The Passive Tech Candidate Recruiting Playbook

How to Attract, Engage and Recruit Passive Tech Candidates

stack overflow TALENT

There are two universal truths about developer hiring for companies of all sizes: there are not enough developers on the open market to fill every single job listing, and most developers are already employed. These things alone would be enough for some hiring teams to throw their hands in the air in defeat, resigning themselves to the idea that hiring a great developer would be like winning the lottery.

And we get it, because we all hear stories about recruiters in other industries who get great results on job boards and think, “If so few developers are turning to job boards, I should probably just give up.”

However, we don’t think that’s the case. Not by a longshot.

While you might have to make some changes to the way you approach and interact with passive developer candidates, this playbook will show you how to:

- Become an active participant in the technical community, even though you’re not a programmer
- Make open-ended questions a priority in engaging passive technical candidates (and understand why that’s such a big deal)
- Build a plan-of-attack for interviewing a passive tech candidate (and understand why they should be different than your interviews with active candidates)

We can’t (and would never) guarantee overnight results. We can, however, equip you with the right tools to build better relationships with developers who aren’t looking for a new position right now, but may be open to the right opportunity.

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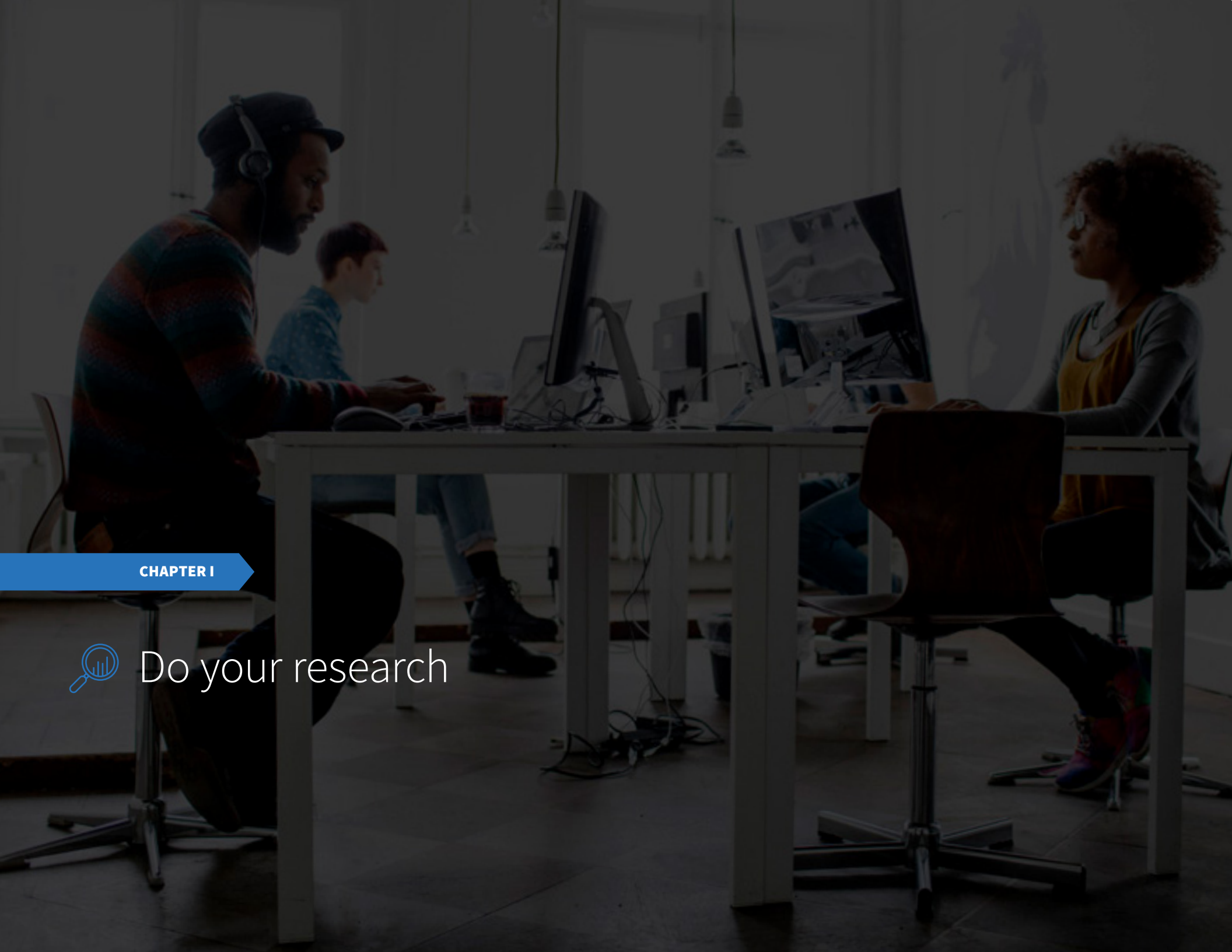


CHAPTER I

Do your research

Understanding the “passive” developer candidate

This might sound silly at first, but the definitions of active and passive tech candidates are not quite as straightforward as they might be for other roles you’ve hired for in the past. Active candidates are developers who reached out to you, and passive candidates were people you found, right? Well, not really.

Before you do anything, the first step in recruiting passive tech candidates is understanding both active and passive developers. Here are a couple of things you should know about the mindsets of both types of candidates.

Active candidates aren’t active for very long

Here’s a sobering fact: 91% percent of the developers we surveyed in 2016 told us they held, at least, part-time employment. On top of that, the developers who are proactively searching for their next gig aren’t on the open market for very long. Our CEO Joel Spolsky once wrote that the best developers will apply for maybe four jobs over the course of their entire career.

Pretty grim, right? Again, not really.

