To Interview is Human

Interview Engineer Helin Shiah on bringing humanity, fairness, and rigor back to the technical interview

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Helin Shiah wasn't looking for a new job when she found the role of Interview Engineer at Karat. When she ran across the job listing in Hacker News, she was interested in the fact that it was a role that required her experience as a software engineer, but would also give her an opportunity to interact with more developers from varying backgrounds and different levels of experience.

To date, Helin has conducted nearly 200 technical interviews on behalf of Karat clients. She mentors her fellow Interview Engineers and is also an avid figure skater. Read on to learn more about Helin and why she feels interviewing deserves to be more than just a side job.

What motivated you to become an Interview Engineer?

I was motivated for a lot of reasons. At work, I wasn't talking to people as much as I'd have liked. My job at the time was at a relatively small company where several of my co-workers were across the country, so I was spending a lot of time coding by myself. I also wanted to get more experience with technical interviewing as my team was growing. Looking back, I wanted to gain my own, specialized work experience in interviewing.

It's so easy to conduct interviews subjectively and go with your gut feeling. Working at Karat has taught me just how much work goes into ensuring interviews are fair and objective. I take interviewing candidates seriously. But if I didn't have this experience with Karat, I'd be much more prone to falling into the trap of leaning on my intuition to evaluate candidates. I'd probably just talk to people for an hour and write notes without taking more ownership of the interview process. It's important to understand all the parameters and ingredients that constitute an ideal interview so I can implement them and create the right experience.

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What constitutes an ideal interview?

A great technical interview emphasizes reporting on what happens during the interview, and what that suggests, rather than judging the candidate's abilities. Our rule is that we don't speculate whether a candidate is capable of doing something — we assess what the candidate did instead. I think it's great that the candidates have the chance to redo their interview if they don't feel like they did their best the first time. It's a big deal. It shows that we're trying to get a full picture of the candidate — not draw conclusions based on people's performance under stress. Karat puts a lot of work into creating a fair interview process, and it shows.

Why do you think professionalizing the technical interview is important to the client and the candidate?

It's important for the industry as a whole. Anytime the subject of interviewing pops up on Hacker News, people chime in and say something like, "interviewing is broken," "whiteboarding is terrible" or "the whole process is horrible." It's indicative of a problem industry-wide. I'm happy that Karat is solving it by humanizing the process and improving the way interviewers actually conduct interviews; not just by automating the code exercises or evaluating candidates solely based on their ability to code under pressure. I think that interviewing is a big problem affecting all industry players, companies and candidates alike, and it's great that clients have Karat as a partner.
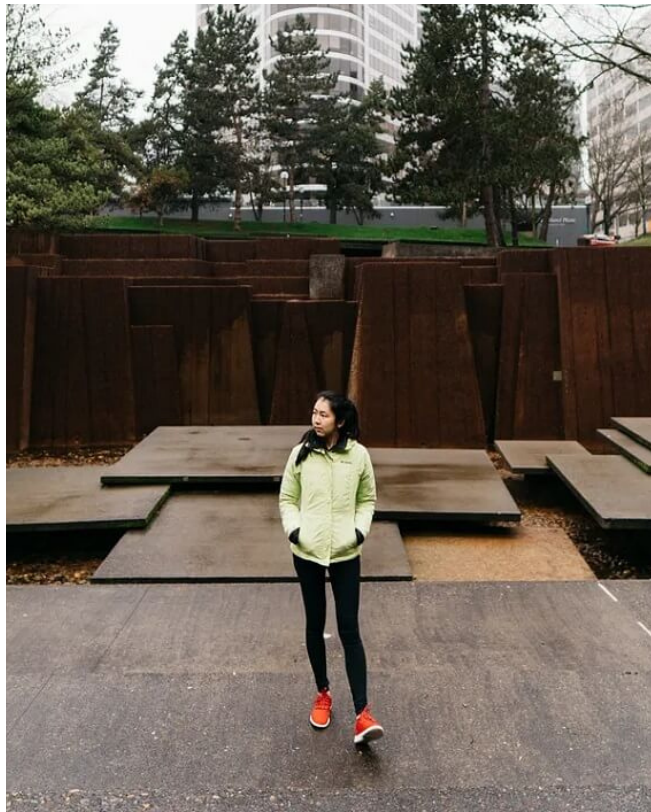
Have you done an interview where you saw that a professional approach made a big difference for the candidate?

I've done a few practice interviews with computer science students as part of our work with the [Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.](#) Those were cool because I had the chance to give direct feedback at the end of each interview. Not everyone gets the chance to do a mock interview for the industry they want to join — and get detailed feedback. For example, interviewees received feedback on how well they coded and how well they explained their solutions. I think it's a great opportunity for everyone entering the industry to hone their interview skills, especially given that there is so much misinformation on what candidates should focus on.

How do you view hand-holding in the technical interview?

Even as an experienced interviewer, I think it can be difficult to make real-time decisions about how much help to offer during an interview. Without techniques I've learned by being an Interview Engineer, I'd probably feel panicked trying to decide how to lead the candidate if they start having trouble. The Karat approach is based on minimal, moderate, and heavy hand-holding, which ensures that the interview process is productive: Interview Engineers are briefed on what to say when candidates start struggling, they don't just provide the right answer on the spot or sit back and watch them suffer without providing any help.

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What did you initially think about the role?

My first impression was that the role was intimidating, only because I wasn't exposed to communication management before. I was worried that I was going to ruin someone's life by giving them a bad interview! In retrospect, this anxiety wasn't justified at all. While there is a considerable amount to learn and pay attention to, it didn't take long before I gained confidence and realized I really was helping the candidate get their best shot at a job.

What keeps you interviewing?

The depth and variety in the job. As I see more of the Karat machine, the more I realize how cool it is. I get to see all the critical details that go into quality control, mentoring, and onboarding an Interview Engineer. There's a perception in the tech industry that interviewing is boring. That might be because developers sometimes view it as a tax on their productivity, not a value add to their team. But when you get that new team member, who meets your bar, and is ready to get going — it is a value add to the team.

Another reason I love interviewing at Karat is that I think it's still challenging. I'm always seeing different things pop up and there are always new problems to solve. I'm still expanding my knowledge of the programming field, so I enjoy hearing about people's projects. It's going to take a while for this to get old.

*To learn more about Karat, visit **Karat.com***