Recruiting Software Engineers —
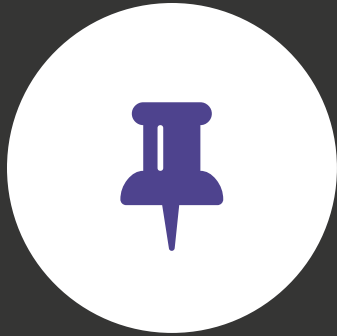# 8 Mistakes to Avoid

A Thought Leader Article

By Chris Szymansky

Introduction

Have you heard about the global talent crunch?

If you're reading this article, you're likely knee-deep in it, struggling to find top-performing software engineers and other technical talent.

Either you can't make a hire, or you can't seem to make the right hire.

You end up with people who aren't a good fit for your company, or won't or can't grow with you.

Yet you need to build a solid technical team. It's essential for evolving your product or service and expanding your delivery.

Why the problems?

Whether you're in a limited-pool geography or a competition-saturated geography, your company is competing with every other company for the same resources.
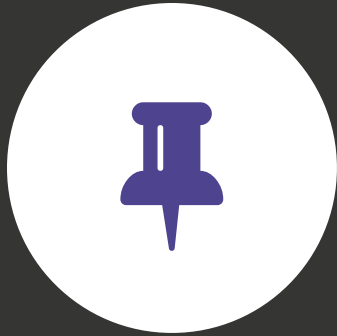
Although there's a solid talent pool out there, much of the talent is happy with work. They're not looking for your offers.

Top software engineers have many options when they're ready to move on; most can get a new job in a second.

We at The Resumator happen to have a unique perspective on the hiring landscape, not to mention a big-picture window into how thousands of companies juggle hundreds of thousands of applications and resumes to hire hundreds and thousands of people.

We know from our customers' experiences, and from our own, which common practices will inevitably harm your chances of finding the great technical talent you need to succeed.

Read this paper, and you won't make those same mistakes as well.

Mistake #1

Focusing on academic backgrounds instead of motivation and self-direction

There's no doubt that today's universities produce graduates with world-class educations and solid degrees in computer science and related majors. Armed with such degrees, students burst onto the work scene with a sound, fundamental skillset and basic training in topics like algorithms, data storage and access, and other lower-level computing concepts.

Even so, many of those basics don't apply in day-to-day work, nor do they prepare students to work on modern web applications as part of a software engineering team.

Yet many companies still focus heavily on degrees, programs, and credentials, using them as filters in the application sifting process.

That's good if the degree, program, or credential really matters.

That's bad if all it accomplishes is to let in the people who can check the right box, and to keep out those who might have become your next top performers.

The most successful entry-level engineering candidates at The Resumator tend to do a lot of extra work on their own time:

- ✔ Internships
- ✔ Open-source projects
- ✔ General training courses
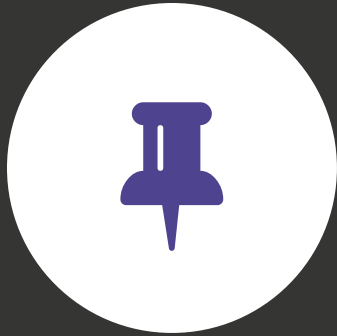- ✔ New technologies
- ✔ New languages

Many are also self-taught, having immersed themselves in application development for weeks and months through intensive boot camps.

Our most exceptional candidates—the engineers who really shine and get up to speed fast—have been involved in web or mobile application development, exposing themselves to the topics even if not through school.

Tip:

For better hiring results, look for engineers who've tackled projects on their own. The Resumator rarely, if ever, hires based on degrees, and has never hired someone whose only selling point was a degree—you need some experience to get through our door. Approximately one-fifth of our hires didn't even pursue computer science; they came to us instead with degrees in surprising subjects, such as astrophysics, sociology, and art.

Mistake #2

Looking for gurus
instead of agile learners

Just as we're not interested in degrees, we're also not interested in whether candidates are the foremost gurus in their fields, as gurus tend not to be the best fits.

Think of it this way: Because the technology landscape is always changing, and because your company may need to switch to the next new technology, you want agile people, people eager to learn and capable of identifying and learning the next technology.

