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How to structure your coding interview timeline

Avoiding exploding offers and burnout while maximizing negotiating leverage and keeping your options open

The exploding offer dilemma

Here's the situation you wanna avoid: You've just started interviewing with a company you're really excited about. Another company you've been talking to for a while sends you an “exploding offer”—an offer that expires in a week or even 24 hours. You have to respond to the exploding offer before your final round of interviews at the first company.

You don't wanna have to decide between a real offer and a potential offer. Either decision has a big downside:

- If you accept the offer in front of you, you're moving forward with a nagging “What if?”—especially if you were excited about the other company.
- If you reject the real offer, it's possible the other company won't end up extending you an offer in the end. You could end up with nothing.

It's also bad for negotiation. The best way to get negotiating leverage with one company is to have an offer from another company. If your offers aren't open at the same time, you lose that leverage.

Work backwards from a signing date

So you want to do everything you can to ensure your offers come in at the same time. But how do you do that? The key is to work backwards:

Pick a "signing date" and stick to it. This is the date that you plan to make a final decision and sign an offer. This includes some allowed time for *negotiating* once you have all your offers in hand (more on that later).

Share your chosen signing date with every company as soon as you start talking to them. You may even want to ask them to *confirm* that they'll be able to work with your timeline. This way a company is much less likely to give you an offer that explodes before that date—they already know your timeline, so if they can't work with it they should tell you up front.

What if a company *does* give you an offer that explodes before your signing date, even though you told them about it early on? Don't panic. Politely remind them that you've been clear about your timeline from the beginning. Explain that you'd like to make your final decision on the date you've already shared with them.

If they still won't budge, you might be better off passing on that company—if they're comfortable squeezing you this early on in your relationship, that's a bad sign for how they'd treat you as an employee.

Now, some companies have policies about not having open offers for more than X days. So what if you're going through the interview process with one of those companies and it looks like you're moving too fast and the offer would come in too early and explode before the signing date you chose?

No problem. Most companies are happy to "pause" or slow down your interview process so the offer comes in later. This way both parties can get what they want: the company can follow their usual "offers explode after X days" policy, and you can have the offer still open on your pre-planned signing date.

How far out should my signing date be?

It depends. At a high level, you should **allow as much time as you can afford to**. Most people underestimate how long their job search is going to take. And when you end up in a time crunch at the end, it means less time at the negotiation stage. So allowing an extra week for your job search could literally mean earning tens of thousands of dollars more in your final salary.

If you have a current job or are a full-time student, try to allow more time by starting the process earlier.

Of course, some of us will be in situations where we really need to start our new job as soon as possible. That's fine. Do what works for you.

Keep in mind that you're shooting for having enough time to practice and get through the whole interview process (/interview-process-at-tech-companies) with multiple companies if you can. Think through how much time you can devote to each of these steps:

- Studying (1–8 weeks)
- Phone screens (1–3 weeks)
- Onsites (1–3 weeks)
- Negotiation (1–2 weeks)

One more consideration: if you have the means, **consider leaving yourself some time for a vacation before starting your new job**. Job hunting is stressful. And that window of time between signing a new offer and starting a new job can be a rare window of low stress and low responsibility in your life.

Many companies are happy to accommodate this by setting your start date a few weeks after your signing date—just ask. Many offers include a signing bonus, which could help offset the cost of this extra time without a salary. But again, this'll depend on your means—not everyone can afford to take this extra time off.

Cast a wide net

Interview with multiple companies. Exactly how many companies depends on your situation, but the point is to avoid putting all your eggs in one basket. You want multiple offers by the end, so you can negotiate the best offer possible.

A good rule of thumb: send out applications to more places than you're currently planning. If you end up getting too many interviews...well that's a good problem to have! You can always "pause" or simply cancel the interview process with some companies.

Schedule your favorite companies last. Get interview practice with the places you aren't as excited about. You'll be in your prime by the time you interview with your top choices, so long as you don't burn out.

Jot down your impressions after each interview. You'll be surprised how much different companies can start to melt together after a couple weeks of interviewing.

Avoid burnout

If you're casting a wide net and allowing several weeks for your job search, you need to be careful about burnout. The interview process is a marathon, not a sprint.

Space out your onsite. Onsites are draining. Try to keep at least a two day buffer between them—one day to recover after your last onsite, and one day to get ready for the next (<https://www.interviewcake.com/24-hours-before-onsite-whiteboard-coding-interview>).

Don't travel too much. You can quickly burn yourself out bopping across the country. When you have to travel for an interview, try to wait a few days before you travel again.

Batch interviews that are in cities you have to fly to. Try to avoid flying to the same city multiple times—though sometimes traveling to the same place twice is better than trying to cram three or more onsite into a short span of time.

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