

Always Learning: Attending QCon as an Early Career Software Engineer

Author: Ronnie Dumesh

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I started my software engineering career in July 2020 working for Klaviyo, first as a co-op from Cornell University, then as Software Engineer, and now as Software Engineer II. I've always aligned myself with one of Klaviyo's [core values](#) to **always be learning**. Company values often may come off as PR speak, but Klaviyo is deep in its commitment to provide a learning environment both on the job (through the challenging work!), and off it, through fringe benefits.

Klaviyo offers \$3000 per year to be used for "learning." I've personally used it on topics that interest me, such as an ethics class: *Choices and Consequences in Computing*. More recently, I've used it for German lessons to improve my communication skills and help me become more well-rounded. We also have an unlimited free book policy that I've used to purchase books that I have personal and career interest in, like [The Pragmatic Programmer](#).

As an engineer, I'm also entitled to attend a conference per year. The most popular here is [QCon](#), which I attended two weeks ago with 17 other Klaviyo engineers.



Part of the Klaviyo delegation

There was a great variety of talks, from ones that detailed high-level strategy (e.g. on [disaster recovery](#)) to more technical topics (e.g. [distributed database system solutions](#)).

My personal favorite was [Combating AI-Generated Fake Images with JavaScript Libraries](#) by [Kate Sills](#). In short, the talk proposed hashing content and its metadata upon posting and storing the resulting hash in a permanent, public record that cannot be modified, such as a printed publication that can easily be archived and retrieved (e.g. the New York Times), or even a blockchain (throwback to 2021, who knew that it might be useful someday). The talk addressed the real-world ethical implications of the social media and generative AI revolutions by proposing an incredibly basic set of steps to help combat misinformation.

QCon talks were generally geared towards decision makers. Thatâ€™s not (yet) me. Iâ€™m on the path to being a senior software engineer (I hope!), but it will be a while before Iâ€™m a lead engineer or a manager. Iâ€™m not yet in a position where itâ€™s my default job to implement a new team-specific technology or paradigm, let alone on a scale wider than that. That being said, attending QCon was still a valuable experience and I recommend other early career engineers try to get three things out of a conference like QCon:

Networking

Networking has to be the word that software engineers hate the most. It either involves silently reading esoteric AWS documentation, or worse, having awkward conversations with people you donâ€™t have any relationship with. Your college CS degree may have taught you to solve difficult problems and to code, but it often doesnâ€™t teach you how to communicate. This is what I see missing from many candidates who I interview, but that most software engineers at Klaviyo do possess, as another one of our core values is to **collaborate radically**.

Networking sharpens your skills so you can better communicate on a daily basis, even with people you know. All too often, you need to explain a complex problem in a concise manner to somebody who has little context. You need to be able to give them the confidence that youâ€™re someone who knows what youâ€™re talking about and can be trusted.

Thatâ€™s not to say all networking goes well. Sometimes you meet somebody who is tired or not particularly interested in what you have to say, and thatâ€™s totally ok. I found myself third-wheeling a complicated conversation about a technology Iâ€™ve never worked with, and didnâ€™t feel like interjecting so I thanked both people for their time and talked to them each separately later.

I found it easiest to connect with other junior engineers who were similarly terrified. It also was easy to talk with speakers who tended to be quite amiable, and of course you can bring up what you learned in their talk. Donâ€™t rule out the sponsored booths either, as they want to talk to you, and youâ€™ll get a chance to learn about the problems the vendors are looking to fix and their solutions.

Networking doesnâ€™t just mean with people you may never talk to again outside of LinkedIn. It also includes fellow engineers from your company. Especially as a remote engineer, I was thankful for the opportunity to connect with fellow Klaviyos that I donâ€™t often get to talk to.