You don't want people who, because of their guru status, say they'll only use this technology or that tool.
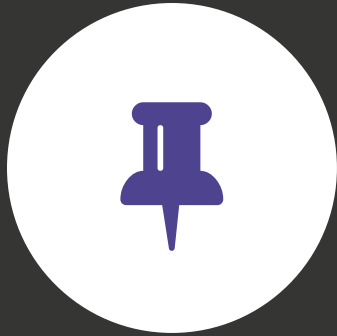
If you're part of a start-up, then you may want to consider first building a core group of agile generalists who are always learning and working towards professional growth. Then, as you grow, tweak how you hire by filling out your team with specialists in certain areas as needed, such as in systems, data, or QA.

Here at the Resumator…. a meaningful percentage of our new hires lack experience with either. Instead, we focus heavily on training programs and developmental approaches to nurture specific language skills and continue to expand their skills sets into others

Tip:

Avoid auto-rejecting applications based on education and expertise. When you don't look at resumes and fail to speak with candidates, you rule in people who checked the right boxes, and rule out others who might have been your next top performers—simply because they earned a bachelor's in a topic other than computer science or because they lack experience with the tools your team uses *today*.

Mistake #3

Ignoring cultural fit.

Cultural fit can be tricky.

On one hand, just because engineers fit within your corporate or departmental culture doesn't mean they'll perform.

Cultural fits can be technical misfits.

Or social misfits.

Or worse.

On the other hand, when you say fit, what, exactly, do you mean?

Fit to what? Fit where? How do you define and measure fit?

You certainly can't judge fit by a "feeling," or just because someone seems like a nice person at lunch. And if you screen out someone by their resume or cover letter, or by the way they answered a certain question, you might miss out on a really great person because you didn't even give them a chance.

At the Resumator, we weigh four values when determining fit:

✔ **Is the person a collaborator?**

Will she fit in with our team of collaborators? If you can turn to your left and teach someone something, and turn to your right and learn something new from someone else, then you're on a collaborative team. We look for people who, like us, want to work with peers, not in a tightly defined hierarchy, not in an environment where everyone works quietly in the shadows with their head down.

✔ **Does she love learning?**

At The Resumator, you'll often hear us saying, "Get senior by learning and owning." Career paths at The Resumator reflect this value. We encourage people to advance by learning new technologies and processes, and by starting to own their work.

At the Resumator, we weigh four values when determining fit:

✔ **Is he pragmatic?**
We want people who care, as we do, about finding targeted solutions that make sense in context.

✔ **Does she take pride in her work, in the team?**
We want people who are proud when they write new code, or feel a sense of team ownership when a new feature launches successfully. We're good and we're proud. And we, individually and as a team, want to keep getting better.
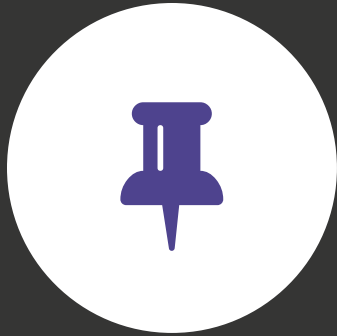
Define what values combine to create cultural fit in your company, which will make the task of judging fit less fuzzy and much easier.

Tip:

Besides weighing fit based on values, consider bringing in certain candidates to eat lunch with the team to gauge how they react in a social environment. Ask all members of the team to report on their thoughts about fit as well, so you're not relying on one individual's judgment.

Mistake #4

Not holding out for the right talent.

Too many companies hire just because they need to hire.

- ✔ We need five engineers!
- ✔ Give us three coders!
- ✔ Bring in a QA professional!

In The Resumator's early days, we were guilty of fudging on our criteria just to hire as well.

Today, we're here to tell you that it's always—always—better to pass on people who don't fit your profile, and to keep looking until you find the right person:

- ✔ Someone with the right blend of skills
- ✔ Someone motivated and self-directed
- ✔ Someone who embraces your team's values
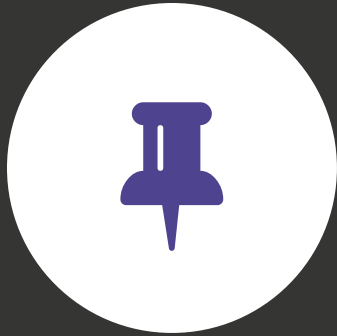
It's okay to be selective.

Sometimes, out of 20 candidates for a given position, we may identify one, two, or three who are qualified enough to make us crank the next steps of the process in motion.

Other times, though, we choose not to hire from a given cohort at all. Instead, lacking the right match, we reboot hiring for the position and try again.

Warning!

When you find a match, don't delay; make a strong offer right away. You can lose a good engineer just by taking too long with your process.

Mistake #5

Not positioning your job to be of interest to top talent.

You may have heard it said that branding shapes perception.

