Conversation Note Summaries

"Brandon Mitchell, currently a Software Engineer at Starbucks, provided insights into his journey and daily work. He emphasized the importance of understanding the company’s mission and values for interviews, having a clear and well-prepared resume, and the benefits of having a good relationship with a manager. His internship at Starbucks was 12 weeks long, divided into understanding the team’s processes, development tasks, and preparing for a final presentation. He highlighted the significance of a good Project Manager (PM) in navigating timelines, and recommended being proactive and agreeable initially.

Mitchell appreciates the work-life balance, the freedom to voice opinions, and the attractive benefits package at Starbucks, though he finds the processes slow and the cybersecurity policies outdated. He noted that Starbucks prioritizes its employees, which motivates him, and pointed out the company’s leadership in marketing and tech. He mentioned that ongoing challenges include unionization and slow project timelines. His day typically includes a 15-minute daily stand-up, bi-weekly 30-minute manager meetings, and 25% of his time working with other teams."

Paul has a diverse background, starting with a philosophy major and economics studies at Berkeley, followed by various roles, including research analyst work and self-taught skills in SQL and Python. He emphasized the importance of having a well-rounded profile combining analytics, business knowledge, and strong technical skills. At Google, he works on the Google Search App team, focusing on using data to drive product decisions. Key aspects of his work include SQL proficiency, experiment design, A/B testing, and descriptive analysis. Paul highlighted the importance of asking the right questions and storytelling with data. He also mentioned challenges such as volatility in priorities and navigating a large company's dynamics. For aspiring data scientists, Paul advised aligning experiences with job descriptions, building relationships, and engaging in practice work through platforms like HackerRank and Kaggle.

During an interview with Josh Vitello, VP of Customer Success at Tableau (Salesforce), he discussed the challenges of moving from a small to a large company and emphasized the importance of internal marketing and operational excellence within Salesforce. Despite the company's success, he noted the need for greater operational efficiency and data-driven decision-making. Josh highlighted the value of storytelling and translating technical knowledge for non-technical audiences as key differentiators for data-related roles, advising to focus on preparing examples that demonstrate this ability. He stressed the importance of asking great questions and thoroughly understanding problems before starting work. Additionally, he emphasized the growing relevance of data proficiency and the importance of validating quantitative insights with qualitative understanding. Josh offered to personally reference and assist with connecting to others within Salesforce for potential job applications.

Ross Bunker's career path has been mainly as a Software Engineer, with significant experience at Tableau Software before joining Lacework. He highlighted three main paths in data science: SWE/Coder, Data Scientist, and Statistician, each with different focuses and required skill sets. His work involves building systems for data science, focusing on cloud security, data collection, and organization. He emphasized the importance of adaptability, a strong coding foundation, and familiarity with various tools for success in the field. Ross mentioned that while data science can significantly impact decision-making, dealing with messy data and tools can be challenging.

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Adia emphasized the importance of aligning your job search with industry interests and role types, preferring data science analytics roles that combine product analytics, SQL, and experimentation over more technical modeling or engineering. She suggested practicing SQL and mock interviews, utilizing resources like Emma Ding’s YouTube channel, and focusing on effective communication of technical insights to business stakeholders. For networking, she recommended informational interviews to learn about day-to-day responsibilities and connecting with hiring managers on LinkedIn for team-specific referrals. Her top early-career lessons included leveraging your network, continuously learning on the job, and balancing applications with tools like the Simplify extension to streamline the process.

Consulting offers fast-paced learning and high pressure but comes with a demanding lifestyle. FAANG and pharma provide stability and strong pay but can be slow-moving internally and may not always offer exciting projects early on. Industry roles strike a balance between work-life and career growth, while startups offer the most variety but come with uncertainty. Ultimately, it’s worth reflecting on what aligns best with your goals and personal preferences before deciding on the next step.

Said he sent my resume to his manager since they were hiring

During my call with Stephen, he shared his journey from consulting to UChicago’s MScA program and eventually to YETI, highlighting his desire to transition from executive compensation consulting to data-driven roles like people analytics. His background in business and consulting helped him stand out post-graduation, particularly his ability to build machine learning models while effectively communicating their business value to stakeholders. At YETI, he emphasized the importance of treating projects like work experience, focusing on consumer-driven data strategies, and balancing innovation with practical company needs. He advised leveraging internships, building a GitHub portfolio, tailoring generative AI projects to target industries, and networking persistently—through alumni, hiring managers, or professors—to find opportunities. Stephen also recommended tracking job applications thoroughly and exploring meetups to expand connections. He encouraged staying in touch and reaching out if I find interesting roles or projects.

