FANTASTIC DEVELOPERS

AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

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5 LESSONS WE LEARNED WHILE GROWING OUR
TEAM FROM 3 TO 30 IN UNDER A YEAR

TENSURE

THIS IS, WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE MOST COMPETITIVE MARKET FOR TECH TALENT WE HAVE EVER SEEN. 🥊

Software is eating the world, and engineers are the ones building it.

Suddenly, every company is a technology company. This makes the talent crunch even crunchier.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of software developers is projected to grow 22 percent between 2019 and 2029, much faster than the average for all occupations.

It's hard to find great developers, and it's not getting any easier.

SO, YEAH, WE HAD A PROBLEM

On January 1st, 2020, we formally started Tensure Consulting.

At the time, we didn't know we'd be building a company during a global pandemic. All we knew was that we had a big client with big needs for engineering talent.

We sold ourselves as having great talent (which we did, just not nearly enough of it), but also as being able to find and hire great developers faster than our clients could.

Saying we could do it was easy.

Actually doing it was hard.

We started 2020 with 3 developers in one city and ended it with 30 developers spread across the country. We learned some hard lessons along the way, and now we want to share those lessons with you.

So whether you're a hiring manager trying to attract and retain the best talent or a developer (or aspiring developer!) considering your options, we hope these 5 lessons will help you on your journey.

YOUR BEST SOURCE OF TALENT IS YOUR CURRENT TEAM 👋

We're leading with this one because we want to be honest: without the existing network and relationships of our first team members, we would not have been able to pull this off.

It doesn't matter how good your pitch is if no one is listening.

Naturally, when we started Tensure, no one knew we existed. We didn't have a big launch party. We didn't buy ads. We didn't have a street team or a social media campaign. We didn't have time for any of that.

So instead, we just called every great developer we ever worked with.

Like anyone else, developers change jobs with some frequency. Some change to find a better culture, some to take on increased responsibility, some just to stay fresh and solve new, challenging problems.

We found our first 10 hires through our own networks and former colleagues, and they found the next 10 through theirs.

It really wasn't until 20+ that we needed to start posting jobs and getting cold applications (and only because of the sheer number of people we needed to hire).
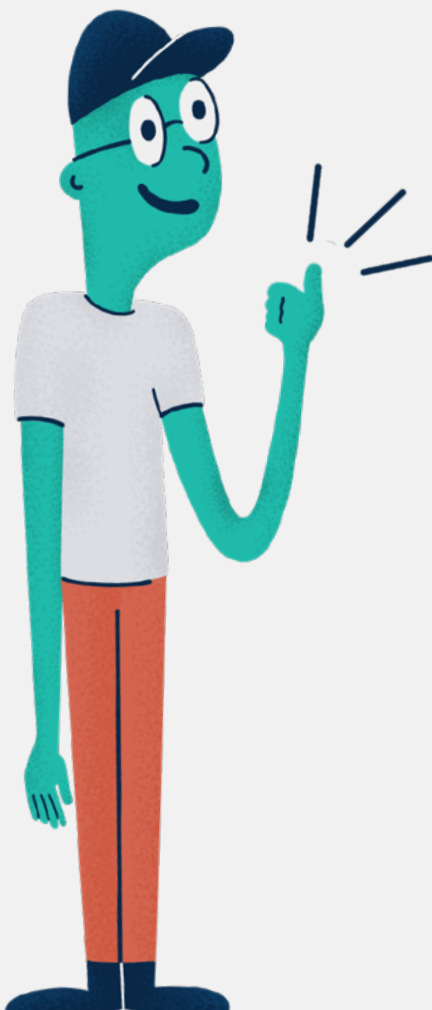
FOR DEVELOPERS & ASPIRING DEVELOPERS:

Great developers refer great developers. Of course you need to spend time reaching out to companies and building relationships there, but also consider calling up any developers you worked with in the past -- even if you weren't a dev at the time. It's a tight-knit community. People want to work with people they trust and whose work they admire. Many firms (like Tensure) have apprenticeship or internship programs specifically designed for devs who are earlier in their journey, and you'll be surprised how many devs are open to mentoring, referring, or even just supporting you on your job search journey.