Most developers are passively looking

It would be easy to think that when a developer responds to you and says they’re not interested, it’s time to leave that person alone forever. 69% of the developers we surveyed last year told us that they would consider moving jobs if the right opportunity presented itself. So, if you know your company is an awesome place to work, don’t be shy about approaching developers who are currently employed, as they may be interested in your company at a future date.

A pre-screen checklist

OK, great. You've learned a little bit about the mindset of a passive developer candidate and are one step ahead of the game. You're almost ready to start reaching out to passive developer candidates about why they should come work for your company. But before you do anything else, review this checklist to make sure you have everything you need.

STEP 1

Do even more research (trust us, it's worth your time)

- Review their Stack Overflow and GitHub profiles for intel on the technologies they find most interesting.
- Identify a side project or two that you can start a conversation about (more on this later).
- When available, read their personal blogs for additional information. Developers love blogging.

STEP 2

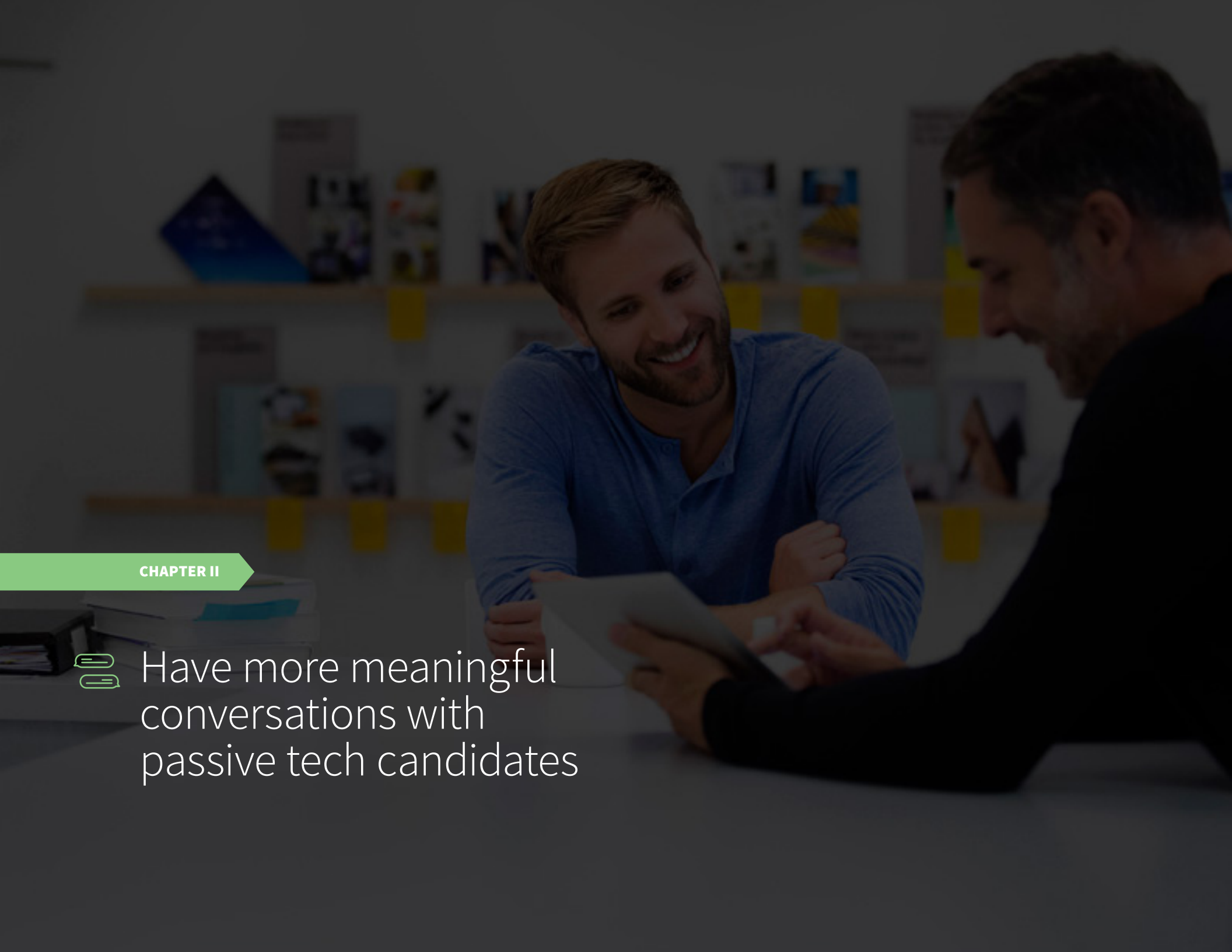
Organize your initial "Pitch"

- Practice an abbreviated company history to open the conversation.
- Be prepared to disclose salary as soon as the very first phone call (59% of developers we surveyed said they wanted to know about compensation when they first hear about a job opportunity).
- Leave time at the end of every call for passive candidates to ask questions, even if that means you're asking them fewer.

STEP 3

Get ready to take some notes

- Although these are informal conversations, make sure you're keeping tabs on everyone you speak with. You'd hate to mix up details about different candidates down the line.
- If you prefer handwritten notes, dedicate a fresh notebook to keep track of the conversations you have with passive candidates.
- If you prefer typing, make sure you have a blank document open on your computer before dialing for a phone call. And for everyone's sake, make sure to ask the candidate if he or she is OK with you typing out notes as you speak.



CHAPTER II

Have more meaningful conversations with passive tech candidates

How to recruit passive tech candidates without the hard sell

It would be easy to assume that merely reaching out to a passive tech candidate would create enough flattery in that person's heart to drop whatever it is they're doing to respond immediately. That's simply not the case.

If you haven't already learned this the hard way, developers hate spam. And because there aren't enough of developers to go around, they get a lot of spammy emails. Couple that with the fact that passive candidates yield a lot of power in conversations, Tom Harvey, a recruiter here at Stack Overflow, says that your tone has to be respectful of that.

