



A Postmortem of SRE interviewing

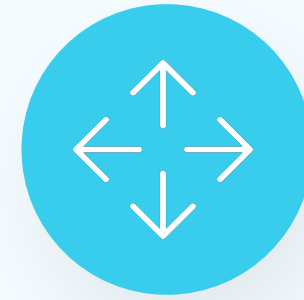


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Sr Staff Security Engineer



Purpose

Why am I giving this presentation?



Highlight ways in which companies can improve



Share tips on what to look for in interviews



Provide preparation resources

Agenda



1. Introduction

2. A summary of the journey

A breakdown of my recent interviewing experience

3. Behaviors companies should avoid

The low-hanging fruit

4. Better interviewing practices

What we can be doing better during interviews

5. Things that companies did that blew me away

Examples of great things companies are doing

6. Thoughts on how to prepare for SRE interviews

Put yourself in the best position to succeed

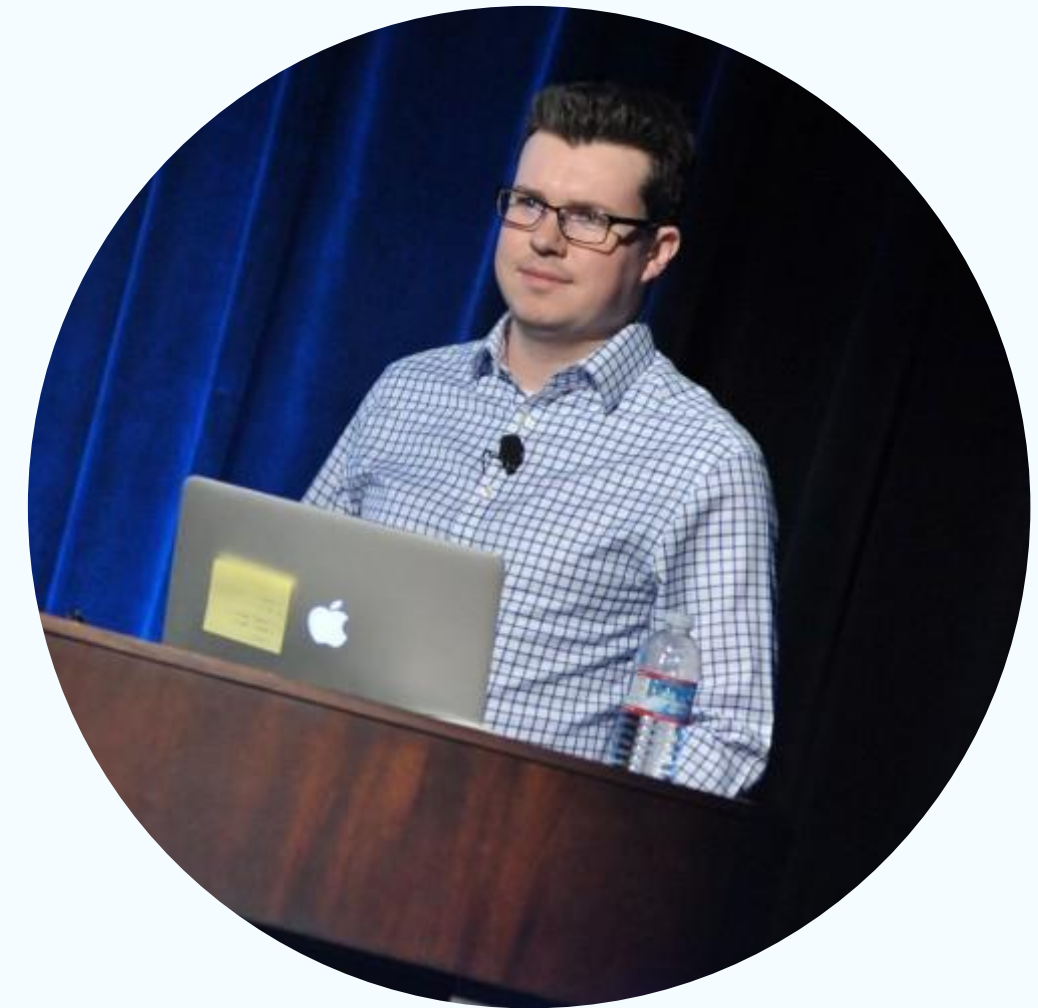


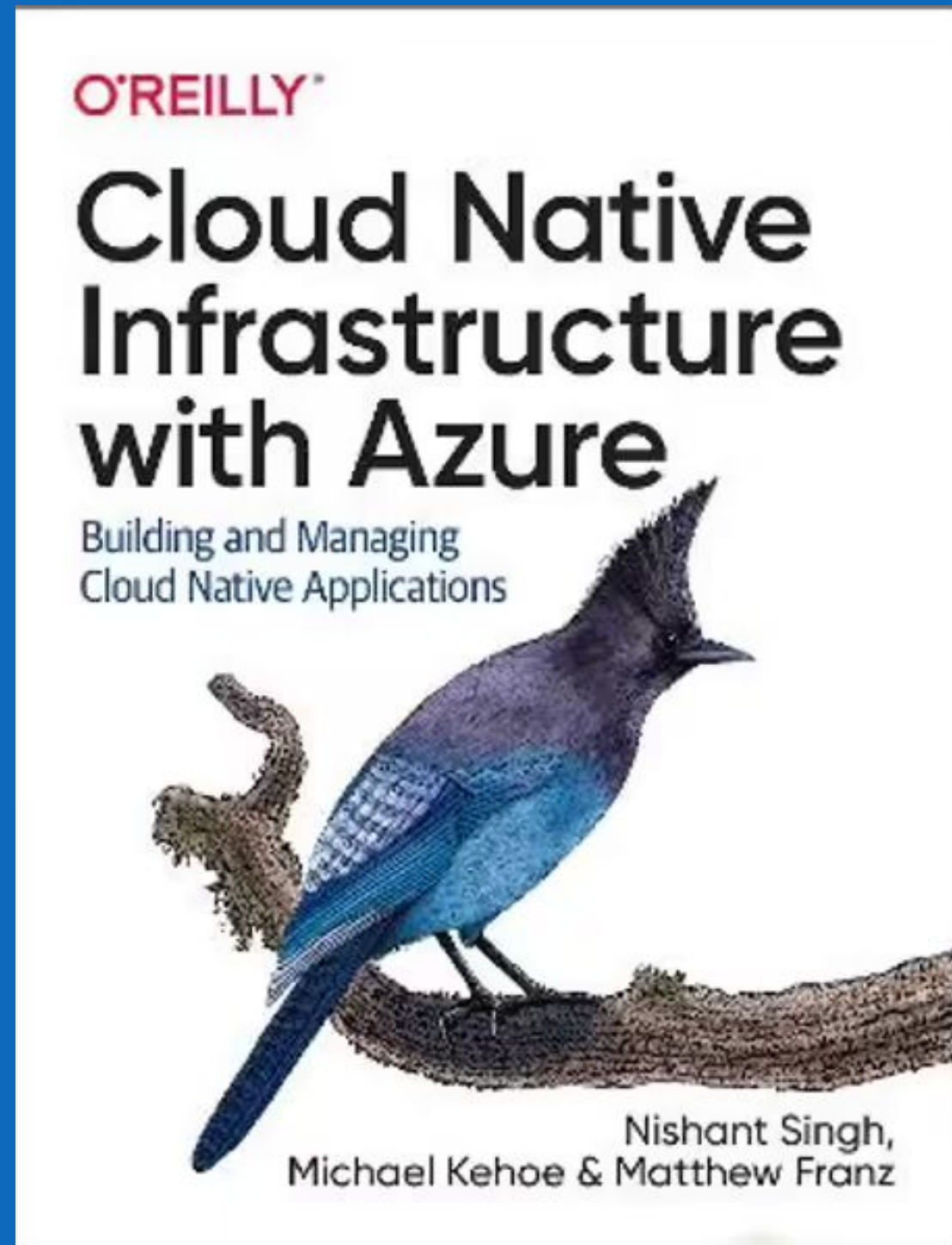
Introduction

Introduction: Michael Kehoe



- Sr Staff Security Engineer - Confluent
 - InfraSec/ CloudSec team
- Previously:
 - Sr Staff SRE @ LinkedIn
 - PhoneSat intern @ NASA
- Background in:
 - Networks
 - Microservices
 - Traffic Engineering
 - KV Databases
 - Incident Management





