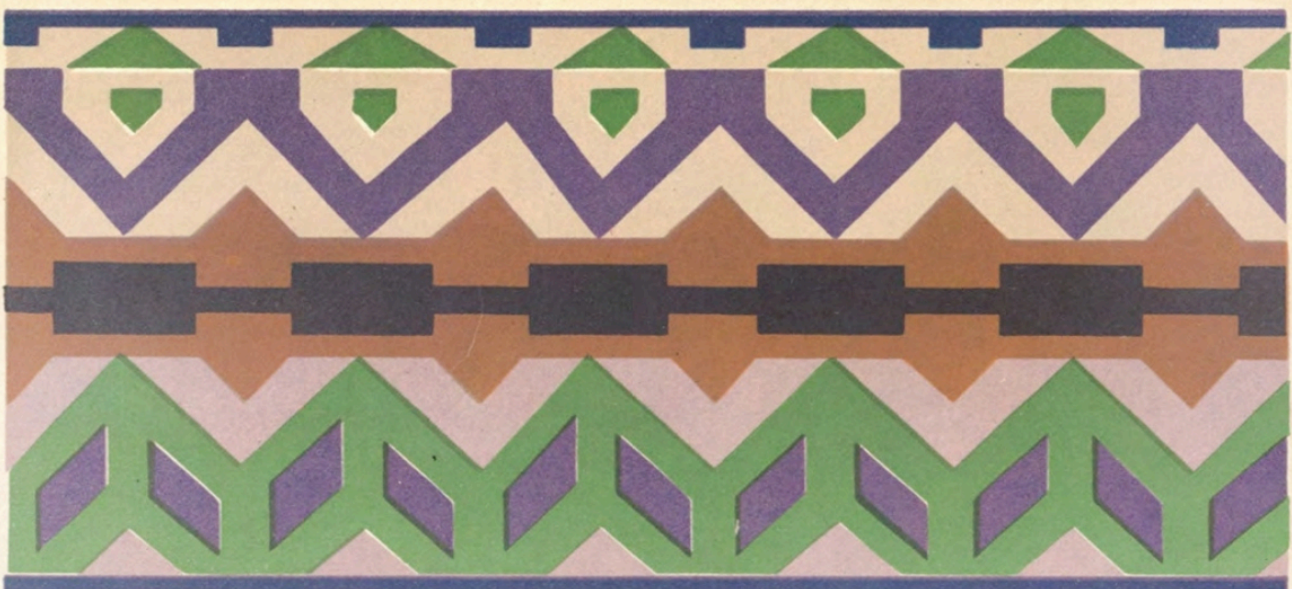Péter Szász

Get Hired as an Engineering Manager

About this book

Hi, I'm Péter Szász, an Engineering Leader writing about the lessons I learned during my career. My blog and newsletter is on peterszasz.com. In May 2024, I partnered with Péter Batiz on a series about the entire hiring process for an Engineering Manager looking for their next job. Péter is an experienced independent recruiter who's been helping startups and scale-ups find tech talent for more than a decade. His contributions and feedback were adding a valuable perspective to my experiences.

While the setting is the unique hiring landscape of 2024, I believe most of the advice here can be applied universally, so I decided to move all the content to a single publication and make it easier to read offline.

All the illustrations I used during the series and in this book are from Mizuki Heitaro's Abstract Pattern Portfolio book, published by Unsodo in Kyōto, 1930. This is public domain now, and can be downloaded from here: https://artvee.com/books/abstract-pattern-portfolio/

I might update the contents in the future. You can always download the latest version, with links to the original articles and other content like podcast episodes and an interview with Péter Batiz discussing the material: https://peterszasz.com/get-hired-as-an-em

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Part I: Capturing your Preferences

Why would you go to a new company? What motivates you in a new job? What are your preferences and dislikes? Starting with defining the right company profile might seem weird if you've been desperately looking for a new job for a while.

Unfortunately for job-seekers, today's market is benefiting companies: due to rampant layoffs and tight budgets, there is a big competition out there for the few open jobs, which can lead to significant compromises in one's preferences. The last time I was looking for a new job in early 2022, I only had to spend a month actively searching, applying and interviewing, and at the end I had the luxury of two offers to choose from. It's a radically different climate now. Expect longer processes, fewer opportunities, and harder compromises.

Still, having to compromise on your preferences requires you to be clear about them first, so that's where you should start the work.

Table of Preferences

The idea is to create a simple table where you list various criteria for a new job. Score each from -10 to +10, based on how positively or negatively you feel about them. Use higher absolute value numbers if the area is more important to you. You can choose a different scale, or add an extra dimension for significance, but I don't think it makes sense to be too complicated here. This exercise is about discovering your preferences — though the resulting numbers will be helpful at the end of the process to make an objective decision about accepting an offer or not.

I'll list a few aspects that can get you started, using a few examples from my preference:

- **How important is remote work for you?** My ideal workplace would be in Budapest, Hungary, with 2-3 days in the office, but I'm very much open to fully remote work within my time zone. So in my Table of Preferences, I would probably add these rows:

Job criteria	Preference
Hybrid setup with 2-3 days in office	+9
Fully remote in CET +/- 1 hours	+7
Fully remote in a significantly different timezone	-8
100% office work	-6

- What are your **travel preferences**? If you're looking at in-office work, what commute time is ideal for you, and what would be close to a dealbreaker? In a remote setting, how often would you prefer to travel to offsites and company events, what's not enough and what's too much?

- Are you willing to **relocate for a job**? Same country or continent preferable? How much? List these aspects with your preferences.

- List the **industries** you don't want to work in, and similarly, your dream areas too. In my case, I don't think I want to work for an alcohol or tobacco company, and nowadays I'm especially excited about the intersection of health and technology. However, this aspect is not too important for me compared to others, so I would use smaller absolute numbers, like this:

Job criteria	Preference
Tobacco or alcohol industry	-3
Health-tech industry	+2

- **What's your preferred company size?** Working in a small team where you might be one of a handful of Engineering Managers (or maybe the only one) is radically different from organizations with hundreds of engineers and dozens of EMs. You'll probably have less freedom to try out stuff in this case, but you can learn a lot from your peers. On the other hand, in a smaller company you have more chance to shape and innovate – but you might be limiting yourself at your current role if there's just one person above you.

- How important for you is the **stability of the company**, which financing stage they are at, how old they are, what's the leadership tenure, etc? If you have a strong preference, list it – these can determine how long you'll likely be able to stay at your next place.

- **Where are you in your career?** Have you recently been promoted and need more experience at this current level? Or to the contrary, you're looking at a new job to get that long overdue promotion? Is there an area you'd like to gain experience in? Something you'd avoid? List those too.

- Are you happy with your current **level of hands-on-ness**? Would you prefer to be more technical? Do you miss coding? Or to the contrary, do you want to focus on management more? It's important

to clarify your preferences, because two companies can have radically different technical expectations from an EM.

- What's your preference for various **tech stacks**? It's the preference, not the experience: someone might be motivated by deepening their knowledge with a familiar stack, while others would give a higher score to something new that they could learn. Microservices or monoliths, native products or web apps, hardware, AI, crypto… add everything you have positive or negative feelings about.

- **How much are you willing to work?** Some companies in critical phases will probably make you do overtime, others are more chill. You should have a good feeling about this by the end of the process. Maybe you're at a point in your life when you can sacrifice some money to afford a reduced commitment, like halftime or 4-day/week. Or, maybe you're eager to learn and try new stuff and don't mind a bit of a grind.

- **How much do you want to make?** Again, go with bands, figure out what's the absolute minimum you can't consider going under, what's your current salary that you don't want to cut from, and what's something that would be a significant boost in your compensation. Score them accordingly, taking in mind the importance of this aspect for you.

- What about **culture**? What company values resonate with you, and is having a purpose important to you? How much do you believe Glassdoor reviews are relevant?

- Finally, you should add any **random aspects** we left out that are important to you (in a positive or negative way). I for example would love to work with ex-colleagues, so I'd add that with a fairly high score.

The goal of this exercise is to think about these aspects and **discover your preferences** in a fairly objective way. Once you're at the end of an interviewing process, you'll probably be subjective and might overvalue some aspects and trivialize others. Falling in love with a job can be a powerful motivator, but do it as a conscious decision, knowing what preferences you'll need to compromise on to chase this opportunity.