So, before you send lots of messages to developers about why they need to drop everything they're doing and reply to you ASAP, here are a few things to keep in mind if you want to be less annoying to a passive candidate.

Ask lots of open-ended questions

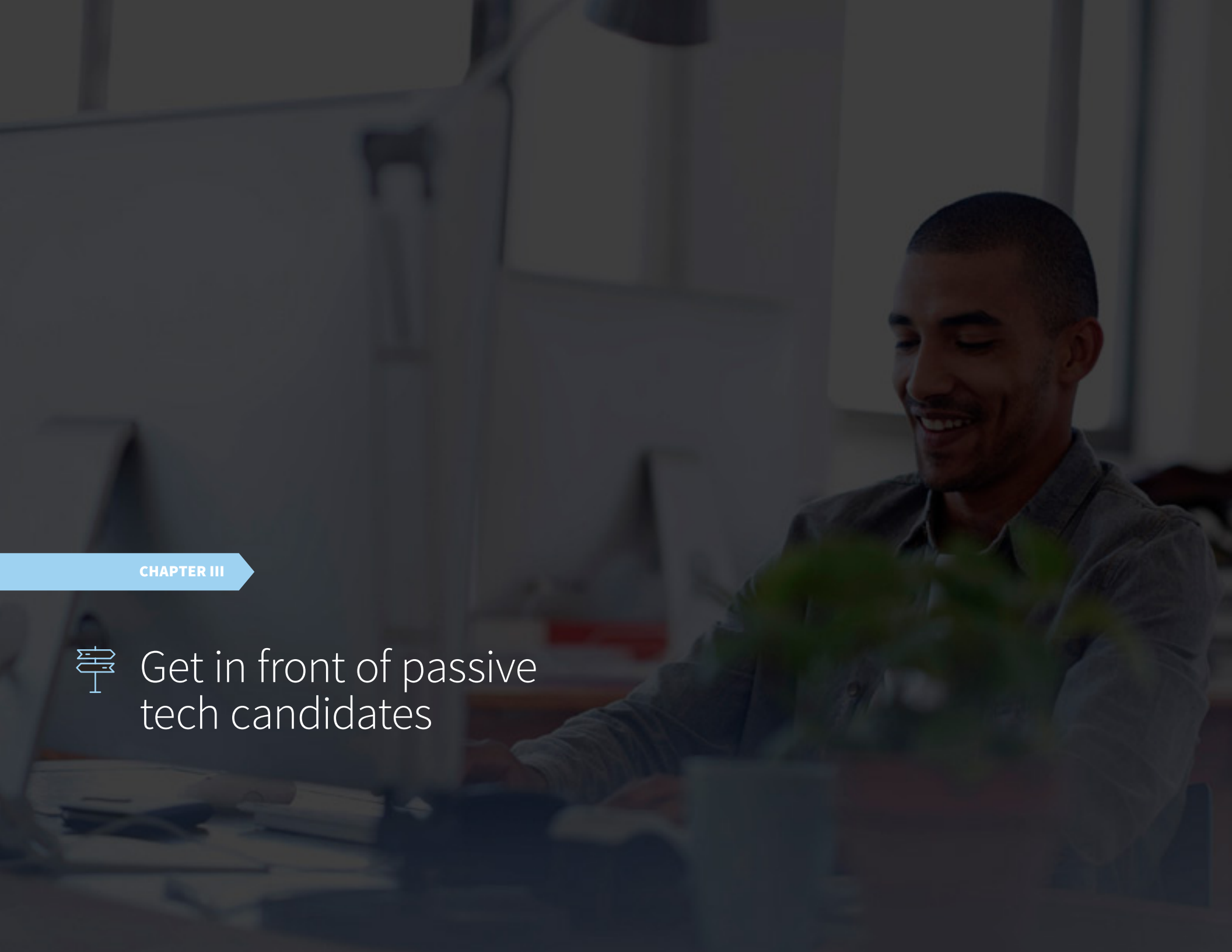
Passive candidates should be given the opportunity to share as much as they're willing to. Harvey tells us that he leans on openers like "so tell me about," "how," "why," and "describe" to keep the conversation flowing. He adds, "Passive candidates who are not actively looking for a job might not spend a lot of time talking to you. This keeps them engaged for a longer period and gives you a better opportunity to speak about their current situation."

Get Your "Pitch" Out of The Way ASAP

Don't stay laser-focused on sealing the deal, especially on the first phone call. Give passive candidates a brief history of your company, and let them ask as many questions as they want throughout the rest of your conversation.

Don't be afraid to ask a developer about his or her current position

This doesn't mean you should try and get developers talking about how much they hate their job. Instead, ask probing questions that give them the ability to share how they feel about their current benefits, the projects they're working on, and the relationships with their teams. When you ask the right questions, developers may discover that they're even more open to discussing a new opportunity than they thought.



CHAPTER III

Get in front of passive tech candidates

How to identify the right networking events to attend

You could easily run a Google search for the best tech meetups in the area and come up with a lot of great options. The problem is that often there are so many to choose from that it can be difficult to determine which events are worth attending. To make this process easier for you, let's walk through the different types of events that you might consider attending. There are three types tech events you should be aware of and understand.

Startup job fairs

These specialized job fairs have started popping up more frequently over the past few years. In New York, events such as the Startup Job Fair and Uncubed have become popular with hiring managers and candidates alike. While the cost of attending might be high at times, the added benefit for recruiters is knowing that everyone at the event also spend their hard-earned money to be there, making it much easier to approach potential candidates about your open roles.

Tech meetups

These events cover a gamut of topics, which make them particularly appealing to tech recruiters. Developers tend to be drawn to tech meetups to hone their presentation skills, share projects they're working on, get feedback from other like-minded professionals, and in the right context even discuss the possibility of moving jobs with recruiters.