Emphasizes staying optimistic and recognizing that you've invested in a great career path, particularly given AI’s growth and the need for leadership in the field. While starting a career in a tough job market can be challenging, persistence—networking, applying widely, and keeping an open mind—is key. The right opportunity may not be perfect initially but can lead you to where you want to go. Gaining experience, even in roles that aren't your ideal fit, will be valuable long-term. If possible, relocating to company headquarters can help you integrate into the culture. Most importantly, stay confident and optimistic

"The discussion covered the operations and future direction of Collective Data Solutions (CDS), a data aggregation company that collects and resells mobile data, particularly location-based insights, for targeted advertising. While the raw data business is fading, CDS aims to pivot towards analytics and real-time data science, enriching first-party data for businesses. The CEO emphasized the evolving regulatory landscape, including privacy laws and AI-driven automation to enhance their data science capabilities.

For job searching, the key advice was to network aggressively, identify 3-4 target roles, and leverage AI to research potential employers. Connecting with CMC and Booth alumni, former college athletes, and influential professionals is crucial. Discipline is key—spend dedicated time daily applying and networking. Companies value commitment, work ethic, and experience over prestige, whether at a startup or an established firm. AI expertise is essential, and there are strong opportunities in advertising, CRM, and data science roles. Mr. Maffei suggested staying in touch, as hiring tends to pick up early in the year"

Startups offer unmatched exposure and meaningful work from day one, but many early-stage companies prefer experienced hires over recent graduates. A strategic approach is to target later-stage startups (Series B+ and 60+ employees) where you can grow with the company and potentially see it through an IPO, positioning yourself well for future opportunities. Early career moves should prioritize learning from strong mentors—finding a manager invested in your growth is key. Leverage alumni networks from Claremont and UChicago to build relationships, as most hiring happens through connections. Spend 80% of your time networking and 20% applying. Taking a role that gets your foot in the door, even if not ideal, makes internal transitions easier later.

He's in a sales role at a fast-growing startup that hires many former athletes and values smart, adaptable people. Like many, he faced the challenge of gaining experience without prior experience. His company, which operates like a "Costco for Cloud," helps businesses optimize AWS and Google Cloud usage, saving 20-30% on costs by aggregating smaller companies under a single billing umbrella. The startup has grown rapidly, skipping Series A and heading toward Series B, with ARR jumping from under $1M to $9M. He found the role through Y Combinator and enjoys the laid-back office culture and team structure. He’ll send job role links, with many opportunities in sales and operations for new grads.

Emphasizes a strategic approach to job searching and career growth. In data science, roles vary from analysts (SQL, A/B testing, dashboards) to engineers (pipelines, SQL) to economists (stats, econometrics) and AI engineers (Python). Technical skills are pass/fail—just meet the bar—while soft skills develop over time. Don’t overthink resume perfection; ATS optimization and referrals matter most. Instead of fixating on a “dream job,” identify roles where you can excel and be rewarded. Build a target list of 30 companies by cross-referencing networks and hiring trends, then reach out. He’s happy to help with networking and interview prep—just ask!

"Big tech offers prestige, high compensation, and career credibility but comes with rigid processes, limited individual impact, and slow onboarding—especially for PMs. Startups, by contrast, provide fast learning, high ownership, and rapid iteration but often lack mentorship and structure, requiring self-motivation.

It's easier to transition from technical to non-technical roles than vice versa. A focused approach is best—spend 2-3 weeks deciding on a role, then go all in. Prioritize networking, especially through alumni, and only apply to top companies when you have a referral. Cold DMs should offer multiple contact options, though calls build the best rapport.

PMs act as the “CEO of the product” but with all the blame and none of the authority. The role is heavy on meetings, documentation, and cross-functional coordination. Different companies emphasize different PM qualities—technical (Microsoft, Meta, Amazon), UX/design (Airbnb), and business sense (varies). AI is unlikely to replace PMs soon, making generalist skills valuable. PMs thrive on organizing chaos, resolving conflicts, and reducing ambiguity—essentially being a “Type A” problem-solver in a messy, fast-paced role."

Tyler, a PM in cybersecurity, highlighted the varied nature of PM roles and the importance of understanding team-specific responsibilities before joining. Their work is split between customer engagement, feature development, industry research, and technical tasks, with meetings consuming 50-75% of their time. They enjoy the role’s diversity, strategic impact, and cross-functional collaboration but find bureaucracy and meeting overload challenging. For entry-level PM roles, they emphasized the importance of product design interviews and recommended using YouTube for prep. They also suggested connecting with a Technical Program Manager at Amazon for additional insights.

Jon emphasized the value of customer-facing analytics roles, noting that sales and pricing analytics have been the most exciting and influential in his career. He recommended prioritizing company culture and employer brand over specific job titles, as it takes 2-3 years to hit your stride in a new role. He also advised that backend work can be less engaging compared to deriving insights and driving decision-making. While consulting offers breadth, he’s seen many long-term consultants become dissatisfied. Jon spoke highly of Salesforce, Tableau, Amazon, and Zillow and offered to connect me with two people: the Head of Analytics at Charlie’s Produce (ex-Tableau, well-connected) and a recently retired Adobe marketing leader who enjoys mentoring.

