfamiliar with
- **Bonus:** Use text-to-speech to “mock” a human
- Play back the recordings and analyze them



# Evaluating Yourself

- ★ Are you following STAR?
- 🕒 Is your answer concise and 5-7 minutes long?
- 😊 Is your body language inviting and enthusiastic?
- ✂️ Can you do the same with less words?
- 🤔 Did you use any esoteric terms?

# Do Mock Interviews

## FIND A BUDDY



# Behavioral Interviews Are Fundamentally Human

- *...therefore it's best done with other humans*
- Mocks are objectively the best way to prepare for behavioral interviews
- Unlike DSA, there are no objectively correct answers in behavioral
  - This makes the human feedback crucial



# Getting The Most From Behavioral Interview Pairups

- 1 Anchor against a certain company
- 2 Have them ask you a question you aren't prepared for
- 3 Write everything down
- 4 Record for later playback
- 5 [BONUS] Go through solo-mode materials

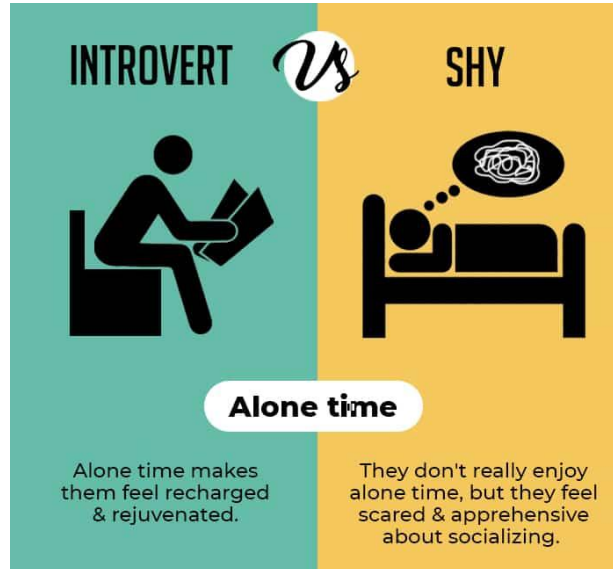
# Conclusion

Just Be A Human

**BE  
A GOOD  
PERSON.**

# Software Is Collaborative. Embrace That

- *If you are a shy lone wolf, you will not survive in tech*
  - Behavioral interviews are a roadblock
- Most engineers are (painfully) awkward
  - This is solvable
- Software engineering is naturally social
  - Especially at Big Tech