Hackathons

These are designed for developers to collaborate with each other and build something new in a short period of time. While these events are continuing to grow in popularity, especially for junior software developers, tech recruiters should proceed with caution. Unlike a traditional job fair, Hackathon attendees will be laser-focused on completing the tasks at hand, so it can be easy to make a developer bristle at the thought of discussing your open roles, especially if you're not careful in your approach.

5 Questions to ask yourself before registering for any event

OK, so you have a general understanding of the different types of events you could attend to meet passive tech candidates. You might even have some impressions on which events you'd avoid and which you'd like to sign up for right this instant. Before you do that, use the checklist below to make sure that a particular tech event is a good use of your time.

How many opportunities will I get to speak with developers on a one-on-one basis?

- If you're looking to build your pipeline of developers, meetups are a particularly good way of creating relationships with developers without having to sell them on an urgent role.
- If you need to meet as many developers as possible, consider focusing on startup job fairs or Hackathons in your area (proceed with caution at Hackathons).

How much time do I have to dedicate to attending events?

- If for some reason you have no urgent openings and have extra bandwidth to attend more events, Hackathons are a great opportunity to promote your brand in front of a large audience of developers.
- However, if you need to hire developers quickly, choose your battles wisely. A career-focused event like a popular tech job fair would be a better use of your time.

How urgently do I need to fill my open developer roles?

- If you have more immediate needs, lean more towards tech job fairs and meetups.
- If you're looking to build awareness around your employer brand, consider hackathons in your area.

What kind of experience have you had at this event previously?

- While this might seem like an obvious question, it's still important to take a moment to reflect on any previous experiences you've had at certain events. popular with developers, consider whether it's worth sending you or a member of your team to represent your company.

How popular is this event (or any event)?

- Of course, numbers aren't everything, but if the tech event isn't very popular with developers, consider whether it's worth sending you or a member of your team to represent your company.

Learn more about developers on their favorite online tech forums

We've talked a lot about the types of events you could attend to meet passive developer candidates. It's good to know that developers also spend a lot of time sharing information with each other online. Not convinced that developers are this generous with their knowledge?

Well, before you jump to that conclusion, consider the fact that Stack Overflow provides over 50 million monthly visitors with the answers they need to everyday programming issues. Whether they're getting questions answered on Stack Overflow or are sharing projects on forums that are geared towards specific languages, developers know that it's important to share what they know. This means there are a number of incredibly active online communities that you can get involved in, even if you don't code.

And we get it. The thought of trying to strike up a conversation with a developer on a tech specific forum, especially when you're having to overcome some pretty negative impressions of recruiters, can be pretty intimidating. While we can't guarantee that every developer you meet will be excited to chat with you, here are a few keys to staying respectful of their time and energy, while also laying the foundations for a more meaningful relationship that could lead to a hire down the road.

3 KEYS TO RESEARCHING DEVELOPERS ONLINE

Don't interrupt conversations on forums about programming

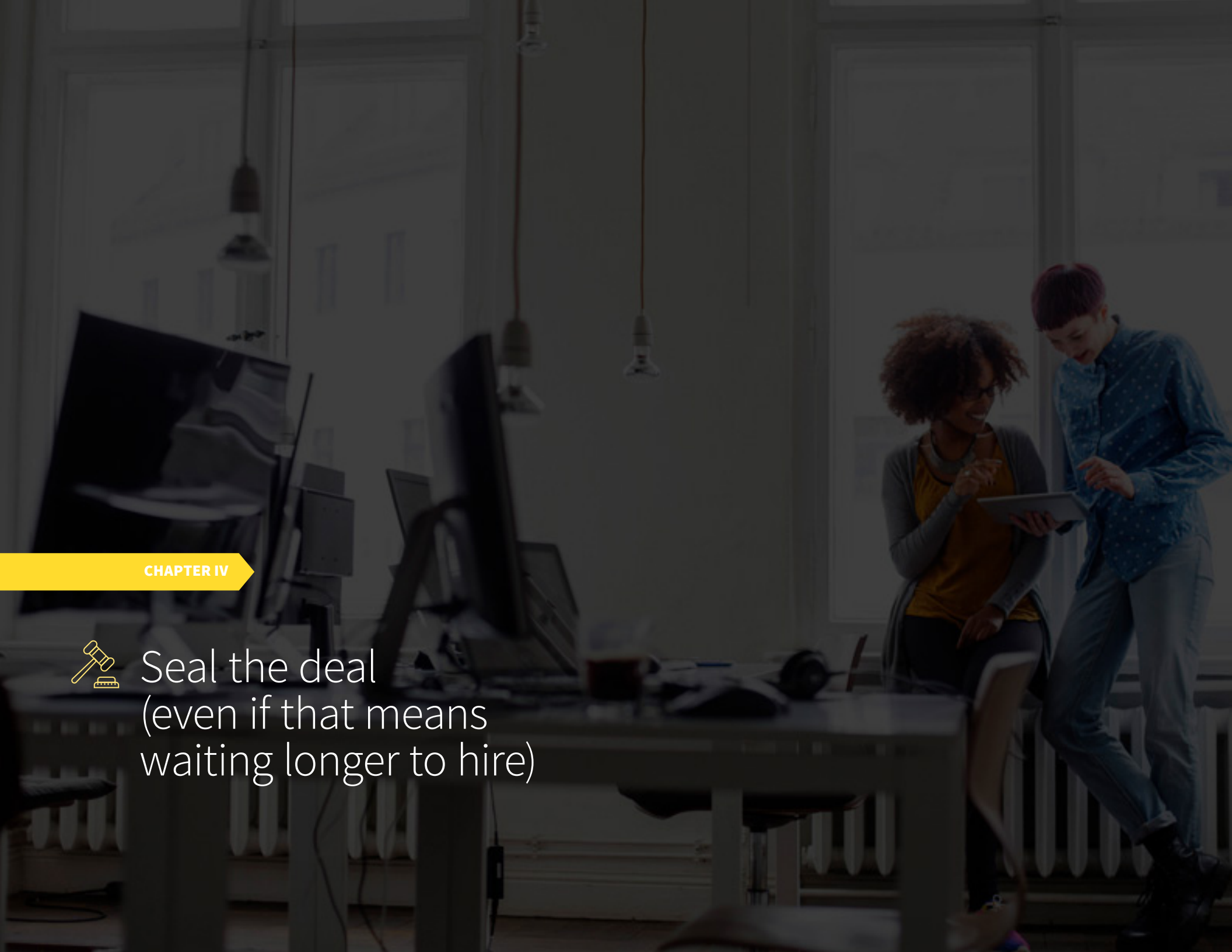
This should be fairly obvious, but developers turn to these forums to get and share information about their craft. They're not necessarily eager to be heavily recruited by someone who needs to fill a job opening. If you are going to chime in, ask people about themselves and what they're doing privately, rather than derailing their posts, and they'll be more inclined to share that information.