We discussed InternationAlly, including its development, data sources, APIs, and use of Streamlit. Augmented AI Labs is a small firm with three partners and offshore support, keeping IP from their projects to identify potential product opportunities. They focus on self-serve analytics, universal data import, and knowledge management for chat and workflow. We explored the idea that a large consulting firm could provide valuable experience, but the culture may be exploitative. A solution architect role, bridging business development and technical teams, seems like the best fit for me—requiring strong communication, problem-solving, and the ability to push for deeper technical understanding. Augmented AI is currently seeking a junior solution architect, though they want someone with more experience, but Larry, one of their partners, will bring up my name to his team. He also plans to introduce me to Boaz, a well-connected business developer. I’ll follow up by asking about the best ways to stay engaged in the Seattle AI community.

FlexShopper is a lease-to-own (LTO) company serving 25-30% of the U.S. population, primarily offering products like tires through online and in-store channels, including partnerships with major retailers like Walmart. They are looking for someone to join their risk function, focusing on model development, strategy, and analytics, particularly to improve their LightGBM-based risk and fraud models. The role requires working with AWS, MongoDB, and a newly introduced Neo4j graph database while navigating challenges with an old-school IT department. The company, though no longer a startup, remains private and offers access to leadership in Boca Raton. Their future goals include expanding their presence in the LTO market, reducing fraud, improving efficiency, and better serving an emerging neo-prime customer base.

Consulting offers valuable exposure across industries without switching companies, making it a strong fit for my background, especially with AI familiarity being a plus. Success in consulting requires curiosity, adaptability, and the ability to bridge tech and business. There are two main paths: becoming a subject matter expert (SME) or a generalist who can work across industries. Sia Partners, a smaller and more agile firm compared to Big 4 consultancies, emphasizes flexibility and collaboration over rigid, exhaustive work schedules. Their approach prioritizes problem-solving through engagement rather than overwhelming clients with lengthy presentations. The firm is hiring junior consultants in Seattle, and I have a potential referral, along with connections to other firms like Slalom, Deloitte, and Revel.

Pump has three main teams: Sales, Ops, and Engineering, with Ops handling all non-sales and non-engineering tasks, including customer support, automation, and business operations. The Ops team is currently small, with one person focused on legal and financial reporting and another on project work, such as automating Amazon pipelines and improving support systems. The Technical Ops team, consisting of two people with CS backgrounds, manages the recommendation model, dashboard automation, and verification tasks. The startup environment offers significant autonomy, rapid onboarding, and minimal hierarchy, with roles and responsibilities constantly evolving as the company scales. Growth is currently sales-driven, but they aim to expand into SaaS and cloud services. There's an opportunity to connect with the Tech Ops team for further discussions.

Chris Barlow shared his experience transitioning from big tech to a mission-driven company, working as a data analyst in a highly collaborative role that bridges technical work, business insights, and client success. The role involves heavy data wrangling (ETL from Snowflake), working with data scientists, and translating client pain points into actionable insights. Zest fosters a strong internal development culture, with mentorship, structured career growth, and investment in employees. The company is expanding rapidly, incorporating AI into lending intelligence and fraud detection, with a high client retention rate and recent $200M funding. The hiring process includes three interview rounds, focusing on experience and business cases, with a salary of $115K plus a 10% bonus.

Caroline, a Deployment Strategist at Palantir, explained the company’s structure, where software engineers build core products like Foundry, while teams like FDEs (more technical) and DSs (more strategic) implement and refine them with customers. Deployment Strategists (DSs) focus on problem-solving with data, customer relationships, and operational impact, similar to consulting but with hands-on building. She emphasized mission impact, problem-solving skills, and familiarity with Palantir’s projects in applications. She also discussed Foundry’s capabilities in data integration, transformation, and modeling and expressed strong confidence in Palantir’s future. She offered to write me a referral and noted flexibility between government and commercial roles.

Robbie Ostrow shared insights from his career journey, starting at Stanford and exploring non-tech roles before realizing his fit in the tech world. He worked at Vanta, where he held multiple roles in compliance software, and later at Q Bio, managing teams building MRI machines. Preferring a more technical role, he transitioned to OpenAI, where he works on the reliability team, balancing technical challenges with organizational understanding. He emphasized the importance of being able to unblock oneself, learning through hands-on projects, and developing product intuition. He advised being flexible, taking ownership of unclaimed work, and writing clear documentation. He also recommended startup job boards like AngelList and Y Combinator and offered to review resumes and stay in touch.

