CRACKING the TECH CAREER

INSIDER ADVICE ON LANDING A JOB AT Google, Microsoft, Apple, or ANY TOP TECH COMPANY

GAYLE LAAKMANN MCDOWELL

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Contents

Chapter 1  Life at the World’s Greatest Tech Companies  1
           Life at Infinite Loop and Microsoft Way  2
           The Differences  4
           Big versus Little: Is a Start-Up Right for You?  5
           The Job Title: What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?  8
           It’s Not for Everyone  11

Chapter 2  Advanced Positioning and Preparation  12
           A Positioning Framework  12
           University  16
           Graduate School  21
           Career Graduate Degrees  22
           The MBA  23
           Part-Time Graduate Programs  27
           Work Experience  28
           Extracurriculars  30
           Questions and Answers  33

Chapter 3  Getting in the Door  37
           The Black Hole: Online Job Submission  37
           Getting a Personal Referral  39
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4</th>
<th>Resumes</th>
<th>55</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How Resumes Are Read</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nine Hallmarks of a Powerful Resume</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Structure</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How Do I Shorten My Resume?</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resume Action Words</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questions and Answers</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 5</th>
<th>Deconstructing the Resume</th>
<th>77</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resume #1</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resume #2</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resume #3</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resume #4</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 6</th>
<th>Cover Letters</th>
<th>83</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why a Cover Letter?</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Three Types of Cover Letter</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Structure</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Five Traits of a Strong Cover Letter</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Daring A+ Cover Letter</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Traditional A+ Cover Letter</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The So-So Cover Letter</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questions and Answers</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Additional Resources</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

### Chapter 7
- References 94
  - How References Are Used 94
  - Whom You Should Select as a Reference 95
  - Make a Good Reference Great 96
  - When Things Go Wrong 97
  - What If Your Bad Reference Is Your Former Boss? 98
- Questions and Answers 99

### Chapter 8
- Interview Prep and Overview 102
  - Interview Questions 102
  - The Tech Interview Culture 103
  - Do Your Homework 104
  - Working with Your Recruiter 107
  - Communication and Behavior 109
  - Special Interview Types 113
  - After the Interview 116
  - Following Up with Your Recruiter 118
  - Dealing with Rejection 119
  - Questions and Answers 119
  - Additional Resources 122

### Chapter 9
- Define Yourself 123
  - The Pitch 123
  - Why Should We Hire You? 126
  - Why Shouldn’t We Hire You? 126
  - Why Do You Want to Work Here? 128
  - Why Are You Leaving Your Job? 128
  - Where Do You See Yourself in Five Years? 129
  - What Are Your Strengths? 130
  - What Are Your Weaknesses? 131
  - Layoffs, Firing, and Unemployment 131
  - Questions and Answers 134
Contents

Chapter 10  Behavioral Questions  136
               Evaluation  136
               Mastering the Content  137
               Mastering the Communication  140
               Common Mistakes  143
               Five Example Questions  144
               Questions and Answers  150

Chapter 11  Problem Solving  153
              Types of Problem-Solving Questions  153
              Estimation Questions  154
              Design Questions  160
              Brainteasers  162
              Questions and Answers  170
              Additional Resources  172

Chapter 12  The Programming Interview  173
              What's the Point?  173
              What's Expected—And What's Not  174
              How They Differ: Microsoft, Facebook, Google,
                              Amazon, Yahoo, and Apple  175
              How to Prepare  176
              Must-Know Data Structures, Algorithms, and Topics  177
              Coding Questions  178
              Algorithm Questions: Four Ways to Create an Algorithm  184
              Object-Oriented Design  188
              Scalability Questions  188
              Testing Interviews  190
              Questions and Answers  193
              Additional Resources  196

Chapter 13  Getting into Gaming  197
              The Culture: Is It All Fun and Games?  197
              Job Positions: What Can You Do?  198
Contents

College Candidates 201
Reaching Out and Getting In 202
Personality Fit 204
The Gaming Interview—Three Tips to Doing Well 206
Questions and Answers 207

Chapter 14 Women in Tech 211
On Men and Allies 211
The Harsh(ish) Reality of Being a Woman in Tech 212
Advice for Women from Women (and Allies) 214
It’s Friction, Not Obstacles 218
Questions and Answers 219

Chapter 15 The Offer 221
How to Evaluate an Offer 221
How Can You Negotiate an Offer? 228
Tricky Issues: Deadlines, Extensions, and Declining Offers 233
Questions and Answers 237

Chapter 16 Crafting Your Career 242
Define Your Career Path 242
Being Great 243
Manage the Review Process 244
Play a Bit of Politics: Build Strong Relationships 247
Identify a Mentor 248
Promotions and Raises 249
How and When to Quit 252
Questions and Answers 255

Chapter 17 On Luck, Leverage, and You 259

Index 261
Life at the World’s Greatest Tech Companies

Everything you’ve heard is true. Almost.