The secondary goal is **actual decision-making**: If you end up with more than one offer (congrats!), or feel that you can't decide to continue applying or to accept the first one, then scoring the company / companies with your Table of Preferences will give a valuable aspect to help you decide.

Your Table of Preferences doesn't need to be set to stone, however, I encourage you not to change what you listed now, before starting to interview. Instead, add new aspects and opinion changes in a separate "comments" or "updates" column. This way you can keep a distance from your interviewing experience, avoiding clouding your judgment.

Once your table is ready, put it aside and start working on your CV and LinkedIn profile.

Part II: Perfecting your CV and LinkedIn profile

Your CV

The single most important goal of a CV is **to get an interview**. That's it, everything should be serving this goal. Imagine your CV is your advertisement leaflet handed out at a busy intersection. You have 10 seconds to convince a recruiter not to trash it like the previous dozen she had to. Feel free to leave out irrelevant details and emphasize the experience required for the current position. Your goal is to get a call, you'll have plenty of opportunities to go into details if all goes well after that.

Customize

Companies hire people to **solve a problem they have**. These problems are unique for every organization, especially for an Engineering Manager role, where scope, team size, tech stack, workforce distribution, technical contribution, and other expectations can vary between jobs. Spend time understanding what problem they need to solve, so you can decide if it's a good match for your motivations — and prepare a CV that best showcases your relevant experiences. Leave out irrelevant or distracting details and explain the things you did that they need someone for.

You don't have to have one single CV! On the contrary, ideally, you have a long, internal one you can edit down for every company you apply to, **targeting their job posts**. If you're constrained for time, your chances of getting an interview are still better if you apply to fewer companies with custom, targeted CVs than applying for more jobs with the same one. This tip is valid for every job-seeker, but especially true for Engineering Managers. So, start with an inclusive CV that has everything in your career. The output from the automatic LinkedIn Resume Builder is a bit too verbose to use directly, but it can be a good basis for this "master CV", and it's best if your LinkedIn profile is not very different from your CV anyway.

From here, you should edit to optimize, emphasizing specific skills and experiences targeting the job you're applying for. The requirements of being hands-on can be radically different from one job to another. If a company is looking for strong technical leadership from an EM, then you need to prove your hands-on tech experience. Similarly, if an organization is searching for a hands-off manager, minimize deep technical details and show your people- and execution management impact.

Don't lie - but shape the narrative

You might feel tempted to come up with missing experiences to fill gaps in your CV. Worst case this gets discovered and you burn yourself – best case, you get hired, and either will be found out during your first months or will struggle with impostor syndrome. None of these sound great! Still, the CV is where you sell yourself. **Build a story**, hide or minimize disadvantages, and emphasize things that match the requirements. Ideally, your career progression shows development, increasing challenges, and bigger scopes. If that's not the case for you, find a good motivation behind your job switches, and make that explicit.

For example, you wanted to go deeper on tech, and alternated between EM and IC roles? Use it to your advantage and emphasize your technical capabilities. Did you have a short stint at a company a long time ago that doesn't fit well in your career progression? Consider leaving it out of your CV.

Titles can be flexible too, to some extent. If you were hired as a Software Engineer, but by the time you left you were acting as the technical lead of the team, you should show this information for an Engineering Manager position. Consider writing something like "Team Lead (Software Engineer)" as your title. It's a bit more sensitive if you've been acting a level higher than your title would suggest, but there are ways to convey this information without risking too much. For example, if you were acting as a Senior Engineering Manager, but only had the EM title for some reason, you could say "Engineering Manager, leading an organization of 15 ICs and 2 EMs in 3 teams".

Emphasize keywords

Recruiters and hiring managers have no time to read, **they scan**. Start the most important things on the top left, and move old experiences and education to the bottom. Emphasize key skills and experiences that the job you're applying to requires, so this information jumps out when somebody scans your CV. **Do a little research to understand the company and the job.** Are they a startup in a growth phase? Explain a relevant part in your career where you had to grow a team and show your hiring experience. What tech stack are they running? Make sure you explicitly add that if you've ever worked with tools they use.

For example instead of saying "My team was responsible for mobile development", say something like "I was leading the mobile development team, working with Swift on iOS and Kotlin on Android".

As a hiring manager, I usually process dozens of CVs in batches. I had the luxury of recruiters already throwing out obvious misfits, so I could concentrate on smaller details: how deep is the candidate's experience? Were they the ones driving the impact or just watching from the sideline? Do they have experience working in a similar setup (team, tech stack, etc.) that our company has? Adjusting your CV to emphasize the matches and downplay the differences according to the job description will increase your chances of getting an interview.

Personal impact and business value

When writing about work experience, use **metrics tied to business goals** and be explicit about your **role and achievements**.

This spotlight should feel a bit hard because as a manager, you're ideally putting your team ahead of your achievements. But you need to show your personal impact in a CV, without giving off a pretentious image. A good balance can be using phrases like "*my team*", "*the team I led*", or "*the organization I was responsible for*". This makes it clear that you were the leader, but also that the work was done as a team.

As a manager, you need to showcase the value you bring to an organization. When describing your role, use metrics showing the business impact of your actions. A few examples to give you inspiration:

Re-architected our backend services to utilize autoscaling, saving $300.000/year, 20% of our AWS costs.

Grew my organization from 10 to 40 people in 18 months, including the identification, mentorship, training and promotion of three ICs to EMs to lead their respective teams.

Optimized our CI pipeline bringing down mean execution time from 23 to 16 minutes, saving 5000 hours of developer time a year.

Check the basics

- **Proper grammar, no typos.** Yes, great candidates will probably get an interview despite writing Java Script instead of JavaScript, but it's sending a bad message, and if you're on the edge, this might have your CV landed in the Reject pile.

- **Working contacts**: email, phone, LinkedIn.

- **No overly personal stuff** like photo, birth date, gender, etc., unless something is explicitly required by the company (which would be a red flag for me).

- **Consistent structure and formatting**, don't use multiple fonts, colors that don't translate well when printed in black and white, or other fancy editing. Use subheadings and break down paragraphs to lists.

- **Two pages max**. Use this size constraint to help you prioritize the key information you want to communicate. If you don't have much experience yet, 1 page is fine, but make sure you fill that page.

- **File format** doesn't matter much regardless of what you read on the web. PDF (with text content) is the simplest and rules out all compatibility issues, but Word is fine too.

- **File name** should be your name, maybe add "-CV", but that's it.

- **Introduce companies** briefly, unless obvious. Just a short sentence about size and market, for example, "*Market-leading Polish online media company*".

Your LinkedIn Profile

In 2024, practically **all recruiting happens on LinkedIn**, and features like Easy Apply make it a great tool for job seekers too. Most Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) can accept direct applications from LinkedIn, and the overwhelming majority of available jobs are on LinkedIn too. So while even a few years ago you

were probably fine having a good CV and ignoring LinkedIn, this strategy is a serious red flag for recruiters, and would considerably decrease your chances of being hired.

Does it mean you should ditch your CV and focus on your LinkedIn profile only? Not really. First, in a different job market, this might be OK, but in today's landscape, every little difference that gives you a small advantage over other applicants is worth checking. Second, still a big part of the application forms ask for a CV, or it might come up during the process. Actually, you should push for this, because unlike LinkedIn profiles, CVs can be customized for companies to target their job descriptions, so it's a big advantage if you can submit your CV instead of or alongside a LinkedIn profile.

So if you had to choose one, here it is: in 2024, **you should rather focus on your LinkedIn profile.**

As an added benefit, optimizing your LinkedIn profile won't just give you a better chance of showing your experience, but also make you **more visible for recruiters** searching the platform. You should look at your LinkedIn profile as your branding page, a personal advertisement in the local Yellow Pages.

Few tips to help you stand out and represent your better side:

- Make sure you select **every relevant skill** tied to your previous positions and experiences, so recruiters have a chance to find you.

- Similarly, use relevant keywords when you write about your **experiences**. Recruiters search for words and expressions in job descriptions, you should match those searches. Treat it like an SEO exercise, mention keywords in headings, and bold letters, and use synonyms too to catch all variations.

- Most of our advice about writing a **good CV can be applied here** too to some extent, especially about showing your role and impact and using data to tie your work to business goals.