Daniel Landa shared his career path from public health to tech, starting late in CS and working at Duke before joining the Marlins, then transitioning to Palantir through a friend's recommendation. He enjoys building and solving interesting problems, from human trafficking to AI applications in defense. Palantir offers a fast-moving, flexible, and entrepreneurial environment with young, passionate employees. As an FDE, he works closely with customers to scope, build, and implement solutions, blending engineering and consulting. He highlighted Palantir’s culture of autonomy, problem-solving, and ownership and advised applying without overthinking, focusing on fit, and leveraging past projects. He also offered to refer me.

Jennifer Liang, a Strategic Cloud Engineer at Google, shared insights on roles in Google Cloud, particularly the Customer Engineer (technical sales guiding GCP adoption) and Strategic Cloud Engineer (consulting for large enterprises). She emphasized the importance of the Cloud Technical Residency (CTR) program, which opens around August-September and requires candidates to obtain the Professional Cloud Architect Certificate within the first three months. The CTR cohort's makeup depends on business needs, often favoring candidates with strong expertise in CS, ML, or data analytics. Interviews focus on a candidate’s chosen areas of expertise rather than coding challenges. She highlighted Google’s positive culture, opportunities for hands-on engineering, and the structured Cloud Sales Residency interview process, which assesses sales, cloud knowledge, analytical skills, and leadership. She also noted that AWS has a similar program and offered to provide a referral when William applies.

Matt Dietz, a Technical Program Manager (TPM) at AWS, shared his career path from a business and finance background at USC to Amazon, where he started as an AWS intern during the COVID tech boom. He initially worked on AWS AppFlow before transitioning to AWS Strategy and Business Development (SBD), where he handled high-visibility customer contracts. Over time, he shifted from Program Manager (PM) to TPM by taking on self-initiated projects, leveraging AWS training, and collaborating with engineers to build product plans. His role now focuses on GenAI applications and agentic workflows, supporting customers in co-developing solutions with AWS. He emphasized that AWS Solution Architect roles offer a great balance between technical depth and business impact without requiring deep backend coding. Amazon’s culture is team-dependent, and while workloads vary, he typically works 40-50 hours per week. He also noted internal mobility at Amazon is relatively easy and suggested exploring Business Intelligence or Business Operations roles for those interested in data-driven decision-making. He’s open to catching up again in the future.

Andrew Percival, a Data Product Manager at PitchBook, transitioned from a career in baseball to tech, initially taking the job just as an opportunity but finding the culture to be great. His role is internal-facing, focused on building tools for internal use, which allows for longer-term projects and more flexibility. He has worked on AI-related projects, including natural language search for SQL queries, similar to InternationAlly, and is currently working on connecting PBM user profiles to Salesforce and financial data to improve sales. He offered to refer William for a Product Manager role at PitchBook and even provide a verbal referral.

Cindy Lay, a Product Manager at Microsoft, is working on SharePoint Embedded, an API-based solution that enables companies with high-security needs to store and share files without building their own secure infrastructure. She originally recruited for a CS role but was moved into PM due to a lack of SWE openings. She mentioned that university grad hiring seems to be off-cycle right now and offered to ask around for updates. She also offered to introduce William to Hillary Lundberg, a recruiter, and needs a reminder to follow up on these connections. She finds work easier than school and misses the intellectual stimulation of academia.

Michael Bronsdon, a former Microsoft and Adobe executive, shared his non-traditional career path from sales and marketing into product management and enterprise technology strategy. At Microsoft, he worked on product planning, pricing strategy, and major enterprise innovations, contributing to what became Azure Active Directory and Microsoft Teams. He later moved to Adobe, working in a startup-like role within a large company, before retiring. He emphasized that careers are a marathon, not a sprint, and encouraged leveraging CMC and UChicago resources, networking strategically, and following up with connections. He praised William’s LinkedIn profile and advised being able to articulate leadership experience from baseball in a way that resonates professionally. He also highlighted the growing importance of AI in business, particularly data privacy and governance, suggesting that helping companies responsibly harness AI-powered insights could be a strong career path. He offered to connect William with someone at Microsoft and suggested looking into PitchBook’s product org and data analytics roles.

Brian Trost, a Data Scientist at Instagram, shared insights on Meta’s unique DS roles, which blend analytics and data science, ranging from MBA-style analytics roles to highly technical ML-focused positions. He works on Instagram Ads ranking models, where DS has a major strategic influence. He emphasized the importance of SQL expertise, recommending that mastering SQL is key to passing Meta’s DS interview process, which includes coding, product analytics, statistics, and behavioral rounds. The role is highly independent, with DS embedded in product teams (1 DS to 25 engineers), allowing for autonomy in defining key questions and strategy. He noted that Meta is demanding but rewarding, with 40-50 hour weeks of intense, focused work. Meta’s hiring cycle is ongoing, with job postings now tailored to specific teams and problems. He offered to write a referral and suggested applying when William feels advanced in SQL.