**BEING  
A LONE WOLF**

**BUILDING  
RELATIONSHIPS,  
ADDING  
VALUE TO PEOPLE**

You put  
yourself out  
there

You make  
friends

Communication  
skills improve

Confidence  
goes up



There is no secret to getting better at communication. 🤔

You just need to do more of it. 💪

Put in the reps. ♻️

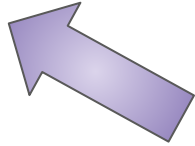
Challenge Yourself, Do Great Work

*QUALITY*

**TAKE PRIDE  
IN YOUR WORK**

# How To Ace Behavioral Interviews

**Step 1:** Have awesome stories to begin with



This is on you

**Step 2:** Present your stories well during the interview



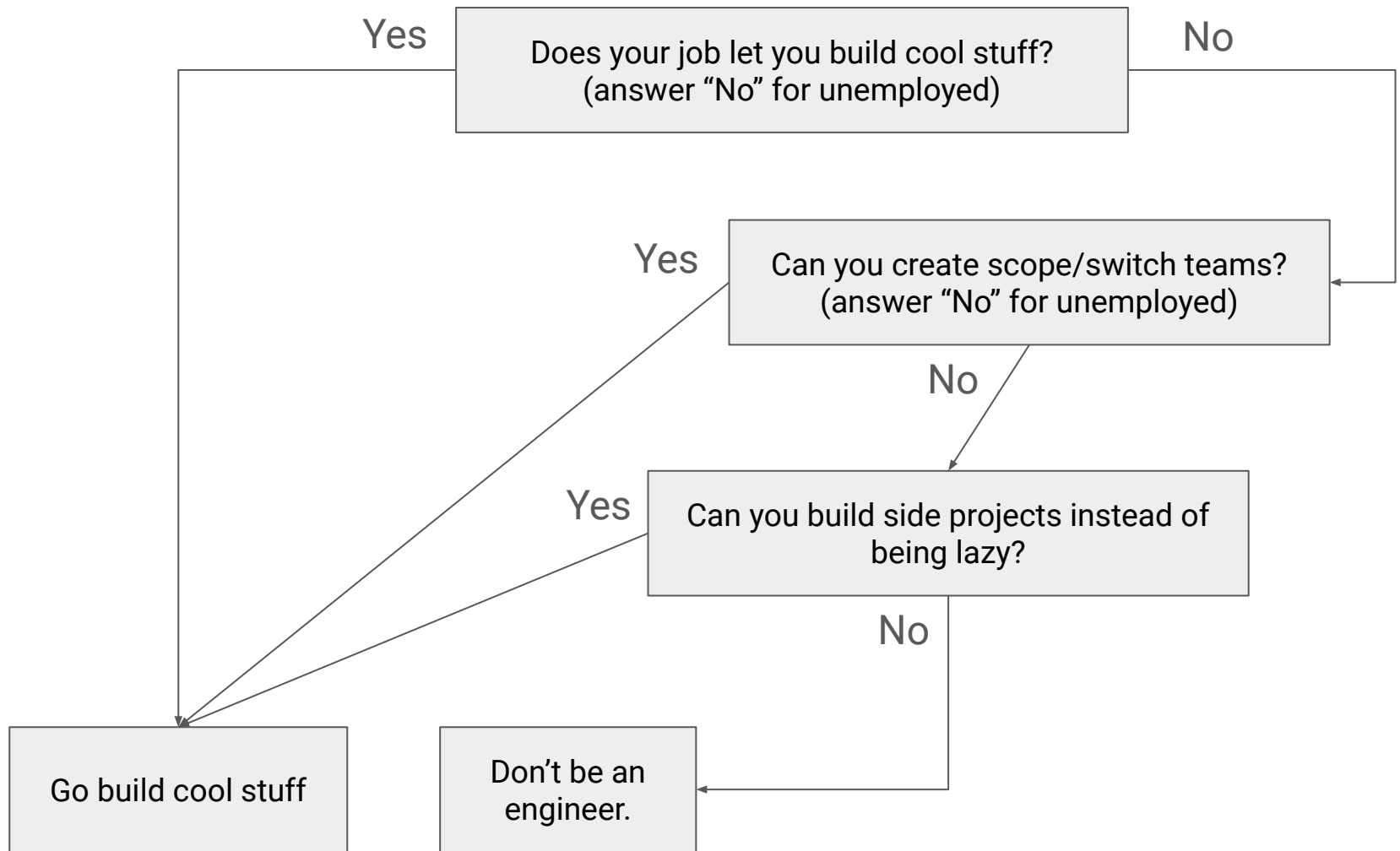
What this course  
helps you with



Avoiding  
tough  
situations  
out of fear



Jumping  
into tough  
situations to  
learn and produce  
awesome stories



**Anything can become exciting if the quality  
bar is high enough.**





**MAKE YOUR OWN LUCK**



# Go Deeper: Follow Through



- *Just watching this course isn't enough*
- Behavioral interviews are both incredibly important and difficult for 1 reason:
  - **You have to put in the long-term hard work**
- Consumption gives you knowledge
- Action gives you learning
- Now your goal is to take as many actions as possible





## Professor Alex's Homework For You

- ❑ Find a mock interview partner
- ❑ Start writing and recording yourself
- ❑ Ask questions in the Taro forum
- ❑ Take the Effective Communication course
- ❑ Understand project credit  
with the Promotion course
- ❑ Go through case studies by level

# Network With The World's Best Software Engineers

Meet other people in the community to gain insights, meet for coffee chats, pair up for mock interviews, share referrals, and more!

Amazon

1

What level are they?



Mock Interviews

1

35 community members match your search



## Mid-Level Software Engineer [SDE 2] at Amazon

Seattle, Washington, United States

I'm happy to help with:

Mock Interviews

Friendly Coffee Chat

Mentorship

Referrals


I'm looking for help with:

Connect

# DSA Community Meetup



## Event details

 Tuesday, December 5, 2023 5:00pm PST to  
Tuesday, December 5, 2023 6:00pm PST

 [Add to Google Calendar](#)

 [Add to Apple Calendar](#)

 [Add to Outlook Calendar](#)

 Taro Premium

**This event has ended**



**11 people attended**

## Title

I keep getting rejected at the recruiter screen - What to do?

## Body

Add more details - the more information you share, the better the community can help you!

**H** **B** *I* S ☰ ☰ “ </> 🔗





# [Taro Top 10] Understanding Engineering Levels

What's the difference between a senior and staff engineer? What does it mean to be L3 vs. L4? This playlist, anchored against Big Tech levels, breaks it down.



## Understanding The Differences Between Engineering Levels

What do career levels structure in big tech company look like? What are the responsibilities for each level?



Engineering Manager at Sinch

I'm defining a career path for my company, and don't know where to start. I would like to see how Meta, Google are doing this so that I can tailor smaller

Show more

How can I think like a staff engineer?



Anonymous User at Taro Community

This occurred to me at work today

I was working on a task for which I completed code testing. I showed the code to some of our Staff

Show more

**Be comfortable with the unexpected.**

**Answer honestly but with purpose.**

**Build a rich career with stories.**

**Put yourself in their shoes.**

**Interviews are 2-way.**

thank you 