A few thoughts on **LinkedIn Premium**: in our judgment, it's not worth the $30/month price purely for the purpose of helping someone in job seeking. Everyone is different though, so here are a few benefits that some users of LinkedIn Premium found valuable when looking for jobs:

- Ability to see **how you're compared to other applicants**. While this sounds great on the surface, there are two huge assumptions in this: that the job post is covering well what the company is looking for, and that your LinkedIn profile is conveying your skills and experiences well. It's not always the case, which led to some weird hits in my experience, where I was a top candidate for a position I never imagined myself applying for.

- See the **number of applicants for a job**. This should presumably discourage you from applying if there's a huge competition. Well, first of all, this should never discourage you. It's not a random raffle where everyone has equal chances, and the more participants there are the less likely you'll win. If you're a good fit, go get it. Second, there are rumors about the trustability of these numbers, and [what's behind them](). The bottom line is that the number displayed is probably inflated, and there's a good chance that you're more qualified than most of those applications anyway.

- You can see **who saw your profile** at a company you've applied to. While this can give some secondary information about where you are in their process, it's not much more than a non-actionable vanity metric. Focus on direct communication with the company, and ignore the noise.

- You can **send InMail to people at a company**. It might be slightly more polite than reaching out with a connect request, but not much more - you're cold-calling either way. It's better to stay on official communication channels or ask for an introduction from a friend who knows someone there.

Ignore AI (at least for now)

This is a bit of an outlier advice, and will probably be the most controversial point we're making, but we wanted to include it because there is some hysteria about this topic on the web. There are two areas where AI seems to have a bigger impact in 2024: applicants writing their CVs / LinkedIn pages with LLMs, and companies automatically filtering if you're a good match for a position using AI.

Let's start with the latter: **we believe it's still a myth.** You might see statements like *"the majority of résumés at US tech companies were never seen by humans"*, but often these come from representatives of companies selling something that's supposed to help your chances of being hired. The bottom line is that we have yet to see a recruiter (or hiring manager) relying entirely on machine filtering, automatically rejecting candidates who don't fit a position. **It's about trust**, and none of the recruiters we know would fully trust an AI and risk losing a great candidate.

It's understandable why this fear of being rejected without any human looking at your application is getting popular again in the current job market, but nothing in our experience makes us believe this is the case. ATSes do what they can to make the initial screening of candidates as smooth as possible for recruiters, but at the end of the day, **there's always a human pushing the buttons**.

If you're a recruiter who's relying on an ATS that's rejecting candidates without you or any other human ever looking at them, please contact us, we're happy to stand corrected!

The other use of AI might be a bit more nuanced: **writing parts of your CV with the help of AI**. However, in our opinion, it's a high-risk / low-reward choice. AI use is still easy to recognize, there are terms and expressions AI is frequently using – and it's even more evident for recruiters who look at hundreds of applicants a day. Having to rely on an AI to tell your story sends a bad message, especially for Engineering Managers, who should have great communication skills. If you're exceptionally stuck, try AI to unblock yourself, but tread carefully, and use the output as inspiration, never verbatim. (This advice is especially true for LinkedIn's AI Resume Builder: in our experience it's dumb and easy to spot, making you look unprofessional.)

Summary

The above points on perfecting your CV and LinkedIn profile should get you started. Remember the role of these two: **your LinkedIn profile helps you be found**, while **your CV tells your story**. Use both accordingly.

If you want to go deeper on this topic, we can recommend Gergely Orosz's book [The Tech Resume Inside Out](#). Two things to note: the book was written a few years ago, and therefore focused on CV tailoring more than LinkedIn optimization; and its main target audience is ICs rather than managers. Still, there are a lot of great tips in there that an Engineering Manager can use to be more successful in job hunting. Finally, Péter Batiz, the co-author of this article is running a Hungarian [newsletter](#) and [podcast](#), if you speak our language, it's a great resource on tech hiring topics.

Once you have your CV and LinkedIn profile perfected, you can start the search and apply process.

Part III: Searching and Applying

Following our series, by now you should have clarity in your preferences, nailed down your LinkedIn profile, and created one or two foundational CVs that you can customize for jobs. In this part, we'll address the long and tedious process of searching for jobs and give tips on applying for them in a way that increases your chances of getting an interview.

Where to find open jobs

As we explained in the previous post, by 2024, most recruiting is happening on **LinkedIn**. Get familiar with the tooling available under LinkedIn Jobs, and set up alerts for the most important search combinations. LinkedIn doesn't allow you to do very fine filtering, most of your options are in selecting the right title. Experiment with variations, for example, for a line manager position, you might want to set up alerts for Engineering Manager, Software Engineering Manager, and maybe Team Lead. For a level higher, you can consider Senior Engineering Manager, Director of Engineering, VP of Engineering. These latter titles can have big differences in scope and responsibility depending on the size of the organization.

While most job posts are available on LinkedIn, it might make sense to check **other sites** too from time to time. However, the chances of finding a great position that's not advertised on LinkedIn are slim, still Otta, Indeed, Wellfound, Levels.fyi or Glassdoor Jobs might turn up something interesting.

It also makes sense to take out your list of preferences (see Part I.), find out what **companies could be a dream match for you**, and check their career pages regularly. Some might even have a general "apply if you think you could be a good fit regardless of positions" option, where you can have a chance to get your foot in the door.

Even if they don't have an opening suitable for your preferences and experiences, you might want to check who's working there in an **internal recruiter** position and reach out to them on LinkedIn. You're both motivated to fill a job, so there's a common interest. Even if they don't have any openings, you can get on their radar and feel out their organization. The need for Engineering Managers is usually less pressing than ICs: existing staff can manage a few more people for a while, reorgs can be flexible, and a Senior EM can

get hands-on temporarily if someone leaves. This means that there might be an opening not yet advertised. Either way, be mindful that you're essentially doing a cold call: be humble, short and to the point, respectful of the other person's time, and don't worry too much if it leads to nowhere.

If you know someone at a company where you'd like to work or can get an introduction, it's worth trying to ask for a **chat with the CTO or VP of Engineering** too. You can try a generic reach-out explaining your interest in their field or tech stack, your experience, and asking for advice. This used to be a great strategy in a climate where companies were desperate to find good talent – now it's not the case, so prepare for no answers. That being said, the majority of engineering leaders I know would be OK with helping out an ambitious EM with a short chat – if they have the time.

Another strategy is to follow **news sites** related to the tech startup scene and VC investments ([TechCrunch](#) is a great example). Once you see a company raising funds, you can bet they'll start hiring soon. Move these to the top of your list, and start to network to see if you know someone there. If you can get on their radar before an official job opening, you have a better chance of getting ahead of the competition.

Finally, it might be worth contacting recruiting agencies and headhunters, especially if you're not looking for a remote job. These companies will hear about new positions first, and a good relationship with independent recruiters is a win-win situation for everyone. You might have had a bunch of cold reach-outs from recruiters around 2020-2022, go into your LinkedIn message history and pick up the discussion – but even if not, a quick search to see which agencies are operating in your area and get yourself on their radar can bear some fruit later in your job search.

What positions to apply for

Be aware that in the current climate, **companies are looking for perfect fits** and are less likely to take risks. In EM roles especially, there can be big differences in expectations between organizations. Focus on the positions where you're a good solution to the problem the company has, and you can show it with your CV. This is not the ideal time to try to get a more senior title with a company change. If someone is looking for a Senior EM, it's going to be an uphill battle to prove your worth if your previous title was EM, especially if you don't have much of a track record on this level.

There's a similar question: should you **apply for positions you're overqualified for**? The current job market is especially challenging for EMs, and we hear stories about people with CTO, VP of Engineering, and Senior EM titles in their past applying for levels below their experience. Painful as it sounds, in most cases, this has a slim chance of success. A director at a big US tech company shared in an online leadership community that there's guidance for hiring managers not to accept applicants leveling down. Painful as it sounds, it makes sense: there are too many candidates to risk investing in a person who is just using this position to wait out until a better opportunity appears – or, because most companies are not planning to grow soon, be disengaged due to a lack of challenges. Our advice is: if you choose to apply for jobs below your latest title, know that there are companies where this can be a red flag, and have a clear story that explains why you're doing this. The cover letter (see below) is a great place to address these concerns proactively. It can be external circumstances (recently moved to a new, smaller city), or career motivations (you miss being close to the "front lines"), but the best option is to find a connection explaining why you want to work at this specific company even if it makes taking a scope- and pay-cut. (Eg.: a great product that you use, a mission that matches your purpose, etc.) Still, know the impact a refusal for a lower-level job can have on your motivation and self-esteem, and don't read too much into it.

