The Engineers Are Bloggers Now

In a perpetually tricky market for tech talent, large companies are turning to an in-house resource to get the word

Cristian Velazquez, a software engineer for Uber, fixed an important issue for the company's software. Then Uber asked him to blog about it.

Jordan Teicher, The New York Times, Jan. 7, 2023

In 2021, Cristian Velazquez helped Uber fix an important software issue. First, he and his teammates diagnosed a data processing flaw that could've stopped the app from working correctly. Then they developed a way to clear memory more efficiently, saving the company time and money.

That's the simple version, at least.

The public can read a more detailed account of the project from Mr. Velazquez on Uber's engineering blog, in a post titled "How We Saved 70K Cores Across 30 Mission-Critical Services (Large-Scale, Semi-Automated Go GC Tuning @Uber)." Be warned, though, it helps to understand technical jargon such as Go, CPUs and garbage collection.

As a staff site reliability engineer, Mr. Velazquez fully grasped those terms. At the time, though, he didn't know much about blogging. In fact, despite working as an engineer at Uber for close to three years, he didn't know the company had an engineering blog until he was asked to write for it.

"This is the first job where I started doing more external work," he said. His first blog post took a few months to finish. "I learned a lot from that one," he said. "It was a lot easier to do the next one."

That's fitting because many people learned about Uber's engineering blog from Mr. Velazquez. His post generated over 84,000 page views since it was published in December 2021, according to the company's internal data, making it one of the site's most popular pages.

Uber is one of several large companies hoping to reach engineers this way. Organizations like Google, Apple and Meta that aspire to build the future of technology are also in the blogging game — a relic from the early days of the internet.

Inside the World of Big Tech

- **Amazon**: Jeff Bezos's e-commerce company launched two prototype satellites to orbit. The spacecraft will test systems to be used in a planned megaconstellation to provide internet service from orbit that will eventually compete with SpaceX's Starlink service.

- **Spotify**: The audio streaming platform said that it would begin offering 15 hours of audiobooks each month for premium subscribers, possibly shaking up the fast-growing segment of publishing.

- **Apple**: At an age in which most consumer devices have lost some of their appeal to users, the company has remarkably increased its share of smartphone sales over less expensive rivals.

- **Google**: The Justice Department's antitrust case against the tech giant is the greatest legal threat the company has ever faced. Google hopes the stolid approach of its top lawyer will once again prevail.

These sites combine glimpses into what life is like at a company with case studies about complex programming tasks. The posts tend to have the titles of grad school papers and the editorial flair of instruction manuals. They're often created to increase transparency, provide resources to the engineering community — and entice people to go work at these companies.

"It fills that gap between your company careers page and the job description," said Jennifer Hindle, director of product marketing at Stack Overflow, an online platform where tech workers can ask and answer questions.

Stack Overflow found that 48 percent of developers use these types of blogs and other company-owned media when researching possible employers.

"It's sort of like the way Instagram is to people's real lives, where it's these highlights of a cool thing," said Devin Riley, an engineer who has worked at tech firms such as GitHub, an open software platform, and Braintree, a payments processing company. "There's a lot of drudgery and day-to-day plumbing work that has to happen for these tech companies that isn't particularly exciting and they're never going to put on their blog."

Mr. Riley recently left his position at GitHub after more than three years. He said he became tired of fully remote work and a new manager who failed to outline career growth opportunities. In his new job search, he ranked compensation, company mission and quality of the product as his top criteria. An engineering blog won't influence his decision to work somewhere more than a great salary, but it still has sway. He consults them for clues about what a company values.

"Engineering blogs give you a couple signals," he explained. "They consider engineering a core part of their business, and they're willing to invest in writing about what they do."

Some companies seem to invest more fully than others. Brands like Uber go into detail about important projects, but engineering blogs, at their worst, can read like glorified news releases and turn off potential job applicants.

"If I read a blog post and can tell it's been written by a salesperson, I roll my eyes and quit two sentences in," said David Walsh, a senior full stack engineer at the cryptocurrency company MetaMask, who also runs a personal tech blog. "If I can tell that it was written by an engineer on the team, that's someone who's been in the foxhole and had to accomplish something important. That's someone who, as an engineer, I have admiration for, I can empathize with."

Publishing these in-house engineering blogs, and encouraging people to write for them, is not a risk-free proposition. For posts to be effective, they require honesty. Yet tech companies are usually secretive about their products, not wanting leaks to give competitors any potential edge.

Now, these same companies are voluntarily disclosing their challenges and bringing in more transparency.

The blogs don't cost much to operate, companies say, since engineers aren't typically compensated extra for their writing. But running this type of publication comes with a price: time. Engineers typically earn some of the highest salaries in tech. Contributing to a blog pulls them away from their primary work of building and maintaining a company's products. As a result, it can take months to complete a single story.

"Whether our editors are taking the lead writing the story, or our engineers or data scientists are, we need an investment of time from our subject matter experts — time they don't always have," said Anita Clarke, Shopify's senior managing editor.

Companies have to navigate these trade-offs during an especially chaotic period in tech. The industry continues to add tens of thousands of new jobs every month, but at the same time, more than 153,000 workers were laid off in 2022, per layoffs.fyi, a site that logs job cuts.

Even for companies juggling the possibility of layoffs, hiring skilled engineers is vital. Surveys have shown that tech founders and executives believe that product and engineering roles were the hardest to fill.

"That's a challenge for employers," Ms. Hindle of Stack Overflow said. "Technology is not slowing down. They're still struggling with how to fill that gap, with that need for tech talent."

Before joining the e-commerce platform Shopify as a developer in 2020, Josh Larson reviewed the company's tech blog, which is designed for engineers and data scientists. "It gives you a glimpse into the tooling that's being used," he said. "Are they using modern stuff? Do they have an up-to-date blog, or was it last updated three years ago?" His future employer passed the test.

Two years later, he was one of the authors behind those blog posts. (Mr. Larson has an unfair advantage: He studied journalism in college.) In June, he published "How We Built Hydrogen: A React Framework for Building Custom Storefronts," a behind-the-scenes look at how Shopify built a new set of tools for developers. Even at 2,500 words, it has become one of the year's most popular blog posts on the site, delving into how Shopify used customer feedback to improve its product.

It's a good example of why Shopify's tech blog has become an industry success story. Annual traffic topped one million views in 2022 — up 56 percent since 2021, according to the company — suggesting that, when done well, there's a significant audience interested in this kind of information.

"The thing you hear time and time again about writing, on the internet especially, is, 'It's already been written about' or 'I don't know what I'm talking about,'" Mr. Larson said, expressing doubts that many bloggers have certainly had before him. He encourages his fellow engineers not to get disheartened. "Your perspective will be helpful to other people, he said, adding, "Just don't be afraid to share what you learned."