

Passive Candidates 101

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Understanding Candidates:
Active v. Passive

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Finding a good developer can be tough. As a general rule, there are more jobs on the market than there are developers to fill them (at a rate of approximately five jobs for every one available software developer), and most developers are already employed. According to our 2019 survey, only 15% of developers are actively looking for a job, and 25% of developers are completely disinterested in a new job.

When you are looking for talent, these numbers may seem grim, and you may have already noticed the clear supply and demand gap between available tech jobs and available tech talent. However, there are steps you can take to adjust your strategy and approach and improve your chances of finding and attracting your ideal developer candidate.

One thing you can do is to hone your understanding of **passive versus active jobseekers**. While the percentage of developers actively looking for a new job is relatively small, there is a much larger percentage of developers who are not actively job searching, but who would be open to the right new opportunity. **These are “passive candidates.”** According to our survey, approximately 59% of participating developers fall into this category.

Active jobseekers and passive candidates are in different situations and therefore have different motivations, time-related pressures, and levels of interest. A well-thought-out recruiting strategy will take these factors into account. Moreover, the right tools can make all the difference in crafting a unique approach toward searching for, engaging with, and attracting passive candidates specifically.

First thing's first: it's important to understand some of the key differences between the average active jobseeker and passive candidates. Here's a brief, general profile of the average active candidate versus the average passive candidate.

Active Candidate:

- **Is currently unemployed or will soon be unemployed.** Active candidates have a reason to be actively searching. They may have lost their job (often because of outsourcing, layoffs, or a company going out of business), or be concerned about the stability of their job, or even be dissatisfied with their job to the point where they're ready to move on. They may also have personal circumstances that initiated their job search. For instance, a long-distance move may mean that continuing on at their old job is no longer feasible, and they're looking for something closer to their new place.
- **Will proactively reach out.** Active candidates are the ones who proactively reach out to recruiters and answer posted job listings.
- **Often doesn't stay on the job market for long.** Because good developers are in demand, active candidates generally do not have a hard time finding work. In fact, top candidates are usually off the market within ten days. As our former-CEO Joe Spolsky once wrote, the best developers will apply for maybe four jobs over the course of their career.

Passive Candidate:

- **Has solid employment.** Passive candidates have jobs and are generally happy and satisfied with their position. They are likely valued, contributing employees and have in-demand skill sets and stable work histories.
- **Is open to new opportunities.** Though passive candidates might not consider themselves in the market for a job, they are at least open to the idea of taking another position if it's the right opportunity for them. The degree of openness may vary—some candidates have an easier time with the idea of leaving their current position than others—but there is at least some degree of openness that characterizes a passive candidate and differentiates them from developers who are absolutely certain they do not want to leave their current position.
- **Is engaged and/or connected in their field.** Passive candidates that you are most likely to reach are connected to the larger tech/development field in some way, either through individual professional connections or through community engagement. They are likely to attend networking mixers, hackathons, and similar development-based events.

While active candidates certainly have an important place in a good recruitment strategy, passive candidates are a huge and often untapped candidate population: according to LinkedIn's Global Recruiting Trends Survey, only 61% of employers currently have a passive candidate recruitment strategy in place. That's why it's essential to get ahead of the game and develop the tools and strategies to recruit passive candidates today.

1. Finding and Attracting Passive Candidates

While passive candidates may take more work to find and attract than active candidates, they are worth the effort. As a recruiter, they represent a huge opportunity: they make up the bulk of the developer population, and there will always be a shortage of active candidates relative to the job market, so passive candidates are an excellent resource for those seeking to fill available development positions.

Passive candidates have several unique advantages. For one, they tend to be top-tier in terms of talent and skill. In fact, research has shown that passive candidates are 120 percent more likely to make a strong positive impact at a new company when recruited. As they are not actively looking for a job, they are more likely to accurately represent themselves and their skill set, rather than trying to advertise themselves in a way that fits the parameters of an existing position.

Second, they are generally happy and in good standing at their current place of employment, which means, at the very least, they are capable of working on a team and getting along with others in a professional environment.

Finally, as you are not interviewing a specific set of people for a single position, hiring from the passive candidate pool allows you to choose a candidate you think is actually right for any given position or for positions in the future.

While there's generally no such thing as a "unicorn," and you might not find an absolute and exact match for a position, you are less likely to try to squeeze a passive candidate into a position they don't quite fit than you might with an active candidate.

So how do you go about finding and attracting passive candidates?