A note on **international remote work**. This can be mostly relevant for people in a country that's in the same timezone as the US or Western Europe, but the cost of living is lower. Engineers from South America, Africa, and Eastern Europe are familiar with this setup (I also used to work for a French company from

Hungary). Frustrating as it is, filtering for truly remote international positions like these doesn't have a great user experience yet.

On LinkedIn, the vast majority of companies advertise for country-based remote jobs (*eg: "Germany (Remote)"*), most of the time meaning that you can be 100% remote, but need to be in the same country for regulatory or other reasons. Depending on how good you feel your fit is to the company, we encourage you to try applying to positions like these even if you're in a different country, and discuss the option of getting hired via proxy companies like [Remote](#) or [Oyster](#). These "employment as a service" providers, despite being around for half a decade now, are still not very well known. A good candidate for a management position might convince a company to integrate them into their HR processes. It's a slim chance in the current climate, but if it works out for you, then you're already ahead of the majority of the competition who didn't try.

Another option is to **use job boards dedicated to remote work**, [like the one from Remote](#) or [Landing.Jobs](#), allowing you to only browse truly international remote positions. The catch in these positions is that they receive a lot of applicants, so companies are reluctant to open them, and in the current job market, will probably prefer to fill positions locally.

Either way, know your chances for international remote jobs: because of this climate and company preferences, you'll have enormous competition, so you better have an unfair advantage to have a realistic chance of getting in. This can be a unique experience in the same rare stack the company is using, having worked at a competitor, or knowing someone inside who can vouch for you.

The cover letter

This is the ugly ducking of the application process: most people hate the cover letter, because they perceive it as an unfair chore that they have to invest more energy into, saying the same things as in their CV, without knowing if they'll even get a reply. But they are wrong. **The cover letter is free advertising**, and it can be a secret weapon that makes the difference between getting an interview or getting rejected.

Here's a useful way to look at it: treat your cover letter as a personalized, targeted trailer of your movie. Remember how we explained that companies have a problem that they need someone to solve and that the job description is the manifest of this problem – and your CV should show that you're the right solution for it? Look at the cover letter as the glue that binds the requirements of the job description with your skills and experiences explained in the CV.

Because there are no formatting rules for a cover letter, as you only have to write a paragraph or two of text, you have immense freedom to emphasize areas that are important to you. Be personal, honest, excited, and curious. Explain briefly what you worked on, but focus on building blocks that create the bridge between you and the company. Just like with your CV, your goal is to convince them why you think you're the best candidate for their team – and you only need to get the recruiter excited enough so they call you.

I found a good example from my past: back in late 2021 I applied for fully remote Engineering Manager positions, and this was a cover letter I sent to [Relive](#), a sports activity sharing startup:

> Hi there,
>
> I'm Péter Szász, an Engineering Manager from Budapest, Hungary. Two of my biggest passions have a great overlap with what you're looking for: helping engineers be the best versions of themselves – and cycling. I immediately fell in love with the simplicity and beauty of what the Relive app provided back then (my first video is from September 2016!), converted a few of my friends, and kept on visualising my rides since. When Strava decided to kick you off their platform, which would've destroyed 9 out of 10

startups, you managed to pivot immediately to utilise other services, while maintaining transparent and helpful communication to your users. This shows the resilience and agility of your team, which is something to be truly proud of.

While I'm an experienced developer (most familiar with JS/Node/TypeScript now), I spent most of my last 20 years leading engineers in various roles, as you can see from my CV. Sometimes it meant managing a small web development studio, at other times working in an international company ensuring all the engineers from Russia through Europe, South America and the US are on the same page and feel like they are members of one team. The common theme between these experiences is that I love the challenge of creating and nurturing an empowering, safe, responsibility-based tech culture for engineers to thrive in.

I'd love to discuss the problems and challenges you're facing now, and find out if I can help you with them. Either way, keep up the good work!

Péter

Of course, not every position is a lucky match like this - and to be fair, despite a great interview experience with Relive, I didn't end up working for them. But with some creativity, I'm sure you can find an overlap between your personal and professional self and the company you're applying for.

Here's a tip that Jeremy shared [in our podcast](#): this is one of the few areas in job searching where the smart use of AI can help you a lot! Feed ChatGPT or your favorite AI tool a job description and your CV, and ask it to write a targeted cover letter! You probably shouldn't use the result verbatim, but it can be a good starting point for your final version. Another useful approach is that after you have your draft, feed that to ChatGPT too, and ask what it would modify, add, or remove to ensure you'll get a call from a recruiter.

Track your applications

Ideally, you have a lot of application processes in progress, and it's easy to drop the ball if you don't use some system to track them. Back when I was last searching for a job, I created a **simple spreadsheet** that I cleaned up and [made available to use as a template](#) (make a copy if you plan to try it). I have instructions on the first tab, the high level is: have a running log of events, and keep on re-evaluating companies about how excited you are about them, and how excited they are about you. I found that these two metrics, while simple and intentionally subjective, are a great way to capture how I'm feeling in a process. Together with this and filtering the logs, you have a job search dashboard that shows you in one glance where you are at various places.

If you already work in **Notion**, you can [try the Job Tracker template](#) from [David Weiss](#) - the UX of dragging cards Kanban-style is arguably more pleasant than typing in a spreadsheet.

Also, small data geekery, if you track your applications, you can create cool charts like this once you're done (actual data of my last job search in 2021):


Made at SankeyMATIC.com
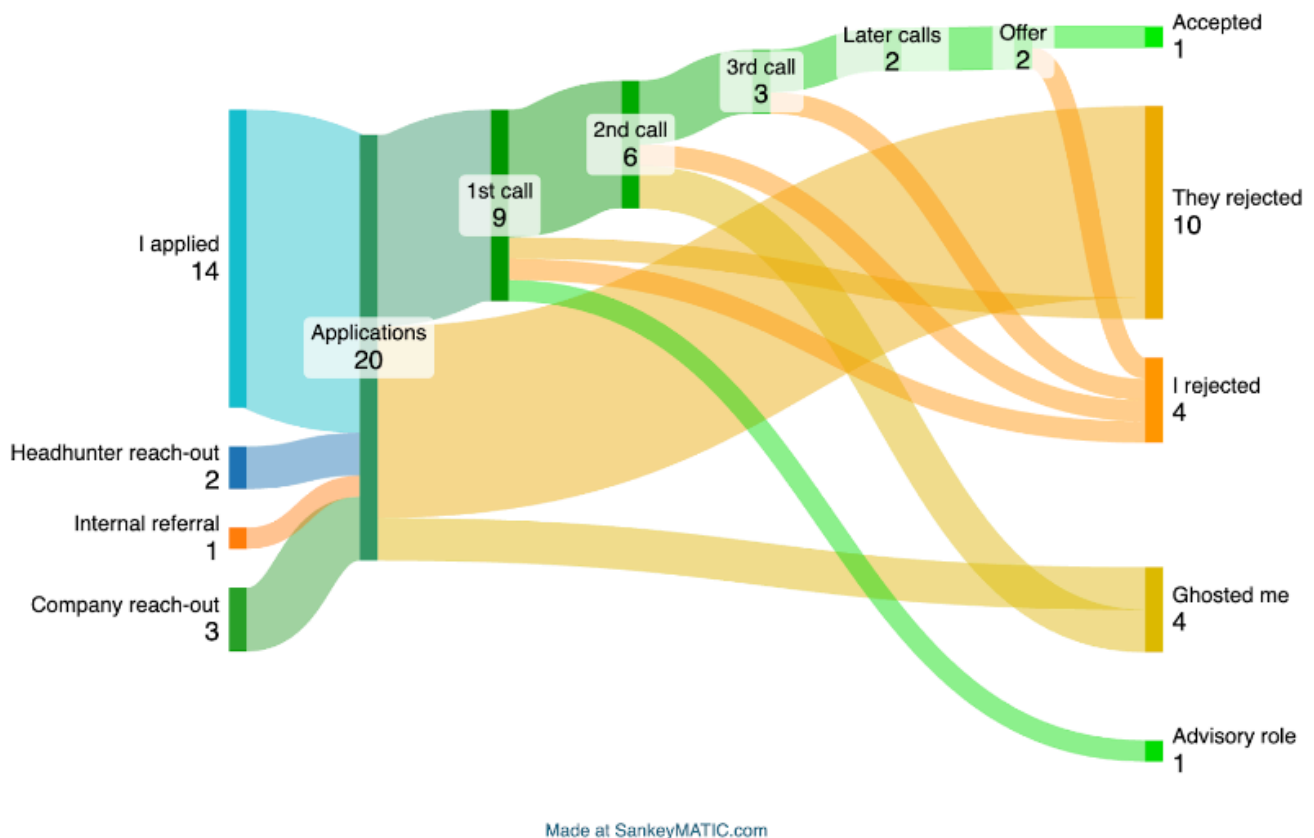
Final thoughts

Make job search and applications a recurring task in your days, so it does not depend on your mood or motivation. Don't stop applying until you have an offer, or are extremely confident that at least one of your ongoing processes will result in one. It's much easier both mentally and efficiency-wise to respectfully withdraw from an application process if needed, than start from zero right after a rejection. It can be challenging to show enthusiasm to an unknown company when you're in the final rounds with another, but persistence pays out.