...UNLESS IT ISN'T 🙁

In some cases, you may find that your current people don't have anyone to refer. If this is the case, you may want to ask yourself "why?". Your team is and should always be the best source of referrals, so what's up?

In our experience, it boils down to a few possible problems:

1. Your people are not involved in the broader developer community 🌍

This is fine. You can't expect people to want to "network" when that's not their thing. Extracurriculars are extra. Some people love being in every Slack community, Discord, and Subreddit. Some don't.

However, it's worth a conversation with your team to talk about how your technical talent can contribute to the broader conversation around culture, best practices, and ethics. It's important (and strategic) to be good "global citizens" in the developer community.

At Tensure, we celebrate when our team members (we call them "Tensurians") participate in things outside of work for our clients. We incentivize them to do so. We give them time within their work week that they can use to expand their skillsets or help other devs expand theirs.

Again, you can't make these things mandatory, but you can talk about the sorts of activities your team *would* be involved in if they had time and energy for it. You may find other things getting in the way of an honest desire to be involved outside the org, and maybe some of those obstacles are within your power to remove.
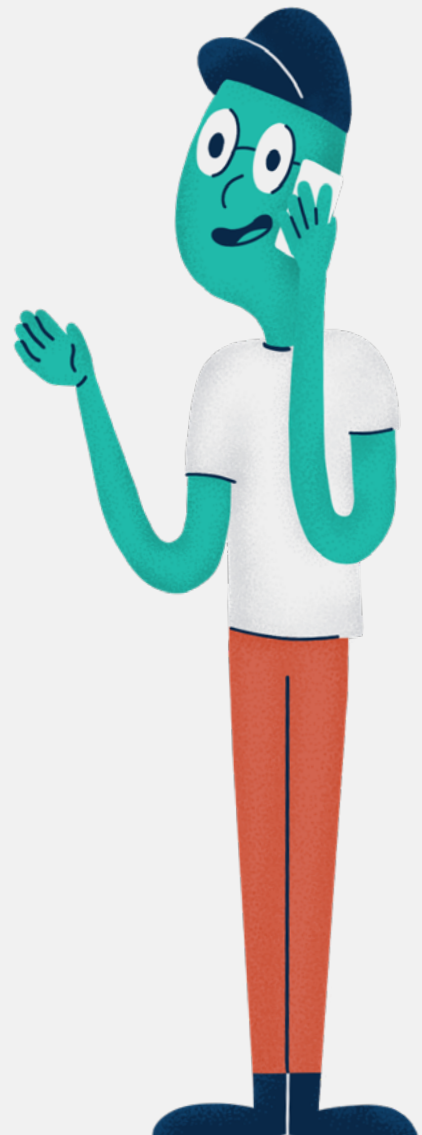
2.Your team lacks diversity ✊🏻 ✊🏼 ✊🏽 ✊🏾 ✊🏿

This is bad for several reasons, and we'd be lying if we said we had easy solutions. In many ways, we got lucky.

If your team (say, on your website, or in that fun Zoom photo you posted to LinkedIn) is a sea of white faces, a person of color is going to make note of that.

If you have (as you should) developers from under-represented groups on your team, but they don't feel your organization takes their experience seriously or is engaged meaningfully around conversations of diversity, equity, and inclusion, they may not be fully comfortable recommending your culture to others from their community.

And just because someone is sticking around doesn't mean they want to invite their friends. We can't tell you how many women in tech we know who say they cannot, in good conscience, refer a woman for a role because of their own experience.

At Tensure, we were extremely fortunate in this regard. We still have a long way to go, but we prioritized diverse candidates early and had great mentors to help us do it right. We recognize that every person we hire who looks just like others is a step backwards from our DEI goals, and we know that "pipeline problem," while easy to say and often comforting, is a cop-out.