It's true for marketing, and it's true for HR as well. Yet too many companies still post boring, academic job descriptions and live with outdated, unprofessional websites that that fail to capture the attention—much less the imagination—of top engineering talent.

Personal story:
The Resumator used branding to influence me when I became engineer #3 in 2012. Because I was already familiar with The Resumator's brand, and knew that the company was solving interesting technical problems and offered fast growth potential, I sought them out. Both their branding efforts and professional website shaped my perceptions of who they were, making the company appear earlier stage and larger than I might have thought otherwise. Overall though, reality met my expectations, so I stayed and am still happy to be growing with the company today.

How do you capture the hearts of software engineers? Don't over-position, but do communicate about your company and its jobs in the context of what you know they want:

✔ To solve interesting technical challenges

✔ To make an impact

✔ Growth opportunities

✔ Career paths instead of jobs

✔ Opportunities to learn new technologies
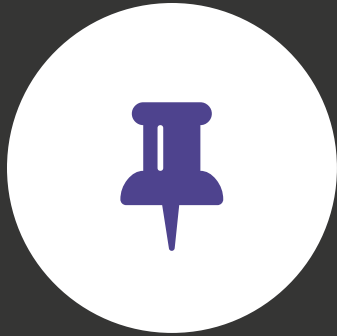
✔ To see their work being used by customers

If your company, like The Resumator, can arrange to use small portions of new hires' work into production in the first week, talk it up in your materials and interviews. Performer types will love it.

Warning!

Keep in mind that companies like Google and Microsoft, armed with vast resources, are out there, not only stealing away your potential new hires, but also potentially poaching your current team. In 2013, Google recruiters began sending a constant stream of emails to technical employees at start-ups in the Pittsburgh area—The Resumator's home turf. We all know that Google is tempting; it's a great resume booster for any technical employee. Your job, then, as is ours, is to ensure that both new prospects and your current team alike realize that what your company offers is just as, if not more, desirable.

Mistake #6

Not mapping your expectations to theirs.

Your job descriptions, website, interview, and all other elements of the hiring experience work together to set expectations in the minds of prospective engineers. Fill your teams with the right software engineering hires, and they will attract more of the same. For these highly sought individuals, your employer brand only gets them to your front door; every experience they have with you after that determines whether they will come inside and stay awhile.

Suppose, for instance, you work with a startup, and need to hire engineers. Without realizing it, your snazzy website and effective branding might inadvertently be positioning you as a larger, more established company than you actually are.

That becomes a problem if you attract people who want structure and leadership opportunities—the kinds of things startups typically can't offer.

Although it may sound as if you're damned if you do, damned if you don't, that's not really the case.

The key is to be honest about who and what you are while also recognizing and communicating that you understand what top performers want. For instance, in the case of a startup, communicate that although you may not have a full suite of technical processes running now, you're looking for people who can help you develop them as you grow.

If candidates want more structure than you offer right now, tell them that you want them to help you add the structure they want—and you'll need—as you grow.
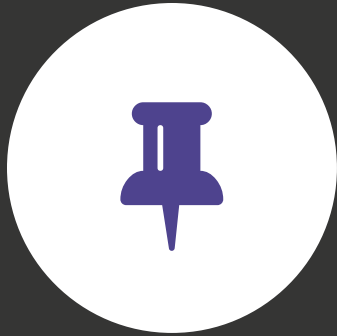
If you're an established company with processes in place, let potential talent know that you're not set in your ways and are always on the search for new and better approaches and processes.

This open communication shows candidates who might value facets offered by companies in different stages of growth that you're aware of their needs, and that you won't fight when and if they want to improve the company later down the road.

Tip:

Startup or developed? Neither is wrong, just different. It's normal for a startup to lack the processes of developed firms because startups simply have to do what it takes to get the work done. If your startup has processes too early on, it might imply that you haven't been spending enough time on your product—also not a good signal to talent.

Mistake #7

Not searching or branding widely enough.

Although companies in large technology markets like New York and the Bay Area can make this mistake as well, the problem of lack of reach is more likely to affect companies in smaller markets.

If you're in a smaller market, you might think that you'll never be able to hire people away from the golden technology sectors.

But the boomerangers are out there, people who grew up in the Midwest or Northeast, moved south or west, and are now looking for interesting technology companies in Pennsylvania, Ohio, the Virginia and DC area, Maryland, Michigan, and New England.

These people used to live in your area. To them, where you live and work is home.

Lured elsewhere for work or college, boomerangers now want to return to their roots.