Admit what you don't know

The easiest way to stay engaged in a conversation that you don't know much about is to admit that you don't know, but would like to learn more. You'll find that if you're willing to learn a little more about what developers are interested in, they'll be more receptive to fill in the gaps for you.

Take down contact information whenever it's offered to you

Engaging developers where they spend their time is a great way to start a conversation. However, once you've established a baseline level of trust, take the conversation offline. The act of asking a developer to send over contact information makes them remember you, and if you've built enough of a relationship, they'll make it a point to stay in touch to continue the conversation.

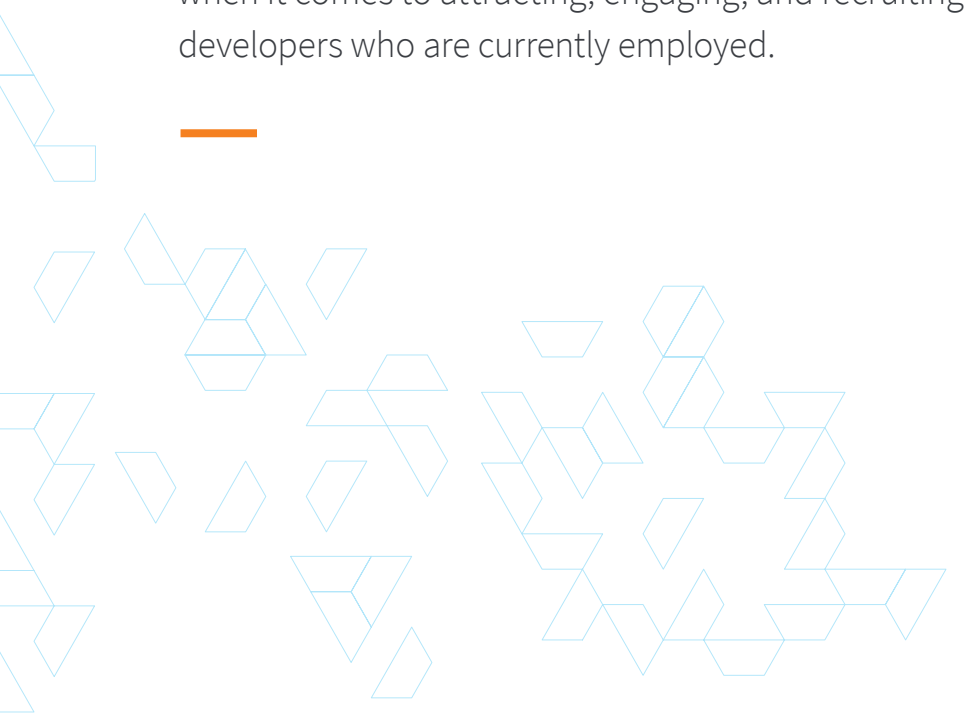


CHAPTER IV

Seal the deal (even if that means waiting longer to hire)

Build and nurture relationships, don't just close roles

Now that you've gotten this far, it's safe to say you've done quite a bit of work and have maybe even made some drastic changes to the way you recruit passive developer candidates. Because you've put in this amount of effort, it would be easy to say, "I've done everything right. Time for the applications to come rolling in!" We wish that were the truth, but the reality is that your work has only just begun, especially when it comes to attracting, engaging, and recruiting developers who are currently employed.



We've talked about the value of building relationships with developers, but have only scratched the surface. Even if you have a number of technical openings that just need to be filled by someone amazing ASAP, the fact of the matter is that **recruiting passive developer candidates is a long-term play**.

Often times, the scope of work required to build meaningful relationships with developers can be misinterpreted. It's easy to say, "We need to introduce ourselves to as many developers as possible." The problem is that it's just as easy to send so many emails that even the most thought out messages come across as spam.

Here at Stack Overflow, we take great care to ensure that the 50 million monthly developers that visit our site to learn more about their craft and find great jobs are not subject to receiving impersonal messages from recruiters who are simply out to fill open roles. As big of a benefit as this is to our community, this also serves as a great way to train you—the recruiter—on building real relationships with passive candidates.

In other words, this playbook will equip you to start establishing trust with developers, but does not guarantee that you'll make a technical hire as soon as you're finished reading. In fact, the only promise we'll make here is that if you want to be successful at recruiting passive tech candidates, you'll need to invest even more time and energy to build the types of relationships with developers that might turn into technical hires down the road.

To make sure you're building meaningful relationships with developers, we've posed three questions here that you should always ask yourself whenever you're trying to recruit passive tech candidates.

QUESTION 1

What is Your Employer Brand?

Knowing how to engage with passive tech candidates via email or their favorite programming forums is a good start, but those things only go so far if your employer brand is lacking.