Luckily for us, a small but incredibly talented number of people from underrepresented groups in tech chose to trust us in the early stages of our hiring frenzy, and then they trusted us enough to refer their friends.
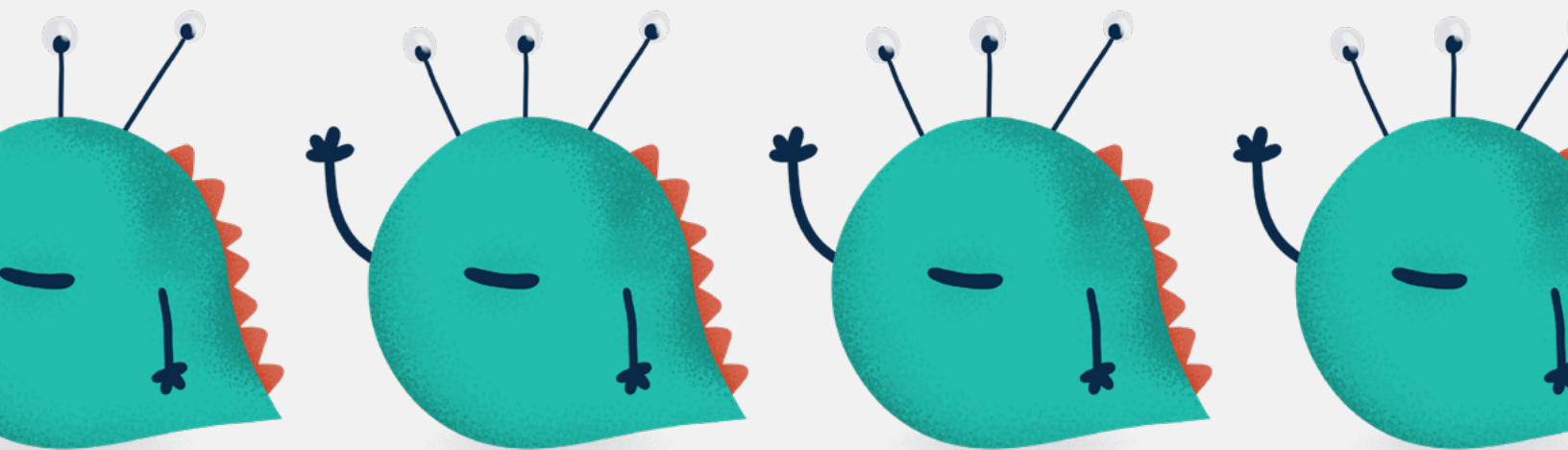
3. Your people are afraid of being held accountable for the outcome 😬

Imagine you are an engineer working for a company, and you have friends who are great developers with no shortage of great opportunities.

Also imagine that your colleague Shannon recently referred someone who ended up not staying with the company, and the hiring manager is *still* complaining loudly about it. Are you going to be hesitant to refer your friend? Probably. What if they leave after only a year and that comes back on you? What if this makes you less likely to get promoted?

Now, imagine that your friend is also from an underrepresented group in tech. Are you confident your friend will get a fair shake during the interview process? Will their questions about diversity, equity, and inclusion get good answers during the interview process? If you're even a *little bit* worried that your friend may not get a fair shake, you're just not going to put them through all that.

And before you say "well of course not, our policies clearly state blah blah blah" -- remember that culture is not what your handbook says, it's what people see happening around them.

It's the stories that get told.