With attention to these details, smart targeting and customizations, and relentless persistence, you hopefully booked your first interviews.

Part IV: Interviewing
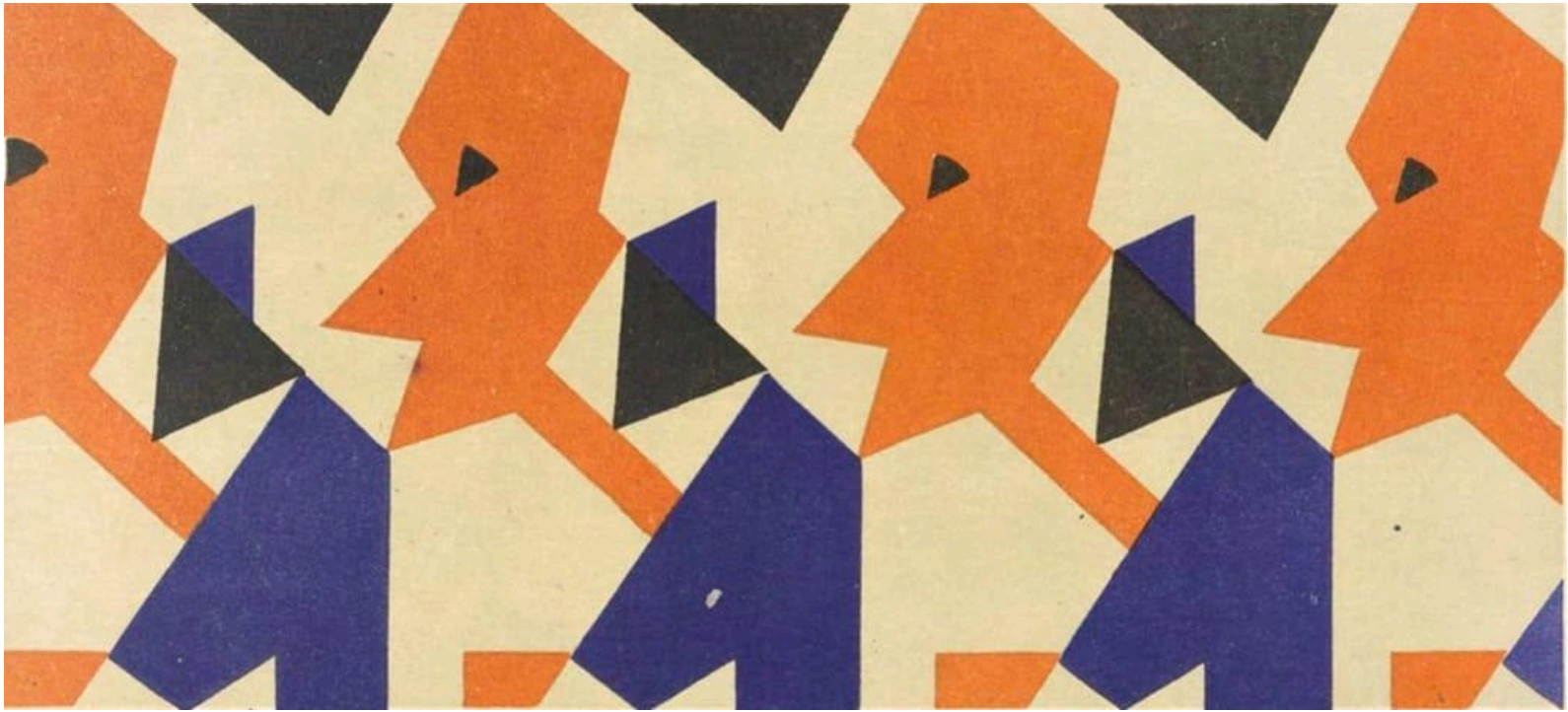
Preparations

Before you start your first interview, there are a lot of things you can work on to increase your chances of passing them, and eventually getting an offer. Some of these preparations are not tied to a specific job application, so you can begin working on them while sending out applications, minimizing the work you need to do once you have an interview arranged.

Get yourself ready

Know the job description inside out, because that is the best document to understand the problem the company wants to solve by hiring an Engineering Manager. If something is unclear, take notes as potential questions to ask during interviews. Study **your own application** too, what customizations you did on your CV for this specific role, and what cover letter you included. Just like the job description is what you can rely on, your application is the most important thing the company will use to start to get to know you. By the end of your preparation, you should be able to **answer the following questions** (some of which might even be asked from you directly):

- What do you think of our product?

- Why do you want this job?

- What makes you an ideal candidate for this job?

- What will be a challenge for you in this job?

Prepare for the introduction. Practice a short version of your professional history. Talk about accomplishments, not responsibilities. What you achieved tells a better story of your experiences and skills than your title. Add a minimum amount of personal detail to help break the ice and build a human

connection. Most interviewers are similarly stressed as you are, and the goal is to show that you'll work together well. End with why are you leaving or why did you leave your last company. Avoid any temptation to badmouth and complain. Even the worst situations can be euphemized with a statement like "*our cultural values grew apart*" or "*the opportunities for me to grow ran out*", giving you a chance to show empathy and an objective character. If you're still employed, a great addition could be "I'm not planning to leave, but when I saw this position, I got excited because *[some connection with the role, company, or product]*".

Have **a list of stories** ready to pull out for (almost) any question. This can be a superpower when you realize that the story you tell is more important than how much it answers the original question. (Politicians do it all the time – make sure you don't overuse it.) Use the following structure when writing your stories:

1. **Hook**: Connect your story to the question and give a high-level summary of what you're about to say. For example, if the question was "*Tell us about a mistake you made*", then you can start with "*Let me tell the time I prematurely promoted someone*". The same story about unclear expectations could be used to answer a different question about career ladders or one about soft skills, mentorship, etc. The "hook" is different every time, but the story remains the same.

2. **Problem/Opportunity**: Describe the situation, and the circumstances in which the challenge or opportunity manifested. Make sure your interviewers understand what you had to solve.

3. **Actions**: Explain what you did, what options you were considering, what metrics you selected to improve, what risks and downsides you identified, how you made your decision, etc. Even in teamwork, show your personal role.

4. **Results**: Show the impact of your actions. Use data if you can, but qualitative metrics are fine too. Make sure you tie your results to business goals.

Find 4-6 diverse stories showcasing the best challenges you solved in various areas spanning from team execution to people management. Having these written down and practiced will be a solid help in answering behavioral interview questions.

Now is the time to start preparing **your questions** too. Have a running list of things you want to figure out before accepting an offer. You might add to this list as you progress in the interviews, or cross some out without asking when the answer becomes obvious after some discussions. If you're unprepared for "*Do you have any questions for us?*", you make yourself look uninterested, disengaged, and a bit desperate willing to accept anything that pays a salary. The right questions however not only help you evaluate the job but boost your chances of an offer too.

You will find example questions to ask and topics to avoid at various interview stages below. While these questions give a good opportunity to show the interviewers your thinking and experiences, make sure they are honestly reflecting your genuine interest, otherwise you'll come off as fake.

Questions that can be appropriate at basically any stage and give you some information about the company's culture:

- How has the company changed since you joined?

- What happens during a typical day of yours?

- What's your favorite part of working here?

Don't bring up sensitive topics (eg: "*What's the ethnicity distribution in the engineering department?*") or obvious questions (eg: "*What's the target audience of your product?*"). Avoid being too critical (eg: "*By now you should've moved to a microservices architecture, no?*") – being judgemental about anything the

company does portrays you as a know-it-all or a showoff. You don't have all the context, and anyway, you should assume they are doing their best to solve their problems.