A summary of my interviewing journey



In March last year, I started to look for a new job. This entailed:

- Applying to 37 companies
- 113 interviews (of different formats)

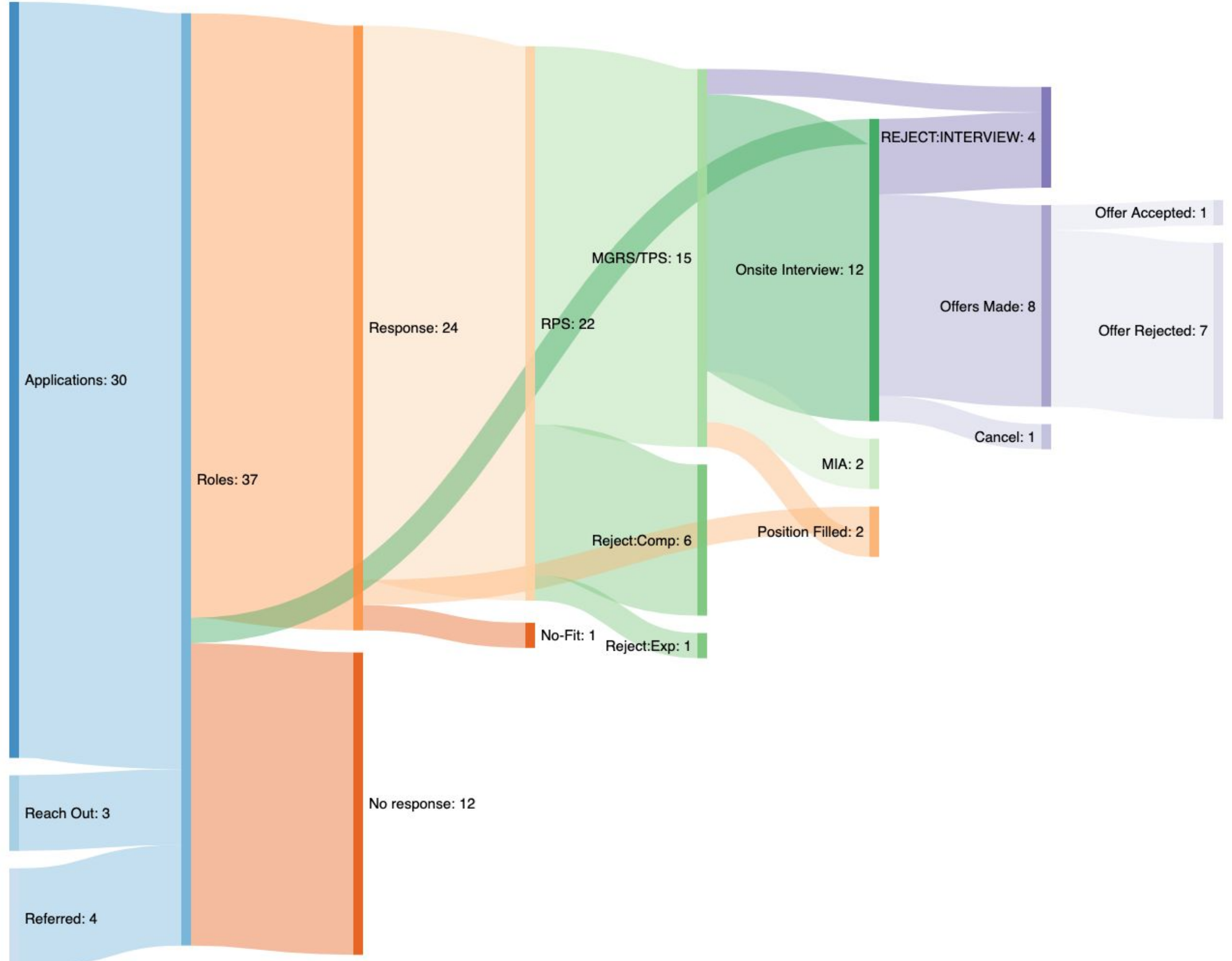
Disclaimers:

