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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.

The Differences

Cultural differences between companies can often be traced back to the company's roots.

- **Amazon**, many would argue, is more of a retail company than a software company. It faced extremely hard times during the dot-com crash and continues to battle profit margins that are levels of magnitude lower than those of a core software company. Amazon is consequently extremely frugal, and refrains from providing the lavish perks that other software companies might. Additionally, some employees have suggested that the company does not value technical innovation for its own sake, and instead looks for an immediate and causal link to profits. But, do not let that deter you too much; indeed, Amazon is leading in multiple industries (retail, cloud computing, etc.) largely because of its technical innovation. The company moves at a rapid pace and pending deadlines often mean late nights.
- **Apple** is just as secretive inside as it is outside. When your innovation lies so heavily in your look and feel, and your market share depends on beautifully orchestrated hype, it's no wonder. The company can't afford to let its secrets slip. Employees are die-hard fans, just as one would expect, but rarely know what coworkers from other teams are working on.
- **Microsoft** has dabbled with search and the web, but a large chunk of its earnings come from Windows and Office. Live patches to these products are expensive, so the company tends to operate on longer, multiyear release schedules. This means moving slower, taking fewer risks, and making sure to get everything right the first time. The bright side is that the company tends to have a good work/life balance, as ship dates are relatively infrequent. Many former employees say that though they loved the company, its mammoth size could stifle innovation and risk taking. However, individual team cultures are all over the map, and some may be more innovative than others.
- **Google** is the nerdiest of the nerdy. Founded by two former Stanford PhDs, the company still prizes engineers above nonengineers. The company moves quickly, shipping products weekly, and can value technical innovation even to a fault. As a web-based company, it can afford to take some risks on products; after all, shipping a new application to the web is so much easier than boxing up and mailing software. Google values its flat hierarchy, but there's a downside as well. Your manager may have too many people under her to fuss about the progress of your career, and moving up can be a challenge.

- **Facebook** has learned from Google's example and modeled much of its culture after it—with a few differences. Whereas Google tends to be more science-y and academic, Facebook prioritizes getting things done. Its original mantra—"move fast and break things"—speaks volumes about the attitude of the company. It doesn't want to let an opportunity go by because it moved too slowly or was scared of taking risks. It looks for this sort of attitude in its employees. As the company has grown, it has seen the value in getting more things right the first time, but it still retains hacker culture.

While these generalizations are fairly consistent, some companies have a great deal of variance across teams. For example, Microsoft and Amazon tend to be fairly team based and therefore less consistent in their cultures. Always investigate both your company's culture and your team's culture.

Big versus Little: Is a Start-Up Right for You?

Go to almost any business school and you'll find that there are about three times as many people who claim to be interested in start-ups than people who actually end up pursuing this career path. Why? Because start-ups are sexy.

Newspapers splash stories about start-ups that made it big, or crashed and burned, and we always think we can do that or we can do better. Start-ups are a high-stakes game, and you're gambling with your time as well as your money.

For the right person with the right opportunity, however, a start-up environment can be fantastic.

The Good

Many say that for true start-up people, this high-risk career is just in their nature. They get that entrepreneurial itch, either in college or at some big company, and know they need to be somewhere much, much smaller. And their new career path offers a ton of value to them in return:

- **Diversity of skills.** Whereas big companies have designated marketing and finance people, start-ups never have enough people to fill every role. And the smaller the company, the more hats you have to wear. Unless you are truly narrowly focused on just one field (in which case you should avoid start-ups), this can be a great thing.

You'll get to develop a more diverse skill set, which will help you in your future job search.

- **Leadership opportunities.** When—or if—your start-up grows, you'll be in a great place to lead your own team. Many people join a company and find that within months they're expected to manage several new hires. You'd have to be at a bigger company for years to get such an opportunity.
- **Control and influence.** Would you rather have a tiny influence on the error reporting tool at Microsoft, or drive a major pivot for an obscure start-up? Both are valid answers, but some might lean toward the latter. They'd rather have big, meaty things to show for their work even if their employer is unheard of. At a start-up, you are not only shaping the company in how you perform your immediate responsibilities, but you're also offering feedback on all aspects of the business. Think the newsletter should have some content about related tools and plug-ins? It's your job to speak up, and everyone will listen. You always know the decision makers in any department.
- **Rapid results.** You won't have to wait years to see your work out in the real world; it'll happen within months. That holds true for any decisions you make as well. For better or worse, the outcome is visible within months, enabling you to learn from your mistakes (and successes) much faster.
- **High reward.** Hey, we don't take on all this risk for nothing. Start-ups can make you very, very rich if you get very lucky. Of course, it could just as well do absolutely nothing for you financially—and usually that's the case.