Company research

Make sure you know **what products the company is making money from**. For bigger companies, the job description might include the department or team, from which you can figure out what subproduct you'll probably be responsible for. If possible, use it: often even B2B products have trial periods. Document your experience, take notes of what stood out for you during the first use, etc. Be humble and unassuming: what seems like a suboptimal UX flow for you might be a result of months of internal discussions and could be optimized for an important use case unfamiliar to you.

> *A personal story about assumptions: Back in 2000 preparing for a job interview at [Graphisoft](#), a CAD software developer, I noticed that it was not possible to purchase their product from their website. I was coming from a web development studio lead position, we were just after the dot-com boom, and e-commerce was getting more and more common. I figured it would be smart to point out during the interviews how adding a "Buy now" button to the website could boost their sales. What I didn't know, as my hiring manager kindly pointed out, was that Graphisoft was relying on a huge international reseller network, and their entire sales operation was built on the personal connection these partners had with their customers. Of course the idea of online purchase came up in internal strategy discussions! Assuming otherwise, with a smug know-it-all attitude could've easily backfired. Fortunately, they explained the reason why they consciously decided to drive interest to local resellers instead, giving me a good opportunity to learn about their organization (and eat some humble pie).*

We're not advising you to hide your opinion about the company's product, to the contrary: just like winning a parent's heart is easier by showing interest in their children, you can improve your image by showing how much you care about their product. Just be aware that you have close to zero context compared to the people working on it, so refrain from universal statements and be explicit with your assumptions.

The second thing you should check about a company is their **business standing**. It's hard for non-public ones, but not impossible. [Crunchbase](#) is a good source, even their free tier gives you valuable data. Also, check the company's LinkedIn posts and their own site's news section, and browse through a few recent Glassdoor reviews. Things you want to find out and be familiar with: recent investment rounds, mergers or acquisitions, main competitors, executive-level leadership changes, layoffs, and other significant events. The point is not necessarily to ask about these during interviews directly, but to increase your familiarity with their situation, help shape your questions indirectly, inform your decision at the end of the process, and show that you're interested in the opportunity.

Checklist of the basic things you should know about a company before the first interview:

- What are their products and how do they make money;

- Who are their main competitors and how do they rank more or less;

- What markets are they targeting? B2B vs B2C? US vs International? etc.;

- If there were any recent news about the company or its products;

- Rough size of current staff;

- Company mission and company values if published;

- What other open jobs do they have currently;

- Some history: how they started, growth phases, and other significant events.

Technicalities

A few things to check to ensure you have a good interview experience. Most of these are common sense, but we thought it's worth listing just to be safe.

In the case of **online interviews**:

- Don't do online interviews from suboptimal locations, like bus stops, from the car, a busy café, etc. (All concrete examples!) It's not just giving a bad impression, it's also distracting you from being your best self. Reschedule rather than compromise if something prevents you from having an acceptable location for the call.

- Test your camera and microphone setup with a friend in advance if it's been a while since you had videocalls.

- Restart your computer to minimize the risk of a RAM-hungry app slowing down your videoconferencing software.

- Connect to your home router with a cable if possible. This can reduce network lags and random slowdowns that are not uncommon with consumer-grade wifi devices.

- Join the call a few minutes before the arranged time. I remember once I was late from an important call because the Zoom auto-update just kicked in when I wanted to join.

- Don't disable your camera. Even if you're calling from a place with a messy background, use blur instead. Not showing your face was always a huge red flag in an interview setting, but with the rising problem of fake interviewers, this is more important than ever. Position the call window under the camera, especially if you have a multi-display setup, to mimic the feeling of continuous eye contact.

- Don't schedule back-to-back calls, leave a bit of time to recharge between them to ensure you can be your best self. Use this time to capture your thoughts and feelings while they are fresh, so they are not mixed with the subsequent call.

If you have **in-office interviews**, you should consider:

- Doublechecking how to get to the company. It's better to find a café nearby to sit in a bit than arriving late. Count some time at the reception, and arrive 5-10 minutes early.

- If you're unsure of the dress code (for example, applying for a bank or a government office), it's perfectly fine to ask the recruiter directly when scheduling. Either way, make sure you're not too uncomfortable in your chosen outfit.

- Bring a notebook with some prepared questions and plenty of place to take notes.

- Make sure you're not hungry, but also, don't go interviewing right after a heavy meal.

Interview rounds

The number and type of interviews differ from one company to another. We listed a few typical ones, more or less in the order that you might encounter them. In the current climate, especially for an Engineering

Manager role, expect most of these to be a part of your process – though companies do differ, and it's entirely possible that you won't have a chance for an executive call, or won't be asked to do a technical test or case study.

The recruiter call

This is usually the first contact, and it's most likely online or on the phone. The recruiter describes the job and the company hopefully a bit deeper than the job post, and you explain your professional history and your motivations to join the team. The goal of this call is to **rule out red flags** and to **validate that you're a possible match** worth pursuing.

Many applicants undervalue the recruiter call or see it as an obstacle to pass in order to have a chance for more important conversations with engineering people. This attitude can easily backfire and make you miss an important opportunity to boost your chances of an offer. What this way of thinking fails to understand is that **the recruiter also wants you to succeed**. Their job is to hire people, and if you convince them that you're a good candidate, you can boost their success metrics, and they can be your best internal ally. They are the ones who schedule interviews for you, who push or burry your application in the updates to the hiring manager, who debrief interviewers after they've talked with you, who can speed up or slow down a hiring process, and who represent your counteroffer if it comes to negotiating. Winning them over makes everything smoother for both of you and is a key to a successful hiring.

Therefore, try to **build a genuine relationship** with the recruiter. Be kind, flexible, and empathetic. Understand that they are usually not a technical person. Insisting on questions they can't answer, theatrically saying "*I guess I'll ask this from a technical person*" is not just inefficient but can also be perceived as disrespectful and humiliating – in a situation where your main goal should be building a positive relationship! Sure, you might want to rule out a position where you need to work with a specific stack, and it should've been in the job description, but the recruiter can't help anything about either at this point. If all goes well now, you'll have a chance to ask your technical questions in the next round.

We list **a few example questions** that can inspire you to create your own at this stage, though keep in mind that this is usually a shorter call, not leaving too much time for deeper discussions.

- What is the primary reason for this role opening?

- What are the key qualities you're looking for in a candidate for this position?

- What does the hiring process look like, and what are the next steps?

Crucially, this (or at some companies, the hiring manager interview) is the only stage where you can expect to discuss **compensation** – the next chance will be after you receive an offer.

Basic negotiation tactics would suggest you need to delay sharing any information about your compensation expectations as much as possible. The reality is that oftentimes you simply cannot pass this round without clarifying how much you'd be willing to work for. A good compromise is to **share a range**, explaining that you have other important criteria in choosing your next job too, and that salary is just one part of the equation. Still, you do need to share a range, so try to set the bottom of it to the minimum you're still willing to work for, provided everything else checks your boxes – and set the top of it to the amount you'd need to be paid if you're forced to make big compromises in your preferences (see Part I.). Prepare this range specifically for the job you're interviewing for before the first call, and track where you are in the spectrum after each call.

Also, depending on the company, expect that a significant part of your compensation can be above your fixed salary (equity, bonuses, benefits, etc.). It's appropriate to discuss benefits with the recruiter, especially

if something is a big factor for you in accepting a job offer. The details of health insurance, company-supported daycare, home office, vacation policy, etc. will probably be explained to you by the recruiter, but if not, you can bring the topic up when talking about compensation, with something like "*I'd like to make between X and Y per year, the amount depending on how the job details match my goals, experiences, and preferences – and additional benefits the company might offer. Can you explain these a bit?*"

Finally, some companies do various, mostly **technical screenings** at this stage too, to minimize the time impact of interviewing on other departments. There's more chance to face these in strictly technical positions, but it's not impossible for an EM one too. The questions are usually not in the expertise area of the recruiter, and your only goal is to ensure you're not rejected based on one of your answers. Therefore, it's not the time to get creative, go with the safest answer that's most likely on the paper they are reading. Include keywords in your answers to increase your chance of passing this awkward round, and to the point above on building a relationship: try to be nice and respectful.

The hiring manager interview

This can be the most important discussion in your process: you meet your future boss and they meet the next member of their team. Both of you need to figure out if you can imagine **working with each other**. You should ask questions to gather information for that goal, and the hiring manager will do the same. They'll ask for clarifications about your professional past, focusing on the personal impact of your role. They want to understand what exactly the EM title meant at your previous company because it's probably slightly different here. Expect behavioral questions too. This is where you can start using your prepared stories!

