

Informational Interview Story

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Desired Audience: Engineering students deciding on career paths

Communitive Goals: Provide practical, adaptable career advice and encourage experience-based decision-making

Constraints: Limited to insights from a single interviewee's experience in tech across U.S. and Chinese markets

Navigating Career Paths: Advice from a ByteDance Principal Product Manager

Deciding on a career path can be a daunting task for many engineering students. Recently, I had the chance to speak with a Principal Product Manager at ByteDance, who offered practical insights for students facing tough choices in an ever-evolving field. His journey, from studying mechanical engineering at Ohio State and Stanford to working with tech giants like Tesla, Alibaba, and ByteDance, provided him with a unique perspective on the tech landscape in both the U.S. and China.

When asked about his career choices, he shared a significant piece of advice: do not just look for the “perfect job.” Instead, he emphasized, prioritize your first job as a springboard for practical experience. “Your first job will teach you so much—about how real-world problems are solved and how teams work together. Whether it is selling coffee or designing a product, getting hands-on experience as soon as possible is the key,” he noted. Starting out, students might worry about whether they are in the ideal role, but he encouraged them to focus instead on the skills and insights they’ll gain.

He also recommended that students approach education pragmatically. “A master’s degree can be incredibly valuable when starting out, but a Ph.D. isn’t necessary unless you are set on a research-heavy career,” he said. In his view, real-world experience often trumps additional years in academia. He shared that he chose to get work experience over pursuing a Ph.D., and it led him to exciting, impactful roles sooner. While higher education can boost credentials, he believes it is not a one-size-fits-all solution, especially in a fast-evolving tech landscape.

For those thinking about doing side projects to enrich the resume, he advised students to look beyond resume-building. “Focus on projects that address real problems rather than ones that simply tick a box on your resume,” he suggested. Solving practical issues builds not only skills but also a portfolio that shows you can think critically and bring ideas to life. As he put it, meaningful work stands out more than a laundry list of projects with no impact.

Our discussion also touched on cultural differences in working environments, which might be useful for students considering roles abroad. He explained that U.S. companies often foster a collaborative atmosphere where employees feel like part of a shared mission. In contrast, many Chinese companies have a more hierarchical structure, resembling a student union where roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. Both

settings offer unique opportunities, so he encouraged students to consider which environment aligns best with their personal and professional goals.

One of the most important lessons he shared was about finding fulfillment beyond just financial success. "Engineering is about bringing ideas into the real world, and there are countless ways to find happiness in your career—whether that is through salary, your network, or personal growth." He advised students to enjoy the journey rather than focusing solely on wealth as the ultimate goal. For him, fulfillment came from a mix of meaningful projects, a supportive network, and the chance to continually learn and evolve.

He concluded our conversation with a thought-provoking point about adaptability in a rapidly changing industry. "The tech landscape shifts so fast," he said, "with advancements like GPT reshaping fields overnight. No one can predict exactly where things will be in five years, so it is essential to stay adaptable and open to learning." He encouraged students to cultivate a mindset that embraces change and uncertainty, as these qualities will be invaluable in a world where the skills in demand today may evolve tomorrow. "Treat each role as an opportunity to learn something new and build resilience," he advised. "That flexibility is what will keep you relevant and prepared, no matter where your path leads."

For students uncertain about their next steps, his advice serves as a reminder that it is okay to prioritize learning and experience, that meaningful work often comes from solving real problems, and that, above all, staying curious and flexible can open doors you might not have expected. His insights underscored a powerful message: the most successful careers are not built on rigid plans but on a willingness to grow with every opportunity and challenge that comes along.

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