


How foodpanda CTO approaches hiring and retaining the best tech talent

"An amazing person is about to come through the door and our job is to find the right place for that person in our organisation," Mann says

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As shared in the [2020 e-Conomy SEA report \(https://e27.co/online-travel-is-expected-to-bounce-back-to-us60b-by-2025-says-e-economy-sea-report-20201110/\)](https://e27.co/online-travel-is-expected-to-bounce-back-to-us60b-by-2025-says-e-economy-sea-report-20201110/), although the regional digital economy is set to hit US\$300 billion by 2025, tech talent remains a key suppressor to growth in the region.

Amidst the competition for tech professionals among firms in the region, foodpanda CTO Benjamin Mann remarked the delivery giant does not face issues when hiring for tech positions.

Dishing out advice on how to hire and retain the best talent, the former CTO of Traveloka’s financial arm also emphasised the importance of team diversity and why micro-improvements represent the future of tech in the delivery industry.

In this second part of our interview with him, you will learn:

- How to cultivate an agile mindset and build a culture
- Using A/B testing effectively
- Working with customers’ feedback
- Notable trends in food delivery

Below are the edited excerpts from the interview.

How do you cultivate an agile mindset and build the culture of an engineering team that is so diverse?

I had a discussion around this topic previously with one of my bosses, who is the group CTO of Delivery Hero. We agreed that two key things need to occur to build a great tech team.

Firstly, you need to create an environment where engineering and product teams can work autonomously while achieving meaningful impact. Secondly, you should bring in people that thrive in a chaotic environment.

Also Read: [foodpanda CTO: Why autonomy is important for developing agile tech teams \(https://e27.co/foodpanda-cto-why-autonomy-is-important-for-developing-agile-tech-teams-20201218/\)](https://e27.co/foodpanda-cto-why-autonomy-is-important-for-developing-agile-tech-teams-20201218/)

When I interview a candidate, I would tell them they need to be in love with chaos because that is how we operate. We work with many factors that are out of our control and no two days are ever the same. Every morning when I wake up, I am thinking about what unexpected things will happen today and how will we need to react!

Hence, what we're trying to do – and I think we're doing a pretty good job at – is giving our teams a relatively huge amount of autonomy to experiment.

An example of the emphasis on experimenting is through the A/B tests that we constantly do. What this helps is drive home the culture that we are not married entirely to results.

Were there instances when these A/B tests proved useful in identifying problems?

There was an instance where an engineering team created a feature that we thought was amazing. Everyone was so passionate about it and it was literally the best invention since sliced bread!

However, when we rolled it out in a controlled A/B test, it absolutely tanked. It obliterated all the major KPIs we had set out.

For large organisations, you usually go into damage control mode to salvage the situation. There would be lots of finger-pointing and blaming going on. However, this was not what we did. Instead, we gathered the entire engineering team and told them they had built a great product that we still strongly believe in.

However, our mistake was that we overlooked or discovered something about our user behaviour that we were not aware of before. Hence, we should not treat this as a failure and take the new learning points and go back to the drawing board to create an even better product.

If you can create a culture like this and make sure that it is practised rather than only written in documents, you would have great tech teams creating great products. Of course, there will always be areas where you can be better.

What other qualities do you empower your tech teams to have?

We want our engineers and product managers not only to obsess about the entire journey but also to understand how it works as a business and [how their work impacts users](https://medium.com/@danielbentes/what-does-it-mean-to-be-user-centric-1abe11ac2566) (https://medium.com/@danielbentes/what-does-it-mean-to-be-user-centric-1abe11ac2566).

One of my greatest pleasures that I get out of my role is when I am having a conversation with someone and he opens the foodpanda app and go, “Hey, you’re foodpanda right?” And he browses through the app and says, “I really love this feature. This is so smart and amazing!”

On the contrary, if you are getting negative feedback, it doesn't feel good but I want my engineers to be part of this experience and understand the impact of their work.

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Through this, we will have a group of engineers that knows they're working on something more impactful than normal. This cultivates a sense of responsibility for their work too.

Your tech teams will also understand how their customers are using their features. If you can combine these things, great things will happen in engineering.

Do you face any challenges when hiring for tech talent?

To be honest, we do not. I think what I realise when hiring is the importance of describing the culture that we have and the journey we are on.

We need to be transparent of where we are in the journey, what worked well and what didn't and share this philosophy with the candidates.

My personal view is that every person that you meet in an interview is amazing at something. Our job is not to vet out the candidates and reject them. The base assumption as interviewers should be that an amazing person is about to come through the door and our job is to find the right place for that person in our organisation.

I explain to them that we want you in this organisation because we value certain aspects of your skills and at foodpanda, we have a real need for these talents to be applied for real-world problems.

With this approach, very few people would not be interested.

And the second part that I think we do really well in our hiring is that we believe we need to have diversity within our organisation.

I'm very keen to get people with little to no actual work experience to be part of our core engineering team. What we don't do is pick a group of fresh grads and assign admin work for them. In engineering terms, this would mean writing documentation.

Also Read: [Can Foodpanda really return to Vietnam? \(https://e27.co/food-panda-a-delivery-app-got-struggling-to-come-back-to-vietnam-market-20200916/\)](https://e27.co/food-panda-a-delivery-app-got-struggling-to-come-back-to-vietnam-market-20200916/)

That's not going to work. We take someone that has the talent we desire in that aspect of engineering and embed them into the actual product engineering team. Although this represents a tough learning curve, the vast majority of our candidates want to put themselves out of the comfort zone and work on hard things.

To summarise, provide a good culture and work environment and have your teams work on hard and novel problems that require them to learn new things.

So far in my career, I have found that is a very good way to attract talent and more importantly, keep them.

According to the 2020 e-Conomy SEA report, limited progress has been made in closing the tech talent gap

What are some technological trends you could see happen in the next three to five years in the food delivery industry?

Three to five years is a very long time with regards to technology innovation. If you look at the food delivery industry, technologies within it were invented less than eight years ago. There's literally no delivery platform worldwide operating on systems that existed 15 years ago.

In the foreseeable future, I do not expect something to completely revolutionise the industry. However, what I do predict is that certain technologies and advancements happening in various domains will have an impact on the micro-scale in many different stages of the user journey.

Certain technologies like machine learning, data science and even drones will slowly start changing how parts of the delivery system work. These changes will happen when such technologies have pervaded deep enough into the everyday usage that they can have a significant impact on how we deliver our goods.

Also Read: [On-demand food delivery startup foodpanda Singapore now includes groceries, household items delivery, broadening lifestyle products category \(https://e27.co/on-demand-food-delivery-startup-foodpanda-singapore-now-includes-groceries-household-items-delivery-broadening-lifestyle-products-category-20191030/\)](https://e27.co/on-demand-food-delivery-startup-foodpanda-singapore-now-includes-groceries-household-items-delivery-broadening-lifestyle-products-category-20191030/)

These changes could result in small drops in delivery time. Hence, it will not be a sole revolutionary technology but rather micro improvements. For example, harnessing technologies like machine learning in certain inflection points in the user journey could shave 10 seconds off our delivery time.

When accumulated, that is where we will see a more pronounced impact on the reduction of delivery times and an increase in customer satisfaction.

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Image Credit: foodpanda



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