Establish your brand

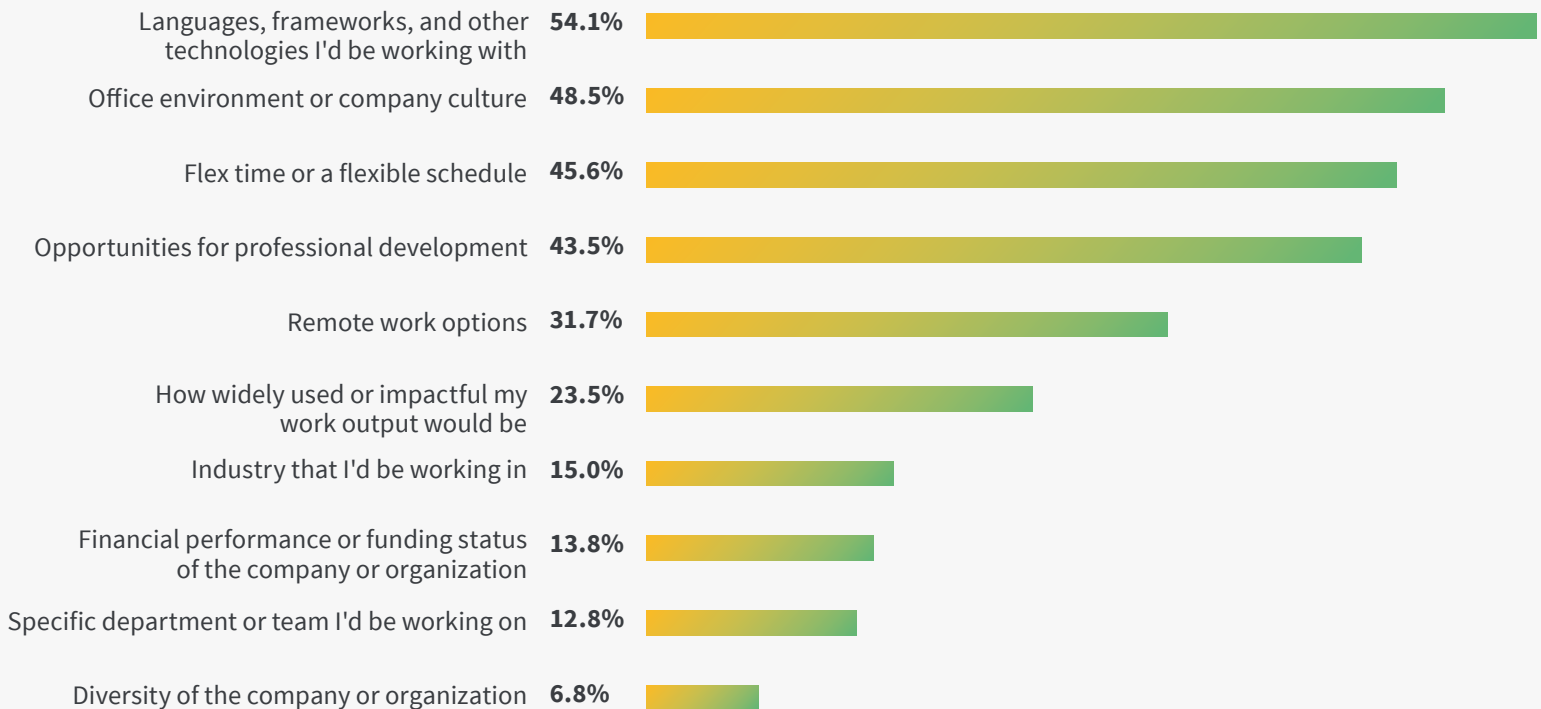
Firstly, it's important to establish a thorough, comprehensive employer brand, and then to develop an attractive, dynamic way to present that brand. This brand and brand presentation strategy will be essential in setting your company apart when seeking passive candidates, both in person and through employer branding materials.

Your brand presentation should:

- **Show off company culture.** Give developers an idea of what it's like to be part of the team, and what it's like to work at your company on a day to day basis. When developing this part of your brand, it is helpful to get insights from other employees, especially developers, about company culture and to incorporate positive testimonials as to what they like about working there.
- **Differentiate your company.** Identify the things that make your company stand out and put them front and center. Whether it's company culture/perks, an intellectually challenging/engaging workplace, accomplished, talented co-workers, or an innovative product/service, it's important to suss out why a candidate should choose you over other companies, especially over a company where they are currently happily employed. In order to do this, you must know what developers are specifically concerned about and interested in.

Most Important Job Factors for Technical Talent

In our global survey of over 90 thousand developers, we asked respondents to picture themselves comparing two jobs with the same compensation, benefits, and location, and consider which characteristics would most influence their choice between the two. These were their answers.



79,371 respondents globally;
top 3 factors selected

Note: Developers who belong to gender minorities in tech rank the office environment and company culture as their highest concern when assessing a new job and are more likely to say the diversity of an organization is a top concern for them.