If anyone on your team has ever regretted referring someone because of how that experience went for them, and if you as a company bear even a fraction of the blame, that's likely having a chilling effect on referrals.
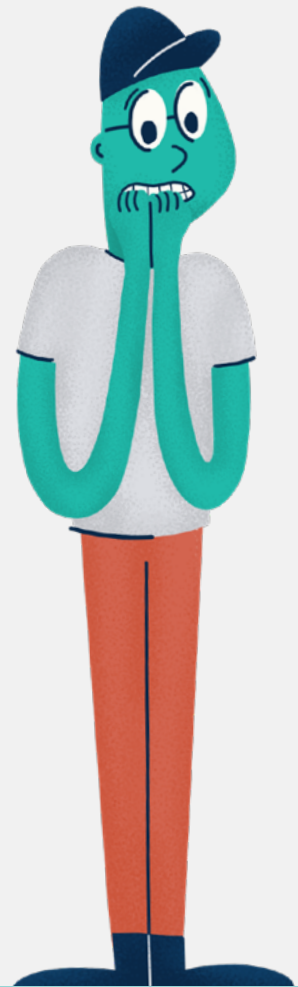
FOR DEVELOPERS & ASPIRING DEVELOPERS:

If you have a strong network, don't be afraid to flaunt that during the application and interview process. Tech talent is the problem everyone is trying to solve, and if you've got the chops AND you've got the network, that's pretty hard to beat. And for those of you from underrepresented backgrounds: we know you face unique and sometimes infuriating challenges. It's tough out there, looking for work, and much more so when you don't fit the patterns people unconsciously and unfairly hold. But please, don't reward a company with piss-poor DEI practices by giving them your labor (technical, or emotional). Ask around, do your homework. Ask the hiring manager and the others in your interview process about their commitment to DEI and what that means. Look for humility, not certainty. You are what the world needs. Do not forget that.

REMOTE-FIRST IS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE 🗺️

Tensure was originally based in the midwest. It's a great market for Tech Talent if you're Kroger, not so much if you're us.

There is simply no way we could have hired the caliber of talent we did with the speed we achieved if we were asking these people to be in the midwest or to move here.

It's 2021. People want to live where they want to live. If my entire day is spent writing and reviewing code on a screen, why do I need to be near you in order to do that?

We decided early on that remote-first was going to be our operating model (before a global pandemic made this an absolute requirement). We weren't sure this was the most strategic move. It's just what felt right to us at the time.

As it turns out, the inflexible policies of other companies became our remote hiring opportunity.

Every day, we hear from developers leaving their roles rather than relocate back to company HQ. 🏃

Unprecedented demand for tech talent means talent gets a bit of an upper hand. So in a way, it doesn't matter what your company's policies are, or what your executive team thinks "collaboration" looks like.

Trust us, if you want great talent, offer remote work for your devs.

And if you want the BEST talent, make remote the norm.

FOR DEVELOPERS & ASPIRING DEVELOPERS:

Consider whether remote is important to you. Would you rather be in an office, or work from wherever you want? If the job is remote but home is a chaotic place (like it is for many of us with small children), does the company offer a coworking stipend? Also, buyer beware of "hybrid remote" workplaces. This will increasingly become the norm, we think, but some places do it well and some do not. Ask hard questions during your interview process about how the company drives equity for those who choose to work remotely (e.g. communication norms, opportunities to get together on the company dime for non-work events, etc.). Far too often, remote workers in a colocation-first culture end being second-class citizens, not truly a part of the culture. Money doesn't lie, and if an organization says it "invests" in their remote workers, they better be able to prove it.

IT PAYS TO HAVE
PAY TRANSPARENCY 💸
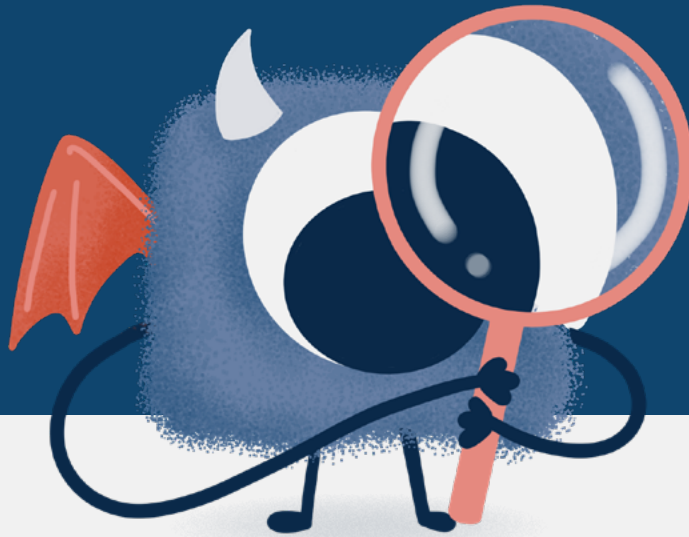
Lots of companies (including ours) pay for salary data so we can decide the appropriate compensation for certain roles. But remember that just because you have access to "the best, most comprehensive" data doesn't mean your people do.

