FIXING THE TECH INTERVIEW

Nicole Zuckerman & James Bennett
PyGotham 2017
INTERVIEWING IS AWFUL.

Full stop.
Google: 90% of our engineers use the software you wrote (Homebrew), but you can’t invert a binary tree on a whiteboard so fuck off.

10:07 AM - 10 Jun 2015

7,110 Retweets 8,645 Likes
“[A]t Google, I tried to hire one of the most productive programmers I know, who was promptly rejected by a recruiter for not being technical enough.”

– https://danluu.com/programmer-moneyball/
How many stories like these could you tell?

How many have you heard from friends and co-workers?
WHY IS IT SO AWFUL?

I’m glad you asked that question!
FOLLOW THE LEADER

Copying someone bigger always works, right?
JUST A BIT OFF-TARGET

Do you *really* know who you’re trying to hire?
Algorithm challenges favor recent graduates

You hire a bunch of recent graduates

They start influencing your interviews

Why can’t we find experienced people?

You emphasize algorithm challenges
“[P]oor performances in technical interviewing happen to most people, even people who are generally very strong. However, when we looked at our data, we discovered that after a poor performance, women are 7 times more likely to stop practicing than men”

MEASURING THE WRONG THINGS

Use proxies for network services, not for job skills.
INTERVIEW “SKILLS”

• Algorithm regurgitation
• Whiteboard coding
• Implementing basic data structures
• Confidence
• Having a prolific GitHub “résumé”

• Having free time to do code challenges
• ”Performing” on demand
• “Competitive” programming
• Being able to wait weeks/months for a process to complete
JOB SKILLS

• Analyzing problems
• Knowledge of common patterns and architectures
• Articulating tradeoffs
• Communicating
• Collaborating
• Empathy
• Asking for help
• Giving help when asked
• Working with non-tech colleagues
What percentage of a typical day do you spend in your editor/IDE **writing code** which will end up in production? What percentage of it do you spend doing **other things**?

Does your interview process reflect that?
HOW DO WE **FIX IT?**

The first step is admitting you have a problem.
First, throw out your assumptions.
BE REALISTIC

Unrealistic interviews have unrealistic results.
STEPS TO MORE REALISTIC INTERVIEWS

1. Use real-world problems
2. Use a real computer, with the candidate’s preferred text editor/tooling
3. Let candidates use Google and other references
4. Encourage real collaboration – not just “thinking out loud”
5. Use real-world time limits
Interview sessions should treat candidates as peers, not pretenders; as colleagues, not as con-men.

Explore things together, rather than just setting a problem and watching someone squirm.
IDEAS FOR TECHNICAL SESSIONS

- Do a code review with the candidate. And it doesn’t have to be their code!
- Pair programming – bring a bug and work through it together
- Give them a rough spec and see how they refine it and break it down into assignable units of work
- Give them notes from a problem and ask them to write a post-mortem on it
Non-technical sessions* are just as important as technical ones.

Involve non-engineers, because your engineers should work with them.

* “Culture fit” doesn’t count!
#WeWillLocateTheMissingBrownAndFemaleDiversityPeopleWhoAreHavingAFantasticTimeOnTechCompanyWebsitesButDon’tActuallyAppearToWorkAtTheActualCompanies
Interview panels should be diverse.

You’ll learn things about candidates that wouldn’t have come up in a panel consisting solely of men or white people.
>>> import this
The Zen of Python, by Tim Peters

... Explicit is better than implicit.
Sit down with your team and figure out what you really value, and write it down. Watch out for vague terms like “professionalism”, “confidence”, or “potential”. 
PROFESSIONALISM?

• Is a hair style “professional”?
• What about a tone of voice?
• Or an accent?
• Or a style of dress?
• Or a way of walking?
• Or a name?
CONFIDENCE?

• Do you know what confidence is a sign of? Confidence.
• Is asking questions a sign that someone doesn’t have “confidence”, or a sign that they want to thoroughly explore a problem?
• Does a tone of voice imply “confidence” (or lack of it), or is it just the way someone happens to talk?
POTENTIAL?

• A loaded word!

• Often, men and white people are seen as having “potential”. Even when they have a track record of failure!

• While women and people of color aren’t – it’s just assumed that where they are now is their peak

• And even if you could dodge bias, “potential” isn’t something you can ever hope to detect or quantify in a reliable way
THREE QUESTIONS TO ASK
What *qualities* do I value most in the people I work with?
How would I evaluate a stranger on those qualities?
This approach I’m considering – does it really evaluate what I want it to?
BE BLIND

You can’t always avoid knowing about a candidate, but blind interviewing practices have been shown to make a huge difference!
“[O]ur results show that women’s contributions tend to be accepted more often than men’s. However, women’s acceptance rates are higher only when they are not identifiable as women.”

– https://peerj.com/preprints/1733/?td=sd
“They put a screen in front of the actual people who were looking to hire people in this orchestra, so all they heard was the music that was being played—and the decisions they made from that hiring method meant that an all-white male orchestra moved to half-female, half-male, and with a lot more diversity”

BLIND INTERVIEWING IN TECH

• You can **scrub some information** from résumés before they get to a decision-maker’s desk, so you can’t infer gender or race from that.

• You can **anonymize code samples** before handing them over for review (i.e., “Candidate 147’s code” rather than “Jane’s code”).

• This is **not foolproof**.
“Letters of recommendation that don’t use first names may nonetheless reveal the sex of the person being written about. Women get described as caring about their students or clients, while men are said to have strong relationships with those groups.”

Consistent interview practices are a requirement, but that doesn’t mean you can’t accommodate humans.
Consistent ≠ Fair
Someone you’re interviewing is just a colleague you haven’t worked with yet.

They’re human, just like you, and deserve to be treated with respect and humanity.
I've had so many people tell me they felt hurt, ashamed, insulted, etc after tech interviews. An interview that ends in tears was a bad one.
IT'S TIME TO PARTYYYYYY!

Nicole @zuckerpunch

James @ubernostrum