If you're new to building out an employer brand, think of it as how you communicate your organization's brand, mission, and values to passive candidates who have no idea who you are or what you do. Take a look at some of the companies who have prioritized their employer branding materials. These companies set themselves apart for the following reasons:

- They show off their company culture.
- They make their hiring process transparent.
- They give developers the opportunity to see what it's like to be a part of the team.

There's also one thing these companies have in common: **they spent a lot of time thinking about and developing their employer brand**. To help you get the conversation started (don't worry, we'll include a great guide to help you complete it, too), here are a few things to consider before you start promoting your employer brand.

What is your company's mission?

When we asked developers what's most important to them in a job last year, 34% of respondents told us they want to build something that matters. Whether you're building out a Company Page on Stack Overflow, reaching out to passive candidates in a forum, or are attending a networking event, make sure your mission is clear and consistent. If it's not, developers will catch on quickly and begin assuming they're being told what you think they want to hear.

How do you differentiate yourself?

Sure, you might look at some of the companies who have nailed their employer branding and think, "Let's just do it like they do!" While this is a great way to show your competitors that you think highly of their employer brand, this is also a good way to show passive tech candidates that you're just a copycat of those companies. Identify some of the things that set you apart, whether that's your perks, workspaces, and tech setups, or the quality of the team that candidates can expect to work with.

What do your current employees think your employer brand is?

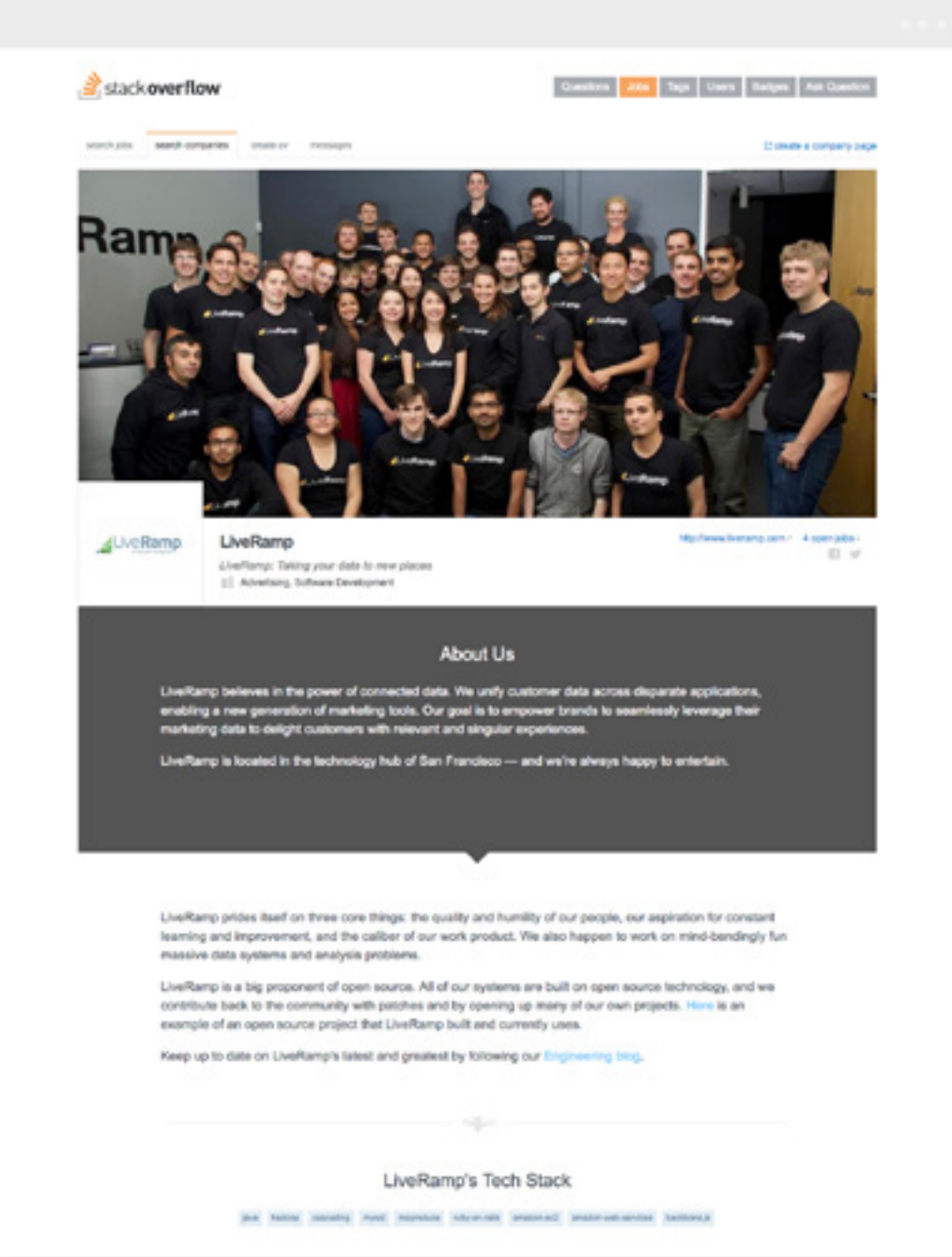
You'd like to think that because your current developers chose to work for you that your company is treating them really well. When you're developing your employer brand, make sure you know how your employees feel about working for you. While you might have strong personal feelings about how you treat developers, the best way of confirming the impressions you have is to go directly to the source.

Get a head start on building your employer brand

Once you've answered these questions, you'll probably be pumped up about the idea of making sweeping changes to your website to show candidates how awesome your company is. The only problem is that you might not have access to make these types of changes without going through a really complicated approval process.