- **Highlight a passionate mission statement:** Many developers, including passive candidates, are excited by the idea of being part of something that matters. Think about your company’s mission statement and the role the company sees itself playing in the world and in people’s daily lives. Make sure that this mission statement is clear, consistent, and meaningful.
- **Feature any impressive or exciting projects.** Similar to being part of something that matters, getting to work on impressive or exciting projects as part of your job can draw passive candidates. Feature particularly interesting or exciting projects, products, or services your company offers. If your company or product has been covered by the media in a way that highlights innovation, make sure to include that in your general narrative.

For some inspiration, check out some great examples of how other companies talk about their employer brand for developers in [this eBook](#).

Once you have your brand established, you’re going to want to put it out there. Make sure you have a well-designed website with clear, on-point, and engaging copy about your brand. Tell human stories about your company and your employees, including highlighting positive aspects of company culture and larger community impact. Use pictures and personal employee narratives to bring the brand to life. Many companies have a dedicated section on their career page specifically tailored to developers, as what might attract a good developer is different than what might attract, say, a good sales or marketing professional. If you’re looking to recruit developers, it’s worth it to carve out that space to appeal to them specifically.

Stack Overflow’s Company Pages were created with exactly this mission in mind. They are designed to highlight the things developers care about at work—your tech stack, your company mission, your team, and other benefits, perks, and prospects you can offer them. Stack Overflow Company Pages speak directly to developers and make the case for why they should choose you over other companies. Even better, our Company Pages reach developers in the context of their work: Stack Overflow’s 50 million monthly users, who come to the site to work on coding problems and discuss coding-related issues, are the ideal audience to introduce to your brand. At this point in the process of passive candidate recruitment, it’s definitely helpful to tell your brand story to the right people, and an easy-to-create way to get that brand story in front of millions of developers can have an immediate impact on your search.

Search for Passive Candidates

There are a number of ways to search for passive candidates, both online and offline, some of which may fit your company's needs and your own recruiting style better than others.

- **Social Media Platforms:** Among the billions of users on social media, you're bound to find the sort of passive candidates you're looking for. Social media can be used to search for passive candidates in a number of ways. However, it's important to be smart and developer-specific about your use of social media platforms.

While popular social media platforms like Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook are often used by marketers and recruiters to promote non-technical content, most developers don't visit these sites as often as you'd imagine. Rather, they tend to spend their online free time on sites like [Cofility](#), [Devskiller](#), [Github](#), [Reddit](#), [Hackerrank](#), and [StackOverflow](#). You can use these sites to look through the portfolios of individual developers and to search by specific types of project expertise and experience. You can also host coding challenges and hackathons, which can help identify promising passive candidates without seeming like an actual interview or application. These platforms have massive populations of developers, like Stack Overflow's 50 million-strong user base, which is a much higher percentage of developers than you would find concentrated elsewhere. On Stack Overflow in particular, you get an unparalleled level of specificity when it comes to who sees your content (including job banner ads). So say for example you are looking for a PHP developer in the Portland area, the platform allows you to show your offerings to talents with that skillset and location.

This doesn't mean you should stay away from the big social media sites completely: though your energy should be primarily focused on developer-specific platforms, it is helpful to use more generalized social media platforms as another way to get your brand story out there. When you do use popular platforms to join the conversation, via hashtag or advanced search for topics, people, companies, or groups, make sure you have meaningful content to offer, such as interesting blog posts and notices about relevant events.

- **Recruiting Databases:** One way to source talented developers is to access and search through recruiting databases. This is true for active jobseekers, who have probably recently submitted their information to these databases. Unfortunately, many of these platforms don't have policies around refreshing your content, so many profiles are mere ghosts. On Stack Overflow, developers are frequently promoted if they are still open to hear about employers that are looking. This way we remove uninterested profiles and avoid spamming developers. Another downside to most candidate databases is that the information submitted is often relatively bare-bones. In the case of a passive candidate, who probably submitted this information some time ago, having such a small amount of information is especially frustrating, since it might be outdated. Stack Overflow has a solution. When candidates put their information into Stack Overflow's database, they submit more than a (potentially stale) CV. Instead, Stack Overflow hosts Developer Stories, which give a much more tailored impression of themselves, their interests, the technologies they work with on a daily basis, expertise they have shown through answering question on Stack Overflow , and exactly what they want out of their ideal position. This sort of information can give you an essential leg up when it comes to approaching passive candidates.
- **Networking Events:** One of the best ways to attract and meet passive candidates is through networking events. These sorts of events, such as open houses, panels, conferences, and hackathons, have the benefit of being relatively casual, and, because they do not require a person to be actively job-seeking in order to attend, they tend to attract passive candidates. Attending or hosting a talk or a meet-up event is an excellent opportunity to meet a passive candidate face to face, and to really sell your brand narrative. It's also a great way to connect passive candidates to your tech team and open avenues of contact.