Some managers like to share a problem they currently have and ask how you'd solve it. Be confident but humble. The main goal is not to show that you know the answer to a question, that's just a small part of the interview. The goal is to convince them that **you can be trusted with making decisions at the company**. Show your way of thinking, and walk them through your decision-making process.

Good questions you can ask at this point can be:

- Can you describe the organization and how this role fits within it?

- How do you measure success in this role?

- Can you give an overview of the team I would be working with?

- Can you provide examples of recent projects the team has worked on?

- What are the biggest challenges the team is facing now?

- How does the engineering function collaborate with the product- and design one?

- What is your approach to managing technical debt?

- How does the company support professional development and career growth?

There are no topics that are strongly advised to avoid at this stage, though don't bring up compensation unless it wasn't discussed in the recruiter call (which is extremely rare).

Technical test

Depending on the company and how hands-on is the Engineering Manager position you're applying to, this will be a separate stage or part of another interview (usually the hiring manager one). If there are strong

technical expectations for the position, you can prepare as you would for a Staff Engineer role – but usually, the expectations are less technical for an EM.

A recent interview process I went through was fairly typical, consisting of a small **coding exercise** and a **system design** task. The coding challenge was writing an algorithm for a simple problem, in this case, giving the appropriate amount of various bills and coins as change after a payment. There are millions of similar exercises on [HackerRank](#) or [LeetCode](#), or if you want to practice with something more exciting (and gradually frustrating), check out [Advent of Code](#). I was allowed to use my own environment, shared my screen, and walked the interviewers through my solution. This is key: the goal of these interviews is not just about proving your technical expertise, but also about **showing how you work, communicate, and collaborate**.

The approach I find useful in these cases is to **make all assumptions explicit** and confirmed by the interviewers, and then try to do a rough **naive solution first**, something unoptimized that simply just works. Once you have that, explain bottlenecks, missing input validations, potential optimizations, and ask if they would like you to address any of the issues.

The system design exercise was about creating charts from a fleet of small hardware sensors. Explicit assumptions and asking questions are even more important here. (Do I need to care about the reliability of the network? How about its security? What's the size and frequency of the data? How long do we need to store it? Can we control anything on the hardware? What are our other constraints? etc.) After all, this is just a discussion to see if you have the experience and knowledge to understand typical problem patterns and their solution options.

Case study

While it requires serious time investment from candidates, it's common to ask applicants at EM positions to prepare some kind of case study, or similar homework. This is usually a managerial problem that the candidate has a few days to solve and present to a panel of future peers. Typical case study exercises are about organizations, processes, metrics, execution- and people management, etc.

An actual example case study I had to present a few years ago was something like this (summarized from a 1-page document):

A start-up's engineering and product team faces issues with organization, productivity, quality, and high employee turnover. Your task is to restructure the team, measure and enhance productivity, and improve release quality and developer retention. Provide solutions with justifications, focusing on creating a cohesive, efficient, and sustainable team structure and processes.

The key to solving these tasks is to understand what the interviewers are looking for. To oversimplify: **they don't care about the solution, but how you got there and how you present it**. There's a misconception that companies outsource their problems to candidates for free. It's rarely true, not just because candidates lack the necessary organizational context to be effective, but mainly because there's no right and wrong solution – but there are right and wrong approaches.

A few tips to be successful here:

- **Be structured.** Start with your concept, explain the steps, and then summarize them again at the end. Don't dwell on technicalities, stay high level unless asked for details.

- **Make your assumptions explicit.** The first slide of my presentation to the above case study was a list of my assumptions: that the product is a web-based SaaS, without extreme traffic, "the house is

on fire" problems and hard regulatory or SLA requirements. This way of thinking shows that you're experienced enough to know typical edge cases that can require a specific approach.

- **Avoid generalizations.** Understand that you don't have enough context, and your solution is one possible approach. Emphasize that you have experience with your proposed solution, but of course, you can imagine something else working too. Try to think about the drawbacks and risks of your solution in advance, you might be asked about those during the presentation.

- **Narrate.** Arguably any advanced LLM can solve these problems today and create a passable presentation. You need to convincingly present this work, to avoid casting any doubt on your knowledge and experience. Share your thinking, what were your considerations, how you ruled out options, which part of the task was easier and where are you less confident in your solution. This transparency can be a great jumping point for some follow-up discussions.

These discussions are usually time-pressed, but if you have a chance, use the opportunity that you are likely talking with your potential future peers, and ask them about their work experience. What processes work well and what do they think could be improved; what's the decision-making process at the company; how do teams and functions collaborate; what project management tools do they use; etc. Avoid asking too specific questions about the actual role you're applying to, as often they don't have that deep context and it's rarely the best use of the time you have with them.

The executive call

Depending on the seniority of the position and the size of the organization, you may or may not have a chance to talk with a CTO or CEO. This is another typical call where you can rely on well-prepared stories. Underline the impact and business outcome of your actions. Besides behavioral questions, you can expect ones about your career goals and aspirations, to ensure those match what the company can offer.

These discussions can also give you a unique chance to **understand the organization you're considering joining**. Prepare well with questions that can help you gauge critical aspects of the company. A few examples:

- How do the company's core values influence day-to-day operations?

- How are key decisions made within the company?

- Can you describe how collaboration happens across departments?

- How does the company ensure remote employees feel included and engaged?

- How do you support and develop your engineering managers?

- How does the company encourage innovation and experimentation?

- What is the attitude towards taking risks and potential failures?

Avoid too specific topics, they might give an impression that you have a hard time seeing the big picture and easily get lost in details.

Team interview

Many processes include a peer- or engineer-interview step. If possible, **try to meet the actual team you're applying to lead**. This can give you a great chance to test if there's chemistry, understand the good and

bad side of the work, what challenges the team is facing, and what they expect from their manager. Even if you can't meet the team itself, questions about these areas can give you useful insights.

Questions you can expect from engineers are usually about technical leadership, decision-making, team representation, and career support. A few examples:

- How did you handle tech debt in your teams?

- What's your approach to resolving a technical disagreement between two seniors on your team?

- How do you ensure technical considerations are represented in product decisions?

- What do you expect from a Staff engineer compared to a Senior one?

The advice above is valid here too: be explicit with your assumptions, ask clarifying questions, understand that you don't have all the context, and be empathic. Make your answer a discussion starter, and try to start building a human connection.

Questions you can ask from developers that give you good information:

- What do you expect from your manager?

- What's the goal of the feature you're working on currently?

- How would you describe code health in the stack you're familiar with?

- What change would have the biggest positive impact on your current developer experience?

- How does the team handle tight deadlines or high-pressure situations?

Offer call

If everything goes well, many companies like to make a final call to present their offer. The stated goal of this is to give you a chance to ask further questions and clarify any missing details. The hidden one often is to get you to accept the offer on the spot. We'll discuss more this phase in the final episode of our series, but for now, if you're in this situation, resist the temptation to accept the offer right on the call. You're overwhelmed with positive emotions clouding your judgment. Be very thankful, but explain that you need a few more days to think through the offer. This will give you some time to identify missing information and decide if and how you want to negotiate in a more objective setting.

One way you can ask for some time respectfully is to just say that this is an important decision for you that you don't want to take lightly, and would like to consult close friends and family members before committing to what you hope will be a long relationship.

Don't stretch this too long though, in the current job market, there's a good chance a company already has a plan B candidate they can extend an offer to. **Aim to give a definitive answer in a few days max**, otherwise, you risk having the offer rescinded.

Final thoughts

As you're probably familiar with from the other side of the table, hiring decisions usually **involve multiple people**, some of whom you don't even have a chance to talk to, and **can take a long time**. Especially in the current job climate, where there's an abundance of job-seekers for the few open positions, companies simply have no incentives to move faster than what's comfortable for them – but they risk a lot if they hire someone who ends up a bad fit for the role that might be the only EM opening they have for a long time. So

don't be surprised if the whole process takes half a dozen rounds with frustratingly long delays in between. It's not uncommon now that a month will pass between the application and the offer, and if you're applying for a Senior EM or above role, the entire process can take even more time.