While that might be frustrating, you can take matters into your own hands (and quickly) by building out a Company Page on Stack Overflow. This is a free, quick, easy win that will help you show passive tech candidates what it's like to work for your company. Take a look at how LiveRamp uses their Company Page to add a personal touch to their recruitment efforts.

You might be looking at this and thinking, "This looks great, but I don't have the time to put together something that looks that fancy." Well, lucky for you that it only takes a few minutes to build out a Company Page on Stack Overflow. Developers are really interested in learning about company culture, benefits, and tech stack. Your Company Page makes it easy to show them what you can offer while you're waiting for approval on the changes you want to make to your company's website.



QUESTION 2

How Engaged Are You on Social Media?

The term “passive” should only apply to the developers you’re trying to engage with and recruit. As far as you’re concerned, you should always be actively finding ways to communicate with prospective employees, especially since many of your targets are probably employed right now.

Unless you plan on knocking on developers’ actual front doors until they agree to work for you (we strongly advise against this), social media can be the perfect way to promote that employer brand you’ve worked so hard to create. It can also be a great way to stay in touch with technology trends, which you can use down the road to have more meaningful conversations with developers.

Here’s a required reading list that’s chock full of tips to help you start building your social media presence:

- 5 Ways to Boost Your Employer Brand with Social Media
- Social Sourcing: The Easiest Way to Recruit Better Candidates
- How Employer Brand Ambassadors Can Help Recruit Tech Talent
- 3 Reasons Why Your Tech Department Should Be Blogging

If you’re like a lot of people, the idea of being more active on social media sounds like a lot of fun, but if you have someone in marketing whose job it is to manage the company’s social media presence, don’t just storm over to that person and say, “Hey, our employer brand on social is non-existent right now, but don’t worry, I am here to save the day.” Instead, reach out to that person and get his or her feedback on how your recruiting team and marketing can work together to make the most of the company’s social media efforts.

Once you’ve hashed out those details, here are a few additional things to keep in mind as you begin to ramp up your social media efforts to engage with passive candidates.

3 KEYS TO WINNING AT SOCIAL RECRUITING

Don't ignore developers just because they don't fit your open roles

Here's the thing—you'll engage a lot of developers who aren't necessarily a fit for the roles you're working on right now. But don't ignore developers just because you don't have a position for them right this moment. Be open about your current and future hiring plans. Every person you interact with is a potential advocate for your company down the road, not to mention a potential candidate for a future position.

Resist the urge to focus only on closing

While developers are often happy to share information with you and stay in touch with recruiters when they're respectful of their time, they'll lose interest in you fairly quickly if you use your social media channels just to sell passive candidates on your company. Stay engaged in the conversations developers are having online, and save the sales pitch for much later.

Stay consistent with your employer brand

It's undeniably tempting to match developers wit for wit when you figure out how they like to communicate. If you start changing your voice on social media, developers will quickly figure out you're simply catering to their preferences because you want something from them. Determine your voice and stay consistent with it.

QUESTION 3

Do you know what passive candidates want (and are you giving it to them)?

OK, so at this point you might be thinking, "I've done all this reading. Will passive candidates start beating down my door now?" The short answer? Not yet! We'll give you a second or two to groan before we move on.

You deserve a pat on the back for doing all the work you've done so far. But there's one thing we haven't talked about yet, and it's probably the most important: all of that work is for naught if you don't take the time to figure out what passive tech candidates want. Sure, if a handful of them respond to you by saying, "I'd like a million dollars and a housing allowance," feel free to move on to other candidates who are a little less unreasonable.

If you're willing to be a bit flexible, you'll find that accommodating some of the more common requests of passive candidates is fairly easy. Here are three things you should be prepared to offer if you want to stand out to developers who are currently employed.

Be Open to Connecting Them to Your Tech Team

We understand this might be tricky, considering that it requires the buy-in and availability of some of the developers currently working for you. And while it can be a little uncomfortable to ask, don't be shy. You'll be surprised by how receptive some developers are to chatting with a passive candidate that you're pursuing. Not only is this a great way to give a developer a better idea of what it would be like to join the team, but it's also an opportunity for your team to give you feedback on whether or not the candidate would be a fit for the organization.

Invite Them to Take an Office Tour

The nice thing about inviting a passive candidate over for an office tour is that it can be as informal as you'd like. Even if you don't offer perks like an in-house water slide or petcare for all your employees, developers are just as interested in learning more about the equipment and technologies your teams use to build new products. If a passive candidate asks to learn more about these things, don't be shy about sharing those details by offering to show them around the office.

Be Prepared to Hear "No." A Lot.

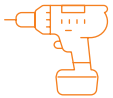
At the end of the day, you need to be prepared to hear a developer who's currently employed tell you, "thanks, but no thanks." While most developers are open to discussing the possibility of changing positions, that doesn't guarantee they'll be immediately sold on working for you. We've talked at length about how attracting, engaging, and recruiting passive tech candidates is a long-term play in this guide, and hearing "no" is one of the most common effects of that reality. Even so, if you stay patient and remain willing to build respectful relationships with developers who aren't open to changing roles right now, you'll see those efforts pay dividends down the road.

A Four-Step Approach to Recruiting Passive Tech Candidates with Stack Overflow

Based on what we've learned from the programmers who use our site everyday, as well as some fancy machine learning technologies that we've taken advantage of, we determined that there are four key components to a strong developer hiring strategy. Let's take a look at a more structured way to recruit passive tech candidates using Stack Overflow.