Tech companies are known for brightly colored walls, ball pits in the office, free food (organic and gluten-free, of course), and shuttles transporting you to and from work. They’re engaged in a constant game of one-upmanship, the latest and greatest company taking what its predecessor does and morphing it into something even better.

With an obvious focus on technology, their engineering divisions are presumed to be filled with nerds who eat, sleep, and breathe code. Some started coding early in life and some not until much later—but nearly all are passionate about technology. It’s not just a job to them; it’s something they love.

Outside of engineering—and in fact most employees at tech companies are not coders—intelligence is still prized. The focus on academics is hotly debated; some companies value elite institutions, while others recognize that many of the most brilliant people never finished college. After all, the founders of many of these companies dropped out of college.

Landing a spot at these companies can be challenging for some people, but it’s absolutely doable.

Job seekers who attended strong universities are fairly technical (even if they don’t want to be programmers), have strong and demonstrable skills
in their chosen profession, communicate well, have solid work experience, have a strong network, and can pull this all into a nice resume—they’ll probably find it not terribly difficult to land a job at a prestigious firm. They might still get rejected by their top choice, but there will be other options.

That’s the ideal candidate, but most successful candidates aren’t ideal. You’re likely missing several of those attributes. Don’t count yourself out—there’s still a path in to these hot companies.

**Life at Infinite Loop and Microsoft Way**

Even their addresses are suggestive of company stereotypes. Microsoft, at One Microsoft Way, screams big and mammoth. Google’s 1600 Amphitheatre Parkway address is understated, like its user interfaces. Apple, of course, takes the bold “think different” step with One Infinite Loop—a play on words that could come back to bite a less beloved company.

**Youthful**

Despite the little eccentricities of each company, these companies are much more alike than they are different. Software companies are youthful—at heart, if not in actuality. They scorn the stuffy suit-and-tie atmosphere of their predecessors and elect to wear just jeans and a T-shirt. In fact, this casual attitude is so potent that it’s pervaded even the social scenes of tech hubs; only a handful of restaurants in Seattle and San Francisco would request anything beyond jeans.

**Perks**

Desperate to attract and retain the best and the brightest, tech firms shower their employees with perks. Microsoft offers free drinks, a heavily discounted membership to a deluxe gym, and a multitude of extracurricular sports teams. Google matched and then one-upped Microsoft on almost all of these. Free sodas? Try free breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Free gym membership? Use the on-site gym and pool. Facebook cloned many of Google’s perks and added a few of their own, such as an on-site bank.
Cynics argue that there’s another side to this. They argue that the perks are just there to ensure that you’ll stay at the office longer, and to infantilize employees to the point where they no longer feel self-sufficient and able to quit.

That might be a nasty spin on things, but there’s some truth to it. When you get your dining and daily errands done on campus, you spend less time off campus and more time working.

*Work/Life Balance*

Despite rumors to the contrary, the biggest tech companies generally offer a pretty reasonable work/life balance. It’s not a 9-to-5 job—in fact, the office is relatively quiet at 9 a.m.—but few people work more than 45 to 50 hours per week on a regular basis. Many people work around 40 and are considered strong employees.

Hours are flexible, too. Come in early or come in late—it doesn’t matter, so long as you get your work done and are there for meetings.

To a large extent, the flexibility and the work/life balance is a reaction to the difficulties these companies have in finding talented engineers. There’s a shortage of great engineers in the United States. If a tech company overworked them, the company would have even more trouble hiring engineers.

The exception, as in most jobs, is during crunch times. Software releases will be stressful on any team.

*Moving Up: Individual Contributors*

Although other industries push high-performing employees into management roles, technology companies tend to be more open to the individual contributor role. Many companies have promotion tracks that offer a great salary and more individual responsibility without becoming a manager. After all, great engineers do not necessarily make the best managers.

An employee, particularly in engineering, can continue to get promotions and increased technical responsibilities, without becoming a people manager. Eventually, this employee can grow into an architect or a distinguished engineer, earning one of the most respected positions within the company. It’s perhaps not as glamorous as being a VP, but for some people, this is just right.