Catching up on the news and the tech cycle

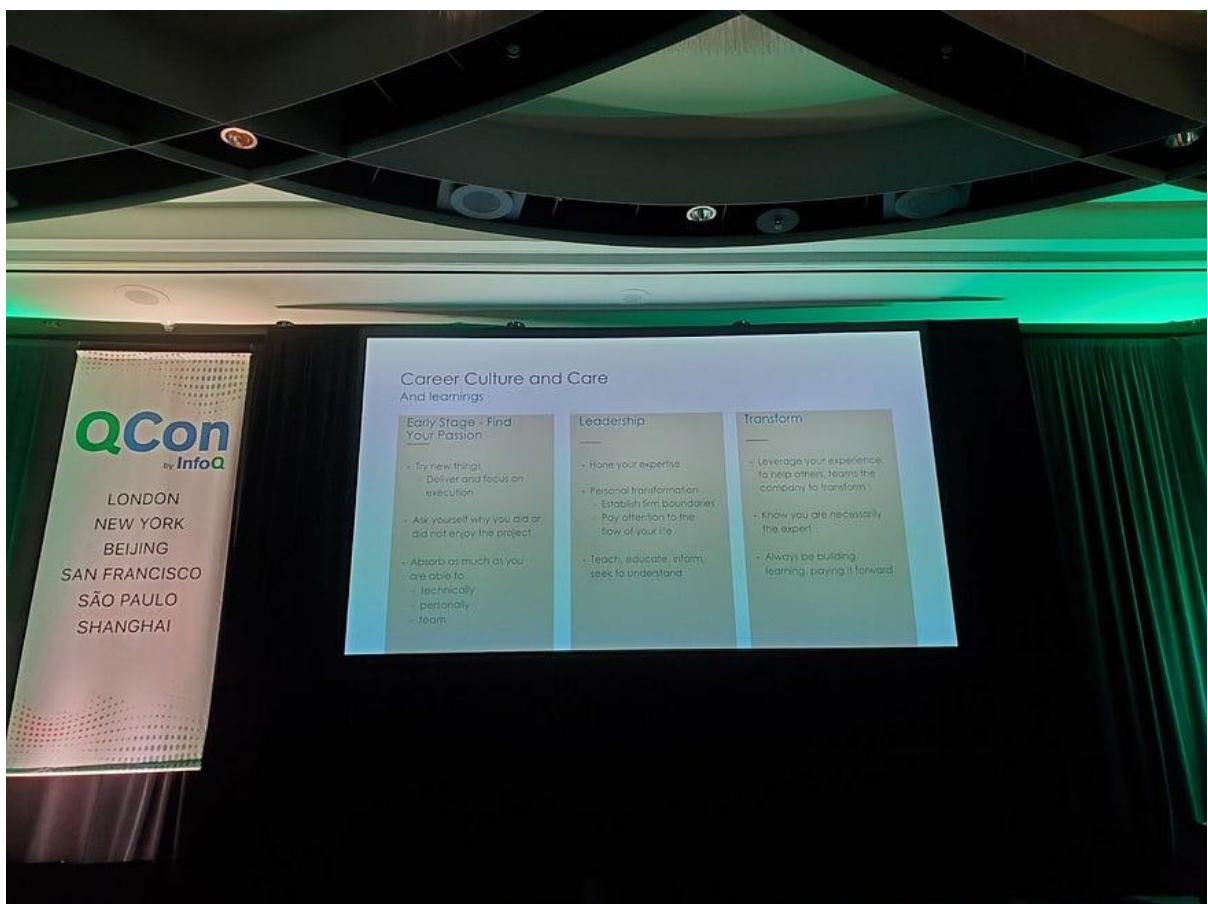
Software Engineering is infamous for having constantly shifting frameworks and expectations of knowledge. If this is your first full-time software engineering position, itâ€™s very likely that the framework youâ€™re most familiar with is the one that was adopted when your team was

created. If this is the case, it means your knowledge is $\{2023 - \text{year_team_was_created}\}$ years out of date. Not everybody has the time or the motivation to constantly be working on side projects, or to constantly be reading tech news. A software engineering conference gives summaries of the last year of tech and sneak peeks into the future. You can start becoming familiar with next generation tech stacks and be more confident that it's worth your time to learn a new technology.

Gain the ability to make decisions

Crucially, it's important to remember that you'll never be ready to make important decisions at the company. I say it facetiously, but imposter syndrome is rife within software engineering, and it's difficult, as a junior engineer, to express a strong opinion in a room full of senior engineers. However, at a company that values the growth of its engineers, your input **will** be appreciated and you'll learn a ton from the resulting conversation.

At some point, even if you don't feel you have enough knowledge or confidence, you have to take the plunge and speak up. In fact, at Klaviyo, and I guess many other companies, you need to demonstrate that you can make impactful decisions with good judgment before you get promoted to Senior Engineer. I found QCon helpful both to build my knowledge and hone my skills in making and communicating ideas and decisions. I will definitely be attending again!



Takeaways for career progression. Photo by Himnish Hunma.