The Fragility of Work: Sitting Down with a Senior

If you survey major news outlets about tech layoffs one thing you’ll find is a distinct lack of individual perspective. It isn’t devoid of granular experiences, however, on the whole, popular media is focused on providing macro observations on current events. The long list of emerging tech layoffs is no different in this regard. Articles are populated with statistical data on the latest company to cut a percentage of their workforce. Usually, these articles are punctuated with a timely quote from a former employee of the company, but these quotes are passed over as quickly as their written. In reaction to this, Newsico sets out to show more directly the responses of those affected by layoffs.

Today, I’m sitting down with a senior engineer who was affected by a layoff in early February. They worked at a mid-size financial services company that provides a solution to small and medium business who don’t want to or can’t invest in full-scale HR departments.

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Rob K: What was your typical day as an engineer?

Senior: There’s often a morning meeting called a stand-up. You give an update on what you’re working on, how it’s going, whether you’re blocked or not. You can call for code reviews and request to pair with another engineer. After this you’re writing code. If you’re leading a project, you’re attending other meetings. Any code you write gets assessed by another engineer before anything gets pushed to live.

While there is an element of mundaneness to this kind of description (reading about someone’s day-to-day work may feel remarkably like your day-to-day work as well). The point of including this is to paint a picture of what the self is doing day after day, week after week, and even year after year. They’re talking to the same people, working on the same sets of interrelated problems, and pushing forward on the same path. How does a layoff factor into this?

Senior: I was in the office on Tuesday and Tuesday was a normal day. I had my normal meetings, and I worked on the projects I just mentioned. For lunch, I went on a walk with coworkers just talking about different stuff. In fact, in one of my meetings I was talking about the feature and telling them ‘Hey, we’re doing these changes. Be on the lookout for it.’ Then Wednesday morning, I wake up at the usual time. I grab my phone and I have a text message from a nebulous number to check my email. I check my email and there is a document sent to me which is simply a company severance agreement. This is how I find out I’ve been laid off. I did some verification on it. I opened up my work laptop and it had been remotely deactivated. So I’m like, alright, I’ve been laid off.

It's a jarring story on it’s own, to wake up one day, without provocation or expectation, and find out that those days over days and weeks over weeks are over now, just done. The part that stuck with me is the usage of nebulous. It’s a single word, but it captures the scope of the event. Routines are driven and refined every day, and something seemingly out of an unseeable, unreachable place tells you that it’s over. There isn’t a meeting or some context filled discussion explaining the rationale behind the decision. There’s no human interaction at all. Perhaps this is a melo-dramatic way to describe it, but from talking to different engineers, the roller coaster of emotion that follows from a text like that isn’t dramatic, it’s a true shock to one’s life.

Layoffs come for many reasons. Often, the individual has no control over the decision to release an entire department or project. But despite the negative assumptions that come with the term “layoff”, a common thread among my discussions with engineers is their optimism for the future. When I asked the senior about their future plans, they gave an insightful thought that touched on principles extending beyond those of the software engineer.

Senior: The important part is not to have job security but career security. This is the way the tech industry works. There’s layoffs, companies go up and down, stop existing, get bought and sold, but career security is going to come from your skills, your work ethic, and your mindset. If you have career security, you can work for a very long time. It’s just going to be for a bunch of different companies. There’s not this thing in tech where you get into a company and work there for 25 years then retire. That doesn’t happen.

I talk further with the Senior about a variety of topics unrelated to layoffs: Coding Bootcamps, Growing as Juniors, developing workflow, strengthening developer intuition. This extended discussion can be found here.

This is a Behind the Screen, a continuing series devoted to understanding the individual response to the tech layoffs of 2022 and 2023. View the archive here.