You have expensive standardized data. The people interviewing with you have Glassdoor, Google search, and their friends in tech (some of whom likely have outlandish Bay Area comp packages).

We're not saying throw out the data, but we are saying you need to acknowledge that compensation is a deeply personal thing. It's a validation of their decision to re-skill at personal expense. It's proof that they truly are talented and worth having on a team.

Expectations are reality. 🤷‍♂️

This is why we recently moved to total pay transparency. We don't publish people's pay stubs (pretty sure that's illegal), but we do clearly explain the pay for each named role in our developer track, and we share this with candidates during the interview process.

Negotiation rarely favors the candidate, so we don't do it. Any policy that allows you to pay people based on how much they're willing to ask for (or how comfortable they feel negotiating) is a policy that reinforces rampant pay inequality.

Also: our pay ranges for each title are pegged at 70th percentile for most of the country (excluding the extremely high-priced markets). So yes, our "average" pay is well above average. We also have significantly better benefits than most.

We don't see any of this as being "generous" -- we see this as how we, a small company in the midwest, can attract the best talent by paying people what they're worth and taking great care of them while they're here.
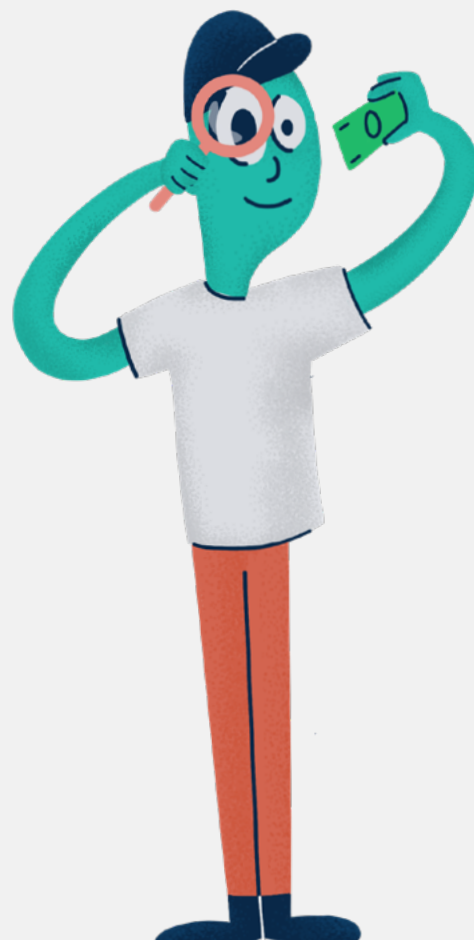
FOR DEVELOPERS & ASPIRING DEVELOPERS:

You don't ever need to share your salary expectations. If a company refuses to interview you unless you say the first number, recognize this for what it is -- manipulation. Many companies feel they should pay you as little as they can get away with, and then tell you not to share what you're paid with anyone else (why, I wonder?). Pay inequality will continue to persist without transparency, and we think you as a developer have the right to demand it.

IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO HIRE THE BEST, YOU HAVE TO ACTIVELY HELP THEM GET BETTER 💪

What's the point of hiring people who've spent their whole career getting better at something, then giving them so much work to do that they never improve further?

We've all heard the old adage "personal development is the individual's responsibility."

Let's call that what it is: exploitative.

