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Job Interview Essay – Will Foran

There is arguably no industry rifer with discontentment among its workforce than technology. Though the lucrative salaries and perks offered by many software companies attract aspiring professionals in droves, they are accompanied by grueling work hours and toxic company cultures. As a result, software developers and engineers often ‘burn out’ at a company within a few years, moving elsewhere in the industry or leaving it entirely. Replicated on a macroscopic scale, the technology industry begins to resemble a collection of nomads; it is so widely accepted to change companies often that some even consider it irrational to hold the same position for more than a few years.

The career of Will Foran offers a welcome departure from the prevailing notion that it is sinful to feel content in a software career. After graduating with a master’s degree in computational biology from Carnegie Mellon University in 2011, he has spent the past nine years working as the data coordinator for Pitt’s Laboratory of Neurocognitive Development (LNCD), which performs neuroimaging studies to research adolescent brain development. According to Will, he “translates research data into language, and vice versa, depending on what [LNCD’s] graduate researchers need”. His work is not flashy, but he enjoys it nonetheless; when asked about his long-term career plans, Will said that he has none. “If the lab loses funding or the study is completed, then I can find another place to work, but right now I have no reason to change jobs.”

Will cites author Daniel Pink’s theory of workplace motivation as to why he feels so content working at LNCD. “He says that to be happy at work you need purpose, autonomy, and mastery, and [working at LNCD] gives me all three of them. What I do is important, I’m good at it, and people give me the space to do it.” Finding a job that has these three traits is extremely rare for those in the software industry. Imposter syndrome, a feeling of self-doubt due to a perceived lack of knowledge, is rampant among younger professionals, and many companies have now distilled software development into a dull formula that accelerates the feelings of burnout. By contrast, Will’s position affords him the luxury of approaching software development as more of a creative process than a formulaic one. He gets to “solve problems in new ways, without somebody looking over my shoulder the entire time”.

In an industry where it is not uncommon for engineers and developers to work upwards of sixty hours per week, Will credits LNCD for having a healthy and balanced work environment. Even though he plays a critical role as the interface between LNCD’s graduate researchers and the results of their fMRI scans, the stakes of his work are not so high to the point of becoming stressful. Before the pandemic, he was “a consistent 9-to-5 guy”, but he admits that working remotely makes it difficult to stop thinking about work. He says that seeing messages on LNCD’s Slack workspace often draws him back into work in the evening, especially when he “see[s] the researchers online as well, and we start talking about the results of a scan late at night.”

When he can pull himself away from work, Will enjoys being outdoors. During the pandemic, he says that a lot of his free time has been devoted to “fixing my bike… and finding new ways to break my bike,” which he usually rides to and from the LNCD office. He also spent four months hiking the Appalachian Trail during his college years, an experience which he says “taught me a lot about being a person”. His interpersonal skills were not a strength at that point of his life, so doing the hike forced him to learn how to interact with complete strangers. He says that even though he is still an introverted person, he no longer shies away from any sort of social situation.

Overall, Will Foran is an excellent example of someone who has pursued a career in software for the right reasons. Many software engineers and developers are attracted to the industry by the prospect of high starting salaries, but they are not actually passionate about the field and are therefore susceptible to burnout. Above all other motivating factors, Will works in software development because he genuinely enjoys it, a rarity in the industry today. College graduates would be well-served to examine his career when planning their own path in the industry.