# Dick Costolo: Two traits get you hired by a Top Company. Neither comes easy.

Published on Published on May 18, 2017

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When I finally get Dick Costolo on the phone, the Silicon Valley veteran and widely respected tech soothsayer is taking a break from ramping up his latest venture, a personal fitness app called [Chorus](https://www.chorus.fit/). Right now, the company is 12 people, and in “early, early” beta, as Costolo puts it.

But the man who took the helm of Twitter in 2010, steered its meteoric growth, then graciously departed in 2015 when the market was clamoring for faster monetization sounds like he’s never been more excited about the future. And starting from scratch, with no constraints from an anxious board or nattering marketplace, has given him the freedom to talk about what truly accounts for success at the biggest tech companies, like those that dominate [LinkedIn’s Top Companies list](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/linkedin-top-companies-2017-where-us-wants-work-now-daniel-roth?published=t) in 2017.

The answer, of course, is people. Special, different people.

In the wide-ranging conversation that follows, Costolo talks about what that means —that is, which qualities Top Companies are looking for when they hire, both engineers and otherwise. And he looks forward, too, ruminating on which up-and-coming industries will be fighting over top talent in the coming years.

### ****Suzy Welch: I read on Google, of all places, that Google receives something like 1 million job applications a year, largely from people just writing the company cold, or applying online. That’s a lot of applicants for a place that has 57,000 employees, and about 975 job openings at any given time just in the U.S. Amazon, Apple, and Facebook have similar numbers, again, with the applications mainly coming in over the digital transom.****

**Dick Costolo:** Yeah, and that’s generally not how people get hired at Google, or Amazon, or any of the big tech companies. Nobody gets a job by clicking a button.

### SW: So, how do they get hired? What’s the secret?

**DC:** Let’s start with the engineers, because when it comes to tech, the competitive battle is won or lost with your engineers. That’s the bottom line. And I think what’s not well understood by the general population, the people on the outside of these companies hoping to get in, is that really world-class engineers are worth their weight in gold. Now, the people at Google and Facebook and Amazon, they get it. They understand a great engineer can be worth ten times a “regular” engineer, or 30, 40, 50, or 100 times. These are the very special engineers that the top companies are seeking. That’s the game.

And because that’s the game, it’s now gotten to the point where it’s like college football or basketball recruiting. The best tech companies are starting to look for these individuals at younger and younger ages. And when they find them, there is a courting processing that is not unlike what you see with athletes.

I remember when I was at Twitter in 2012, there was a senior at Princeton who was an amazing engineer. Really, one of the stars. She had done an off-the-charts initial phone interview with us, so we prioritized getting her into the pipeline right away. And the way it works, whenever there was someone that great on the radar, I wanted to talk to them. I wanted to get on the phone, and sell her myself. The CEO, OK? Getting her was that vital.

### ****SW:**** The CEO calling a senior. Times have changed.

**DC:** Yes, this was not happening when I was in college.

### ****SW:**** What happened?

**DC:** Well, I spoke to her. She was extremely polite and gracious and thankful, and repeatedly referred to me as ‘Mr. Costolo.’ But it became clear as we talked that she had actually had several conversations with CEOs from other big tech companies. I was just one CEO conversation of many. And I thought, “Wow, that’s where we are.” That’s how ferocious the competition has become for the best engineers. Incidentally, we didn’t get her.

### SW: What made her so special? What differentiates a good engineer from a great one?

**DC:** It’s so much more than high-quality coding, developing algorithms, and the ability to solve graduate-level comp sci problems, that’s for sure. It’s the ability to think abstractly, to think about solving a problem you have never seen or heard of before, and knowing how to step through a big problem in a logical fashion, and in a thoughtful, smart, original way.

### ****SW:****Does personality matter? Do values? You hear a lot from companies about how they want to hire team players, and so on.

DC: With engineers, you might be surprised how much berth they’re given. Over the years, though, most tech companies have tried to have at least some cursory scan of self awareness.

### SW: That’s not a very high bar!

DC: Yeah, you’d be amazed. A lot these companies will say, “No brilliant jerks,” and generally, they would prefer not to have brilliant jerks, but when you’re trying to get world-class engineers, there’s a lot you’ll overlook.

Then, there are the conversations you get in to actually land the best engineers. Like you’ll get asked, “Help me understand how you think about value of a single Twitter option against the value of an option at this company or that company?” Or they’ll say, “Would it be possible to structure my package this way or that?” All sorts of questions that 20 years ago, you would have never asked the CEO. People generally took offers at face value.

### SW: Do the best engineers have agents negotiating for them?

**DC:**I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s around the corner.

### SW: It sounds like landing the top talent is generally about the money, then?

**DC:**Money matters, but having an impact matters an equal amount. The best engineers want to be sure that, if they’re going to grind away for 60 to 80 hours a week, it will be on a part of the software that people are going to see and use and leverage.

### SW: Let’s talk about how you get a job at a Top Company if you’re not an engineer. You’re in marketing, for instance, or HR or sales.

**DC:**Then it becomes a matter of standing out, and by that I mean having a really creative approach in how you come after the executives of a company. You would be surprised how few people do that. Most people go through the motions. The fill out the online form, they e-mail. It’s just not enough.

### SW: What is enough?

**DC:** Something wildly creative. Something that shows you’ve thought about the company and its challenges, and how you will actually make the company better. One time, a marketing person sent me a look book walking me through how I could reimagine talking about Twitter publicly. A lot of time and energy went into it, and we cut the normal four-part process, and got him in right away for an interview.

Another example that comes to mind is the #HireAlex [campaign](http://lizgross.net/alex-kowalsky-social-media-manager-for-hire/) – it was a very energized social media drive to get hired in digital marketing, undertaken by a student at University of Wisconsin, Madison. We ended up hiring him.

### SW: I wonder if this kind of thing doesn’t happen more because applicants are worried they’ll put in all that work and no one will notice.

**DC:**But they will. Something bold and audacious will always catch someone’s eye.

### ****SW:**** To wrap up, let’s talk about what companies or industries are likely to be on LinkedIn’s Top Companies list as the future unfolds, say in 2020 and beyond. Bill Gates has been [outspoken](http://fortune.com/2017/01/28/bill-gates-jobs/) about artificial intelligence, energy, and biotech as fields where he’d quit college to work today because they hold so much promise. Alec Ross, who wrote [The Industries of the Future](http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/introducing-industries-future-alec-ross-unveils-winners/), says his research points to opportunities in robotics and cyber security, and he’s obviously not alone in that assessment.

**DC:** It’s definitely very fashionable to be excited about those spaces, and especially VR (virtual reality) and AI. But maybe it’s because of what I’m doing right now, but I have to believe that the increasing focus and tech brought to bear on the health and wellness space is going to be explosive, and several companies are going to have an audacious and massive impact.

### SW: President Obama gave a [speech](http://grist.org/briefly/obama-says-well-have-to-speed-up-innovation-to-avoid-eating-our-way-to-climate-catastrophe/?utm_campaign=weekly&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=weekly-static&utm_term=EDIT%20Weekly) last week that said the future belonged to the companies and entrepreneurs in the sustainable food space.

**DC:** Anything with nutrition and the environment is going be an area for significant growth. I think wellbeing is the next frontier. What could be bigger? It’s about how we live.

### SW: But the engineers will still matter, correct?

**DC:** That’s definitely not going to change.

This interview has been condensed and edited.