Some people love start-ups. The speed. The innovation. The risk. The learning as you go. The impact. For as much as start-ups are glorified though, it's also reasonable to decide that they're not for you, or to at least have mixed feelings.

The Bad

Start-up burnout is a very real thing. Sure, you may be passionate about your new social-location-group-buying-thingy-dot-com, but things change and passions die. The following stresses tend to wear on people the most.

- **Long hours.** With the amount of money and careers depending on a start-up's success, long hours are critical. Those who do the bare minimum don't last long, and start-ups don't have the fear of firing underperformers that bigger companies do.

- **Unclear job description.** You were hired in to be a tester, and now you're helping look for office space. Well, tough. Someone's got to do it. Start-ups don't have the time and money to hire a specialist for each and every task, so employees are expected to chip in on projects that are outside of their roles. That may mean you spend less time doing what you love and more time doing what the company wants you to do.
- **Lower pay.** With very few exceptions, start-ups tend to pay below-industry salary and compensate for the difference with stock options. If the company fails (which it usually does), your stock options are worth nothing. Unfortunately, it's difficult to understand the worth of stock options.
- **Limited credibility.** The earliest employees of Google and Facebook have lots of credibility, but let's face it—what are the odds? You may join a start-up, only to have it fail in six months. And all of a sudden you're back on the job market with some no-name company on your resume.
- **Less mentorship.** Big companies have invested time and money in understanding how to train new employees; start-ups lack both of those things. They probably won't invest in growing you into a great leader in three years because they'll be lucky if they make it that long. Big companies can teach you a structured way of solving problems, under the guidance of more experienced professionals, while those at start-ups are learning on the go. And if your coworkers have never spent time at a big company, they may have never been taught how "real" companies do things.
- **Instability.** Start-ups are inherently unstable; it comes with the risk. If it's easy for you to find a job, you might not be too worried about job stability—yes. What happens, though, when you go through four jobs in five years? At some point, you might just want to settle down.

Interestingly, many ex-employees of big companies find that the lack of credibility was the hardest for them to deal with. They spent years where the name of their company meant something to anyone on the street. Now, they're in the same grouping as everyone else fighting for credibility and reputation.

The Ugly

In Ryan's first four years after leaving Amazon for the start-up scene, he'd worked for four different companies. He left one company because of a personality mismatch between him and the CEO. Words were exchanged.

It wasn't pretty. The next start-up folded. The third one started to veer in the wrong direction, and he decided to get out before it was too late. Lucky number four is a company he started himself.

Whenever you join a start-up, you're rolling the dice. Things tend to get messy.

- **Broken promises.** “As soon as we raise our next round of funding,” one start-up CEO promises, “you’ll get a promotion.” It’s a familiar story. The CEO likely means well. Perhaps he’s being overly optimistic, but he’s probably not lying. But, very often, the promotion—or the assistant, or the team, or the project—is never a reality.
- **Bad management.** Many start-up CEOs and managers are first-time managers. Sometimes they’re fairly fresh out of college and barely even have work experience. They’re going to screw up—a lot.
- **Working for kids.** Are you prepared to have a 25-year-old as your manager? It’s unlikely at a bigger company, but it could happen at a rapidly growing start-up. This can be a problem not only in terms of the aforementioned management issues, but it can also be a blow to someone’s ego to have someone so much younger manage him.
- **Lost work.** Projects getting canceled before or after launch is just part of the tech industry. It’ll happen at big companies, too, but it’s especially common at start-ups. A start-up might need to make a rapid change in direction and cut everything you poured your time and effort into. In fact, it’s not unusual to meet someone with 20 years of experience and *zero* “surviving” projects. You typically won’t get laid off if it’s just a project change. The bigger concern is the effect on company morale.

It’s going to be a bumpy ride. People joining start-ups should be mentally prepared for this constant change.

The Job Title: What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?