So broaden your search.

Get your brand out there.
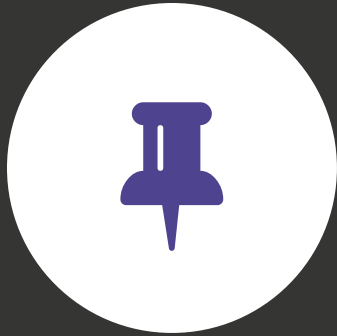
Tug on the heartstrings.

Remind these transplants about the lower cost of living in their hometown. Also remind them how much closer they'll be to family (which may or may not be a positive!).

To sweeten the pot, consider reimbursing for travel interviews, and paying modest relocation signing bonuses if warranted.

Tip:

Using job boards to find engineering talent? We've had our greatest success using Indeed.com, which is why we focus on that platform in The Resumator. We've also had hiring success with Stack Overflow Careers 2.0.

Mistake #8

Fumbling during
the hiring process.

When The Resumator started, we had little in the way of process:

- ✔ A 30-minute phone call
- ✔ A 30-45 minute in-person interview
- ✔ For certain candidates, an hour-long lunch

One engineer handled all aspects of hiring, supported some by our own product.

As a result, we had a hard time attracting top performers in the early years, and missed several talented engineering candidates because we lacked organization and process.

If you're a startup, your process might look like that as well. We know now that we could have—and you still can—do better.

As your engineering team grows to encompass a variety of disciples and roles, you'll put sensible processes in place, including processes for hiring.

Whether you're at 5 people looking to grow to 15, or 15 looking to grow to 50, or 50 looking to grow to 100-plus, we recommend that you implement hiring processes now—not later.
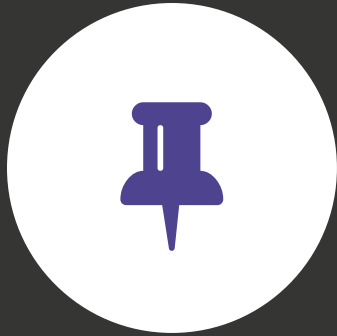
the Resumator

And with a product like The Resumator, it's oh-so-easy to do.

Since 2012, we've built and evolved our product by solving our own hiring challenges as we moved from 3 to 6 to 12 to 18 engineers, as well as by imparting into our software the wisdom and processes of companies that had surpassed us in growth.

Today, our hiring process includes:

- ✔ A mix of passive recruiting, job board syndication, and outbound recruiting—we both look for people and help them to find us.

- ✔ Candid job descriptions that sell the job and our culture with oomph and personality.

- ✔ A consensus- / team-based hiring approach— a certain number of people review resumes each month to see if they're worth bringing into the telephone interview process.

In Summary...

If you avoid the mistakes listed in this article, you'll be well on your way to hiring success.

That said, you also have to keep in mind that there is no one-size-fits-all guidebook for all companies.

Even though over the last two years we've built a process we're happy with, a team we're proud of, and a product that customers love, what worked for our company might not work for yours.

If you take away nothing else, I'd like you to remember that:

- ✔ Like everything else, you should iterate on processes—hiring and otherwise. Don't force it.

- ✔ It may take lots of tweaks and changes, and perhaps even a complete overhaul, to begin to see the results you want. Persevere. Change is a part of growth.

- ✔ Bad hires don't tend to happen for technical reasons. It's easy to screen for technical ability. What people tend to miss are the intangibles—the work ethic, the cultural fit, and how much structure an individual needs.

✔ Technically underperforming yet highly motivated engineers can become performers with the right training. You can teach technical skills, but you can't teach motivation.

✔ Although it's hard to let a technical guru walk away without an offer, it's sometimes the right choice if the person doesn't fit with your team's values and dynamic.

✔ We've made very few bad hires—a testament both to the hiring process and to our company and team, both of which have proven to be a place where great people want to work.

Also remember that we at the Resumator have been lucky enough to benefit from the hiring expertise of more than 3,000 customers. We've built that expertise into our product, which is available to you whenever you're ready.

www.resumator.com

About the Author

Chris Szymansky

Chris Szymansky joined The Resumator in 2012 as Engineer #3. Today, he leads a global and growing team of engineers, data and talent scientists, and quality professionals.. Before joining The Resumator, Chris launched his own startup and consulted with technology companies. He earned his chops at a technology agency, where he acquired a solid foundation in the creative process and project delivery, skills that taught him to how to build solid value out of sometimes-loose requirements and usually crazy deadlines.