Because of the high number of applicants, low time pressure, and high risk of a bad hire, companies can now delay the rejection of someone until later rounds, which might feel unusual and unfair. Interviews used to be go/no go decisions, now the question is not if the candidate is good enough to proceed, but **who are the best ones to advance** to the next round. Don't take it personally, it's the current sentiment that drives these decisions. You would do the same as a hiring manager. Understanding these circumstances can help you set appropriate expectations, so you can maintain your interest and show the best side of yourself despite the challenging circumstances.

If everything goes well, eventually you'll pass all rounds and the recruiter or the hiring manager will let you know they are ready to make an offer. There are important considerations you should take into account at this point, and we'll explain them in the next article about closing the offer.

Thanks to Benjamin Heinbuechner for giving valuable feedback on an earlier version of this article.

Part V: Closing the Offer

Hopefully, you've arrived at the final step of the process and received an offer (or more!). The gut feeling at this point is to be happy about it, quit your current job, and prepare for the work ahead. Not so fast, there are a few aspects left to discuss before you accept the offer.

Validation

If you followed our advice in Part IV., you hopefully have a few days to make a final decision on the offer. Take out the list of preferences you started this whole process with (see Part I.). Relying on this document will bring some objectivity to your decision. You just finished a long interview process where you were immersed in the company and its problems – this recent experience is probably clouding your judgment.

Score the job offer on the various categories you've set up for yourself. You can try to stay super-objective and come up with a scoring formula for the offer, multiplying your preference numbers with the offer's scores. Still, I think there's much more value in your internal discussions and realizations during this evaluation. Every job is a compromise, what's your gut feeling, is this compromise you're about to make worth it? What would need to change to make it an easier decision?

You should identify a list of items you'd like to improve in the offer, ordered by personal importance. This explicit list of preferences will help you stay on track if you go into negotiations. Start with reaching out to the recruiter, asking for a call with them or the hiring manager, and explain that while you're excited about the offer, you have a few questions left to ask before you can make your final decision. Understand though that in the current climate, there's a chance that a longer delay could result in a rescinded offer, as they might already have other candidates advancing in the pipeline.

Negotiation

Books and articles about this stage often give the advice that you shouldn't accept an offer without negotiation. Because of this, companies frequently calculated with some back and forth with their offers and

tried to have some internal wiggle room to handle this case, making a negotiating strategy even more worthy to pursue.

There are a few things that make this approach more risky now than a few years ago:

- More candidates for fewer positions, giving companies more options;

- Increased transparency in compensation information, pushing for companies to adopt stricter salary bands that force them to pay the same for everyone at the same level;

- Tight budget control to get closer to, or stay profitable;

- Decreased pressure to fill a position because organizational growth is not as much of a priority.

So **it's up to you**: if you have multiple applications going strong, a comfortable job, or a lowball offer in front of you, then sure, try negotiating, because you don't have much to lose. But if you're out there without any income, and this is your first offer after a long search, then it's probably not the right time to try a bluff in hopes of higher compensation.

Either way, if you decide to negotiate, don't start the process by showing disappointment with the offer. You need to be enthusiastic about the role while pushing your proposed changes. Be respectful and professional; aim for a win-win situation. Create a setup where you explain why it's simply a fact, almost outside of your control to accept the current offer as it is. This way you're not negotiating about changing your preferences and requirements but working together to find ways to create a mutually acceptable compromise. Treat the recruiter or the hiring manager as a partner in this work, come up with different options, and brainstorm ideas. Always underline how excited you are to be joining their team. If only this small annoyance would go away that's preventing you from accepting their offer. By treating your preferences as objective criteria, you move the negotiation discussion from "satisfying a candidate's wishes" to "**working together to solve a problem**".

Remember that the base salary is not the only aspect you can bring up in a negotiation. Equities and bonuses can be part of a compensation package and therefore could be discussed, or you might have a chance to fit in a sign-up bonus if you justify any one-time cost of changing companies. You could also try adding a performance evaluation round after a few months, and a guaranteed raise if you pass requirements.

Beyond financial aspects, healthcare or pension details can be an important part of a package, or you could push your start day and take a longer break if it's important for you. Look at your list of preferences, and try to come up with ideas that can close the gap for the company you're about to join.

If you're about to join a distributed team, you can try negotiating a lot of the remote work aspects too. The company could cover some of your home office setup expenses, or pay for a coworking space for you to work from. Make sure you clarify who bears the cost of company-required trips, and how often they expect you to travel. Similarly, if the job requires you to relocate, have the details of that mutually agreed: timeline, help in the expenses, or access to services for apartment search, education, etc.

Whatever you end up achieving during negotiations, make sure you have it in writing too, even if just in an email – companies change, staff change, maybe by the time you use something that was discussed during the interviews, the person making that promise will not be at the company anymore.

Again, the current job market is benefiting companies, so **be prepared to risk an offer being rescinded** if you don't move fast enough or stretch the limits too much.

Multiple offers

If you're successful enough to have multiple applications going on with a good chance of resulting in an offer, try to arrange schedules and timings in a way that they end more or less at the same time. Accept the earliest interview dates available in the process where you're behind, and ask for more time where you're ahead. Partner with the recruiters, and explain that while you're excited about their companies, you have another attractive process in progress, and in order to be able to make the best decision, you ask their help to be flexible with meeting schedules. They'll appreciate your honesty and if there's some trust built in between you, as we explained in the Interviewing article, then you have a good chance to work something out.

If you manage to land multiple offers, you'll need to solve an arguably good problem to have: choose. Use your previously recorded preferences, and identify if there are further questions you need to ask to be able to decide. While nobody likes to stretch this process longer than needed, especially in this tight job market, if you have a few critical questions to ask or changes to make, it's better to ask for an extra call than jump into an uncertain or hard-to-accept situation.

You can use the fact that you have two offers as a strong bargaining point too: going to a company saying you want 10K more because… *reasons*, or because you already have a higher offer on paper that you'll be ready to accept, makes a huge difference. Still, everything we said above is true: be prepared for zero flexibility from companies in this climate, or even losing both offers if you're stretching the process too long.

Closure

Hopefully, you've reached a point where it's final: you have a formal job offer that you've accepted, and you'll start at a new job soon. Thank the recruiter for their help during the process, and consider sending a note to your new manager too explaining that you're looking forward to the work together. Finish your application tracking stats, as explained in Part III., to give closure to your whole search process (and create some cool infographics). Reach out to any companies where you're in various stages of interviewing, notifying them that you're withdrawing your application.

If you're currently employed, this is the time to **announce your decision to your current manager**. (And not before – a lot of things can go south in a process, a sudden hiring freeze for example can happen without the knowledge of the recruiter or hiring manager, and you might end up without any job, or having to make an extremely awkward conversation.) Explain your main reasons to your boss why you accepted the other opportunity. Stay grateful and future-focused: thank them for the opportunity you had here and ask how you can make your departure as smooth as possible. You might have had your conflicts, but now you're moving on, and it's in nobody's interest to burn bridges. Break the news to your team as soon as possible, so they hear it from you first, and if possible, during one-on-ones, so they can react in a safe space.

Your manager might ask if matching your new salary could change your mind. I rarely found **counteroffers** working well and leading to a long and happy relationship. Engineering Managers rarely leave for financial reasons only, so there's not much chance that a salary bump would change their minds. It also tells a lot about a company where someone needs to present a job offer just to get the raise they believe was long deserved – and this culture will not change just because the person ends up staying on board. As a manager, I hardly ever give counteroffers; and as an employee, I would be skeptical about a company's culture that would offer me one.

During your **offboarding**, focus on making the process as smooth as possible for those who stay. Ask both your team and your manager what they need from you before your last day. Build LinkedIn connections,

and give recommendations to people you've worked with. A strong social network can be a great asset to rely on in future job searches. You're not allowed to take company materials with you, but while you have access to internal systems, take a look at your achievements, formal feedback you've received, announcements you've made about your team's accomplishments, etc., and save a summary of those for your files – it can be useful for future reference next time you're out on the job market again.

It's important to **rule out any second thoughts** you might have after you make your choice. Accept that you made the best decision based on available information. If you end up being disappointed about the new job, give it at least half a year to try to make it work, and if despite all your efforts, it's still a huge disappointment, start interviewing again.

This series on Getting Hired as an Engineering Manager ended up way longer and more extensive than I imagined more than a month ago when I started writing it. I'm grateful for the help and feedback from everyone during the writing, especially Péter Batiz, whose deep knowledge of the recruiting field helped fill the gaps in my experience and challenge or confirm my advice.

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