The question every kid is asked over and over again: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” We answer definitively as kids, but as we get older, many start to think *I really don’t know*.

Few, especially outside of engineering roles, have a laser focus on their long-term career goals. That’s okay. Talk to people, research positions, and start figuring out what’s important to you. Ask yourself the following questions to start understanding what career path makes sense.

What Do You Need?

Our society contradicts itself every day. On one hand, we are told over and over again, “Money doesn’t buy happiness,” and we have the disastrous lives of celebrities to drill this into us. On the other hand, we’re also told that we really do need that new jacket. Let go of what you think should matter, and be honest with yourself. How much do the following matter to you?

- **Money.** Money may not buy happiness, but it does buy your kid’s college tuition. And a house in a nice neighborhood. Or maybe just a nice bottle of wine after a hard week. Does that matter to you? Be careful with looking too heavily at money. While you can be fairly confident that your teaching dream will never bring in the big bucks, you can’t be as certain about many other career paths. Passionate, driven people can earn a good living in unexpected ways.
- **Recognition and respect.** Many people who shun the spotlight still desperately crave the admiration of their fellow people. How much do you care about what others think of you? Would you be okay with people giving just a courtesy smile when you share your profession?
- **Work/life balance.** There is nothing wrong with wanting a nice, stable, 9-to-5 (or in the tech world, 10-to-6) job. You want to be able to enjoy a nice day out on the boat during the summer, and that’s fine. You don’t have to decide to prioritize your career above everything else.

If you find your answers leaning away from a job for some reason, ask yourself why. Is there something you need from the job that you wouldn’t get?

How Do You Enjoy Working?

Job seekers think so much about their project, responsibilities, company, and other factors. Few think about the actual *style* of work though. How do you enjoy working?

- **Teamwork versus independent work.** Everyone loves to say, “Teamwork is the best!” but deep down, you see the problems. Coworkers letting you down or just getting in the way. Needing a consensus just to make a decision. Managing everyone’s emotions and expectations. Is this really something you enjoy?

- **Creating versus maintaining.** While software development is creating a new product, testing is maintaining it. There are no tangible results of your work; it's more like pulling the plug in a sink while the water's still running. It'll just keep coming and coming. How important is it to feel that you built something? Remember that even "maintenance" jobs (like being a surgeon) can have huge impacts on the world.
- **Leading versus joining.** Leading is great, but it's the joiners who get their hands dirty. Do you want to lead, with all the joys and responsibilities that come from that? Or would you rather relax a bit more and join someone else to accomplish a task?

What Are You Good At?

Even if you don't know what field you want to go into, you probably have an instinct as to what your skill set is. Which of the following are your strengths?

- **Numbers.** Numbers come more easily to some than to others. Are you the kind of person who can understand real-world word problems and whip up a spreadsheet to demonstrate?
- **Writing and communication.** Don't worry about prose and poetry; it's rarely relevant to the professional world. It's more important to be able to communicate effectively, both in speaking and in writing.
- **Creativity.** Creativity stretches beyond artistic skills; it's also about how you solve problems. When faced with an issue of releasing a software product in China, can you brainstorm other revenue streams to dodge the nearly 100 percent piracy rate?
- **People skills.** Being good with people is more than just being likable (though that's certainly part of it). It's also about reading people, knowing how to encourage them, and knowing when you might be pushing them too hard. Those who are especially good with people may find themselves well suited for management positions.

Most people's college majors have little to do with their eventual career path, so don't feel constrained by your major. Your skill set is so much more than your raw factual knowledge. Analyze your success and failures. Think through actual projects or jobs where you've been particularly happy or unhappy. What was it that made the difference? The answers to these questions will help point you in the right direction.

It's Not for Everyone

For many people, technology is the best field they could possibly be in. They love the culture, the world impact, the hard problems, and the fast pace.

But tech isn't universally the best, and it's not for everyone.

Some people decide to take their job, pack up their San Francisco home, and move away from the tech industry entirely—literally and figuratively. They were sick of what they felt was a college mentality. They were frustrated by constantly working under 25-year-old kids. They were turned off by an assumption that the world revolves around these tech firms. Or, perhaps they just didn't want to live in Silicon Valley anymore, where the majority of big tech companies are.

Tech is a wonderful place for the right type of person. If you think this is you, then read on . . .