If you want to attract great developers and keep them, you need to actually help them get better. To be explicit: you need to actually pay your people to improve. ☝️

We recently negotiated contracts with our clients to give all of our developers "carve time", a specific amount of time each week that our people can use to get certifications, learn new skills, or help others on our team do the same (this is an explicitly communicated expectation for our senior and principal devs).

Of course it is an individual's responsibility to continue to hone their craft and grow their base of expertise. However, you can't expect people to take time to get to the next level when you're only incentivizing them to perform at their current level.

A corollary to this: we celebrate the desire to be promoted. We have a clear progression of developer roles and we share that with current team members and interviewees. So when someone asks how they can get to the next level, we can tell them objectively (vs. "well when you're ready I guess").

Like it or not, job title and compensation or how we keep score in our careers. We hope to become more skilled and more valuable over time. So please do not punish people or question their desire to understand what it takes to be promoted. Believe us, that sort of behavior gets talked about, and it will hurt your ability to attract new talent.

We've talked to a lot (A LOT) of developers leaving their current jobs. So take it from us: it's not that they don't believe they can get promoted, it's simply how poorly and paternalistically their leadership reacts to the people who ask.

FOR DEVELOPERS & ASPIRING DEVELOPERS:

You 👏 should 👏 want 👏 to 👏 be 👏 promoted! We mean it. We celebrate it. Don't let people look at you weird if you ask about opportunities for increased responsibility (and pay) during the interview prcess. Don't fall for a big title with no opportunities for growth. It's often better to enter at a lower job title at a company who can prove that they help their people get promoted.

NOT EVERYBODY NEEDS TO BE ON YOUR PAYROLL 🤝
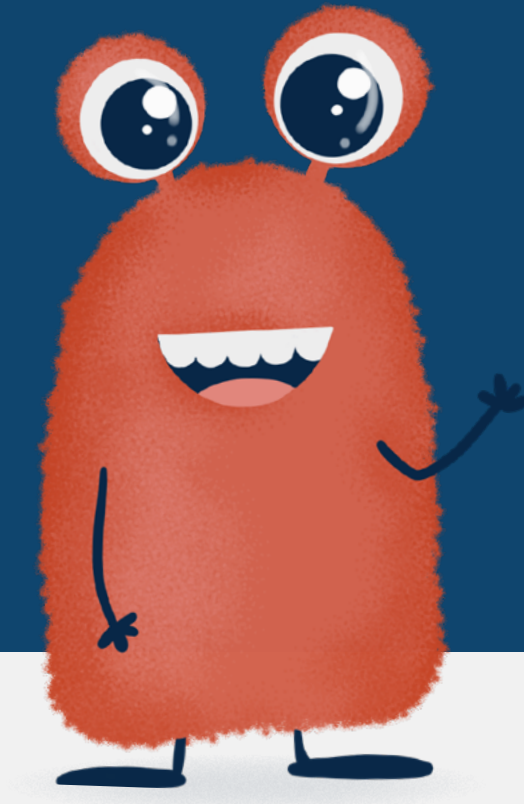
Finding, attracting, and retaining great developers is hard, and only getting harder.

We think it's true that every company needs to become a technology company to survive. We don't believe, however, that every company needs to make technical recruiting a core competency.

Even our clients with tremendous engineering talent bring some of their work to us, simply so they can continue focusing on what they're great at.

Sure, we're biased, but we'd at least love the opportunity to talk with you about your technology needs and help you decide which path is best.

We spent an absolutely insane amount of time over the last year finding and hiring great developers.🔥🦄💯

And we're not going to stop spending insane amounts of time, we're just going to keep finding great talent, building teams, and helping them grow. That's what we do.

If you want to do that work, too, we're rooting for you. But if you'd like some help, we're here for you.

Thanks,

The Team at Tensure
hello@tensure.io

FOR DEVELOPERS & ASPIRING DEVELOPERS:

Thanks for reading! We hope some of the lessons in here were helpful as you consider your options as a developer. At Tensure, we're always (always) looking for great talent, so if you're reading this, we want to talk to you!

Email us at hello@tensure.io.