1. I fall into the category of a privileged white male. I am well aware that many in our profession are unlikely to see the same level of engagement as I did in their interviewing process
2. In all cases, I was applying for senior or principal level positions which may mean different levels of engagement with my applications
3. I am not going to name or shame companies in this presentation

A summary of my interviewing journey



- It looked something like this ...



A summary of my interviewing journey



- Ingestion/ Recruiter Screens:
 - 37 job applications/ recruiter reach-outs
 - 4 referrals
 - 12 non-responses from companies (including referrals)
 - 1 generic rejection from company
 - 7 non-fit/ salary expectations
- After technical phone screens
 - 2 companies already filled the position
 - 2 companies went MIA
 - Proceeded to 12 on-site interviews
- After “on-site” interviews:
 - 3 rejections + 1 cancelled
 - 8 offers
 - 1 acceptance
- Total of 113 interviews
- All of this in approximately 2.5 months



***Behaviors companies should
avoid***

Behaviors companies should avoid



Not responding to applicants

- It takes time to apply and show interest for a company
- Please do the courteous thing (especially large companies) and acknowledge the applicants interest in your company



Not following up after interviews

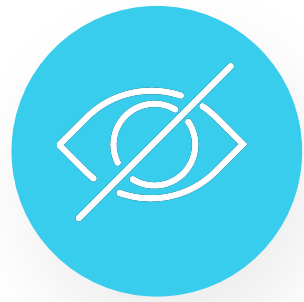
- Post-interview mechanics should be efficient and standard
- If your post-interview procedures are slow, you should let the candidate know



Not setting/ following timeline expectations

- Be crystal clear how long each step of the interview process takes
- You should ask candidates if they have any time pressures
- You should be able to go from final interview to offer in less than a week.

Behaviors companies should avoid



Non-transparent interview processes

- Have a standard process that is followed for the role
- Ensure that this is made clear to the candidate
- Avoid adding extra rounds of interviews



Unstructured interviews

- Interview modules should be standard for the position
 - This builds fairness
- You should not be repeating the same question multiple times
- If you cannot tell if a candidate is right for a position, you need to make changes



Bad interview modules

- Your interview modules are a representation of your company/ organization
- Practical/ real-life questions show you're serious about the candidates real-life experience.



Better interviewing practices

Better interviewing practices - Recruiter screen



- Recruiter screen interviewers
 - Tell candidate compensation package (tell, don't ask)
 - Tell remote-work policy/ travel
 - Set expectations on interview process
 - Set expectations on interview timeline
- Recruiter screen follow-ups
 - Recap of interview details (everything is difficult to write-down/ remember)
 - Preparation materials for first interviews
 - Company benefit package brochures

Better interviewing practices - Technical Interviews



- Interviewer
 - Introduce yourself and what you work on
 - Introduce the format of the interview
 - Explain anything you're looking for as an interviewer (criteria/ scoring etc)
- Candidate
 - Be short and concise when it's a straightforward answer
 - Provide as much detail as you can concisely
 - Ask clarifying questions if you're not sure of what you're being asked
 - Admit when aren't sure of the answer or where you have a knowledge gap
 - Use these interviews to find out more about the role

Better interviewing practices - Manager Interviews



- Interviewer
 - Be crystal clear on team duties/ responsibilities (no bait & switch)
 - Explain expectations and professional growth opportunities
 - Don't make promises you cannot keep
- Candidate
 - Understand the role, expectations and projects
 - Ensure you can find work will that make you happy
 - Understand annual review/ compensation mechanisms
 - Understand oncall & work/life balance considerations



***Things companies did that blew
me away***

Things companies did that blew me away



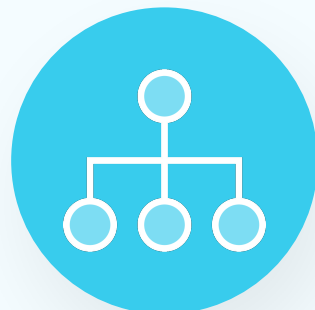
Preparation Packages

Sending comprehensive preparation packages explaining each interview, what the company is looking for, suggested practice materials.