One thing to keep in mind when it comes to these events is that they should be catered specifically to developers. In general, events for developers do best when they give them a “reason” to come out. If you're looking for developers specifically focused in a certain area of tech, consider hosting a talk with a leader or interesting figure in that area, or on a trending topic that might be of interest to people with those interests/areas of expertise. At the very least, these events should have a special theme or focus that appeals directly to developers, rather than a more generalized “mixer” or “networking night.”

- **Employee Referral Programs:** Many of your current employees are likely tapped in to a wider network of developers and programmers. Creating an employee referral program, wherein employees are encouraged to refer their friends and people from their network, is a great way to source passive candidates. Employee referral is especially useful for passive candidate recruitment because the employee referring the candidate will probably have a very specific picture of where the candidate is in their career, what they're interested in, and what it might take to recruit them. Sourcing candidates this way has a proven track record: according to the Jobvite Recruiter Nation Survey, 78 percent of interviewed recruiters said they found their best candidates through referrals, and employees who were hired by referral have been shown to perform up to 15 percent better than non-referred employees .

2. Building and Maintaining Your Passive Talent Pipeline

Once you establish a strategy to source passive candidates, you can start building and maintaining your talent pipeline. **This means developing relationships with passive candidates.** The best strategy for passive candidate relationship development starts with engaging them in open-ended conversation. You want to be able to explain your brand and what makes your company unique without being pushy and listen to the passive candidate's thoughts, needs, and interests with genuine focus.

Get a feel for who the passive candidate is, and what their current professional landscape is like. Without being intrusive or prying, address topics like commute, salary, leadership and learning opportunities, bureaucracy and the accompanying frustrations, and the specific sorts of tech the candidate is interested in working with.

After you have a general sense of who you're talking to, deliver a carefully honed pitch for your company. This pitch needs to honestly but confidently represent your company's brand and, in doing so, must strike the delicate balance between underselling what makes your company great and gloating, over-embellishing, and/or pushing your company on the candidate. Make sure you have your brand messaging (including a clear and **compelling presentation of your company's mission, office culture, benefits, funding, team structure, and ongoing projects and technology stack**), but put in the effort to personalize the pitch so that it doesn't sound automated and inorganic. Touch on the thoughts the passive candidate shared with you and open the door to the possibility of potential mutual benefit.

This initial phase of relationship building is also a good time to think about whether or not a passive candidate is right for you, whether it be for a specific position or for the company in general. A passive candidate may not ultimately be a good fit for your company for many reasons, regardless of whether or not they are objectively talented or in-demand. They may be looking to work on different sorts of technology, in a differently sized company (either smaller or bigger), or in a logistically different situation in terms of location or available salary and benefits or general company culture.

In some cases, a passive candidate may be a great fit for the company itself, but the right role might not be currently available, or they may be at a stage in their life or career where switching jobs isn't feasible.

In the case of this sort of passive candidate, you should add them to your **“passive talent pipeline,”** a pool of candidates who may be right for positions at your company in the future and/or with additional negotiation. Here are some tips for maintaining that pipeline and following up with the passive candidates added to it:

- **Stay in touch with passive candidates.** Make sure to follow up after meeting a promising passive candidate, even if it seems unlikely that they would accept a job offer at this time or there is currently no role open that fits their skill set. It's important to keep the lines of communication open, which will improve the chances of a passive candidate reaching out to you first if they start to consider leaving their job. An extra tip here is to do what you can to personalize emails—even rejections—rather than sending out mass notes. Though this may seem labor-intensive and may ultimately become less feasible the larger your talent pipeline gets, a little individualization goes a long way to keep passive candidates interested and reading your emails.
- **Keep passive candidates updated:** Keep passive candidates in the loop about job openings, especially if you think an opening is particularly well-suited to them. You should also send out updates about interesting developments, new projects, new community engagements, and new tech your company is working on.
- **Host live and digital networking events:** One of the best ways to maintain a relationship with passive clients is to keep them coming around to events—specifically, your events. Hosting regular mixers, like a once-a-month meet-up, can help establish a closer relationship and a sense of community in passive candidates. If you have enough space to host open house events, those are especially helpful for showing off your office culture and giving passive candidates the opportunity to imagine themselves working there. It is also useful to host actual coding or maker's events, such as contests and hackathons. If you are looking to grow your network beyond your city, consider hosting events for people to join online. Stream a talk, for example, this makes it low barrier for passive candidates who may not be able to physically show up to an event for whatever reason.

These tips on how to find, attract, and maintain relationships with passive candidates should help get you started on your passive candidate recruitment journey. Good luck and happy hiring!



At Stack Overflow, we'll partner with you throughout the entire developer hiring process. From understanding the developer market to sourcing the right talent, we help you reach the right talent right now.

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