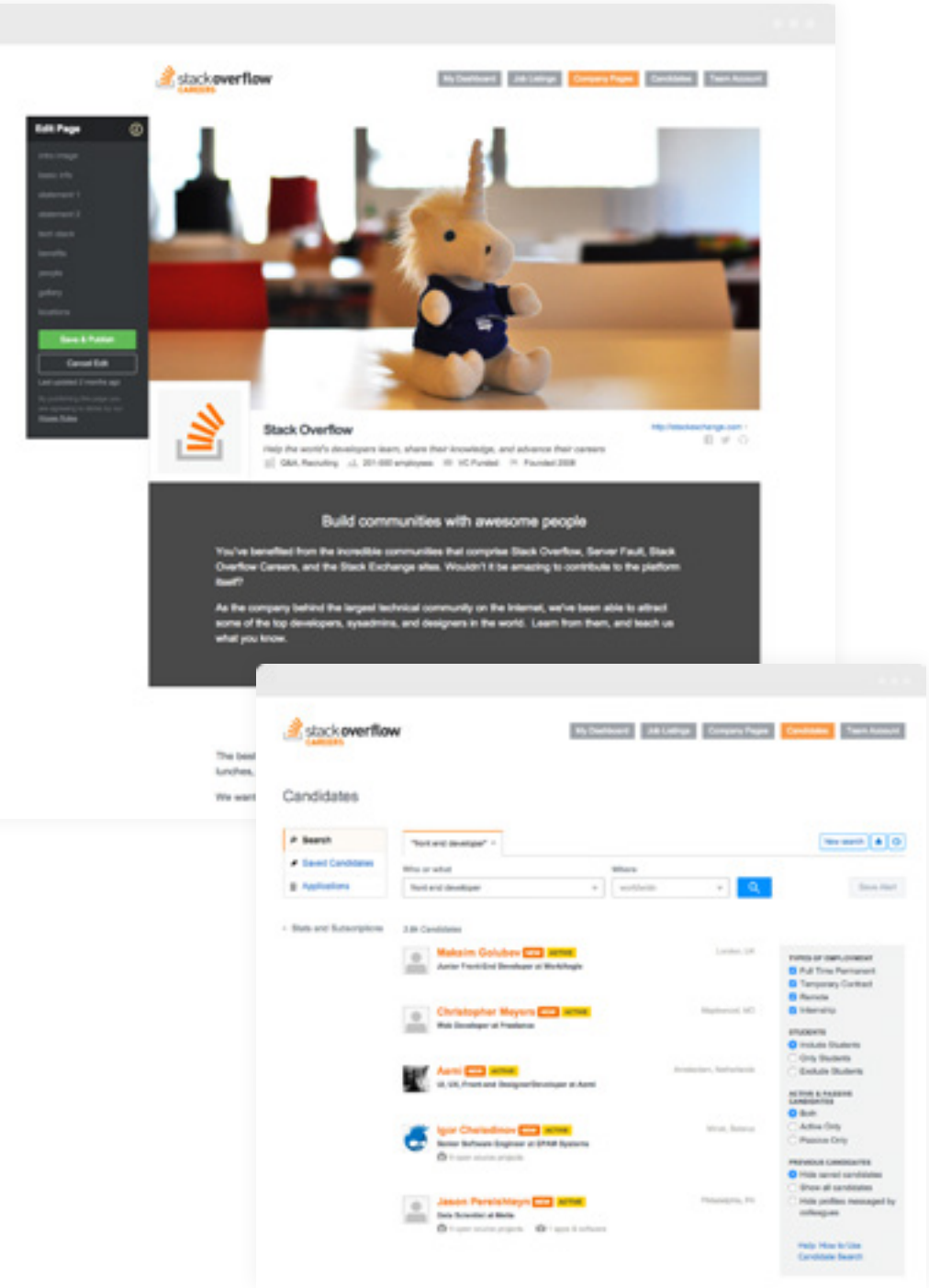
Step 1 - Understand

Recruiting passive tech candidates starts with doing a great deal of research. We've discussed how important it is to learn which technologies candidates are interested in before reaching out. Candidate profiles on Stack Overflow give you insights into a user's technical proficiencies, their writing style, and their open source contributions. While you shouldn't squeeze every single bullet point you find into an introductory email or phone call, it's up to you to determine how to use these insights to shape the conversations you have with passive tech candidates.



Step 2 - Build

This guide is full of tips to help you be successful at recruiting passive tech candidates over the long haul, but you can also have an immediate impact on your employer brand with a Stack Overflow Company Page. These quick-to-create and free company pages take all the guesswork out of determining what developers are interested in. At this stage of the process, take the time to show developers the technologies they'll work with, the teams they'll join, and the unique perks you offer. Above everything else, make sure to do all of this in your company's unique voice.



Step 3 - Source

By now, you've done a lot of preparation to have better conversations with developers. This is the point where you need to take the leap and start searching for passive tech candidates. You could spend countless hours scouring every single candidate database, but Stack Overflow expedites your hiring process by showing you a smaller batch of developers who more closely meet your search criteria. As an added bonus, all of the users in our candidate database have opted in to receiving messages from recruiters like you. While you should still craft personalized messages to anyone you reach out to, you can breathe a lot easier knowing that you won't catch anyone on Stack Overflow off-guard by reaching out.

Step 4: Manage

Most recruiting teams are used to adjusting how they communicate with developers on an ad-hoc basis, but it's important to always keep this on your mind when engaging passive tech candidates. In fact, the most successful recruiters make these adjustments an integral step throughout their entire developer hiring process. We know how hard it is to make this a habit, so our developer hiring experts are available to help you analyze and make the right changes to ensure you're engaging passive tech candidates effectively.

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Stack Overflow is the largest, most trusted online developer community for developers to learn, share their knowledge, and build their careers. More than 50 million professional and aspiring programmers visit Stack Overflow each month to help solve coding problems, develop new skills, and find job opportunities.

Founded in 2008, Stack Overflow partners with businesses to help them understand, hire, engage, and enable the world's developers. To learn more about Stack Overflow's business solutions - technical recruiting, advertising, market research, and enterprise knowledge sharing visit stackoverflowbusiness.com.

Want to learn more about how Stack Overflow can help you recruit great passive tech candidates?

Talk to one of our experts →