Choice of communication methods

Connecting can be difficult. Give the candidate a variety of methods to communicate through



'About the Team' Documents

Explaining team roles, leadership personnel and organization structure



Sell calls

Sell calls with C-suite or VPs to help answer questions from the candidate



Benefit Package Documents

Clear information about all company benefits.



Welcome packages

Sending out care packages to welcome the team. Bonus points for hand-written notes

Things companies did that blew me away



- Fun & challenging interviews
 - Architecture:
 - Designing a real-world UDP-based server with real-life constraints
 - Coding:
 - Implementing a prometheus exporter in 60 minutes
 - Hiring Manager:
 - Talking about professional leadership challenges and my accomplishments
 - Presentation / essays:
 - Demonstrating my work in written form and presenting it for “peer” discussion



Thoughts on how to prepare for SRE interviews

Thoughts on how to prepare for SRE interviews



- SRE interviewing is an art as much as it is a science - It is naturally difficult to pass all modules given that they test vastly different skill-sets
- Practice makes perfect-ish:
 - Question repositories
 - Flash cards/ Wheel-of-death
 - LeetCode/ HackerRank questions
 - Grokking the systems design interview
 - Example projects that demonstrate your work:
 - Technically complex
 - Working with others
 - Planning/ leadership
 - Hardship
- Checklists
 - Practice how you want to approach system design/ coding questions
 - Prepare a list of questions you want to ask your interviewers
- Know what you're looking for in a job
- Try to avoid your dream job being your first set of interviews

Thoughts on how to prepare for SRE interviews



- Github question repo's:
 - <https://github.com/michael-kehoe/sre-interview>
 - <https://github.com/mxssl/sre-interview-prep-guide>
- Books:
 - [System Design Interview Vol 2](#)
 - [Interview preparation and questions for DevOps and SRE](#)
 - Google SRE Books - Great for SRE culture and process
- Other useful resources:
 - [Grokking the system design interview](#)
 - Leetcode/ Hackerrank/ Glassdoor
 - [SREWeekly/ Devops Weekly](#) newsletters

Getting an offer



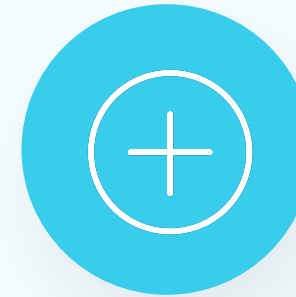
- Understand the details of your compensation package
 - Equity timelines/ value
 - Bonus structure
 - Don't be bullied into saying you're happy with it
 - BUILD A SPREADSHEET!!!
- Ensure you're given an official set of benefits
- Don't agree to anything that is not in writing
- Do your research
 - Glassdoor
 - levels.fyi
- Don't be bullied into saying "yes"



Conclusion

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Learnings from my experience for
Companies



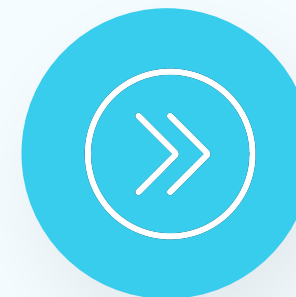
Showcase the best of your company

Providing the most positive (honest) experience for the candidate is important. Everything from scheduling to negotiation matters.



Interviewing is expensive

Interviewing is expensive for both parties, be upfront with one another and make the process efficient



Go the extra mile

In a competitive environment, picking a company can come down to a coin-flip

Conclusion

Learnings from my experience for
Candidates



Get all of the information you need

Make sure you ask questions of your interviewers to learn anything you need to know about the company, role or team



Have a tablet ready to use

If you have a tablet device, have the VC software ready on it just in case you need it.



Be able to talk about your experience

Be sure you can talk to a difficult situation you faced; what you did well, what you could have done better



Questions & Answers



CONFLUENT