Code Is Cheap, Culture Is Expensive: How to Stop Hiring the Wrong Engineers

"She was the most technically brilliant engineer we'd ever interviewed—and within six months, she'd taken down two projects and three team relationships."

If you've been in software hiring long enough, you've lived this story. Maybe not in exactly that form, but close enough to feel the sting.

The cost of a bad engineering hire isn't just measured in bugs or delivery delays—it's in team morale, trust erosion, meetings full of tension, and silent Slack channels. And while code is easier than ever to produce, a strong team culture is more fragile—and more expensive—than ever to build.

So why do so many companies keep hiring great coders who are terrible teammates?

Let's talk about why it happens, how to stop it, and what to do instead.

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The Hidden Cost of the "Wrong" Engineer

What Does "Wrong" Even Mean?

The wrong engineer isn't someone who lacks talent—they often have loads of it. The problem is usually deeper:

- ⚑ Can't collaborate
- ⚑ Dismissive of feedback
- ⚑ Hyper-opinionated without being solution-oriented
- ⚑ Poor communication
- ⚑ Lack of humility or empathy
- ⚑ Misaligned with company mission or pace

These traits aren't always obvious in interviews—but they wreak havoc over time.

The Real Price Tag

Hiring the wrong engineer costs 4–5x their salary when you factor in:

- Turnover time
- Recruitment and training replacement
- Lost productivity
- Burnout ripple effects on existing team members
- Damaged client or stakeholder trust

Now multiply that cost across a scale-up team of 40 engineers. Ouch.

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Why We Keep Hiring Brilliant Jerks

1. Over-Reliance on Technical Assessments

We often confuse "hard problem-solving" with "hard to work with." Technical screens—especially leetcode-heavy ones—reward individualist brilliance over collaborative intelligence.

2. Cultural Fit Is Often Vague

"Culture fit" gets tossed around without definition. It becomes a proxy for "do I like this person" instead of "will this person help us build the team culture we need?"

3. Lack of Interview Calibration

Different interviewers optimize for different things. One goes deep on code, another vibes with personality. There's no shared rubric, no alignment.

4. The Myth of the "10x Engineer"

We're seduced by the idea that one rockstar engineer can do the work of 10. Sometimes true in a garage. Rarely true in an org.

5. Time Pressure to Fill the Role

Hiring fast trumps hiring well. The opening's been live too long. People are stretched thin. "This person's smart—just hire them." Sound familiar?

Culture Is Not Vibes—It's Behavior

Culture isn't ping pong tables and coffee budgets—it's how people behave under pressure, disagree, take ownership, and support each other.

The right engineer:
- Doesn't just ship code—they unblock teammates
- Doesn't just own services—they own outcomes
- Doesn't just escalate problems—they solve them with empathy
- Doesn't just "fit in"—they amplify what's good

And here's the kicker: those traits don't show up in code reviews—they show up in how people show up.

How to Stop Hiring the Wrong Engineers

Let's fix the process.

✅ 1. Define Culture Operationally

Make it a set of behaviors you can evaluate:
- How do we handle failure?
- How do we make decisions under ambiguity?
- What do we reward and promote?

From that, define key cultural competencies you expect:
- Team ownership
- Communication clarity
- Bias toward action
- Feedback maturity

✅ 2. Design Interview Loops That Measure This

Have cultural interview panels with teeth. Not soft "get to know you" chats.
Ask:
- "Tell me about a time you strongly disagreed with a team decision—what did you do?"
- "What's the best feedback you've received? What did you do with it?"
- "Have you ever helped mediate a conflict on your team?"

Create rubrics for evaluating these, just like you would for technical assessments.

✅ 3. Involve Diverse Interviewers

Bring in:
- Someone from another team (less bias)
- A future peer (gut-check on collaboration)
- A non-technical stakeholder (cross-functional empathy)

The broader the lens, the clearer the picture.

✅ 4. Test for Systems Thinking, Not Just Coding

Instead of asking "Can they code?" also ask:
- "Can they design for humans?"
- "Do they think about edge cases, scale, longevity?"
- "Will this person make others better?"

✅ 5. Slow Down Early to Move Faster Later

A bad hire takes 6 months to recognize and another 3 to replace. Spend a few extra days or weeks up front. Get it right the first time.

Real Stories, Real Damage

Case Study 1: A fintech startup hired an ex-FAANG engineer with brilliant credentials. Within months, two junior engineers had left. The cause? Feedback sessions that felt like interrogations and dismissiveness during code reviews.

Case Study 2: A dev tools company brought in a mid-level engineer who had average technical skills but exceptional communication and team EQ. A year later, they're a team lead—and the team's delivery metrics have doubled.

Which one was more expensive?

The Solution Isn't Simple—But It's Worth It

This isn't just about better interviews—it's about aligning your entire org around the idea that great code without great culture isn't a win.

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Hire for Multipliers, Not Just Makers

The best engineers don't just code. They elevate the people and systems around them.

If you're still hiring based on technical alone, you're playing checkers in a chess game.

The future belongs to companies that understand this simple truth:

Culture isn't built by chance. It's built by design—and by hiring the right people, the right way.

Ready to Build a High-Performing Engineering Team?

At Carson Harris Associates, we specialize in connecting companies with top-tier software engineering talent—fast. From backend architects and DevOps pros to product-focused full-stack engineers, we understand what it takes to deliver real business value, not just code.

If you're stuck chasing unicorns while your roadmap burns, it's time to change tack. I help teams hire real engineers—fast, skilled, and actually available. Let's talk before your competitors ship what you're still interviewing for.

Don't let perfectionism stall your progress. Partner with a firm that knows how to deliver.

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About Us

Carson Harris Associates was founded by Simon Carson in 2004 as an executive search firm specialising in UX/UI, software engineering and app development.

Simon has over 30 years of experience in the industry, having served previously as the Sales Director of US based, Management Search International. As Managing Director of Carson Harris, Simon oversees our business development and client relationship management, and is on hand to provide one to one guidance on all aspects of the hiring process.

Our delivery teams are based in London, Dublin, and Nairobi, and our consultants have hands-on experience in their specialist fields.

With collaboration always at the heart of what we do, our partner companies now range from startups to globally recognised brands.

At Carson Harris, we've got a proven track record of consistently securing desired outcomes for the companies we work with.

Generating CVs and portfolios is the easy part of recruitment. Understanding the talent behind them is where Carson Harris excels. We give our partners solutions rather than options.

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Testimonials

"We've been using Carson Harris for over five years now, since our early startup days, and they've been an integral part of our journey. From the outset, they became our first choice for product and UX roles—two areas that are absolutely crucial to the success of our company. Their deep understanding of our needs and ability to deliver top-tier talent has been key to our team's growth"
Hemal Vaghela

"Carson Harris have been on our PSL for many years and always one of our first go to's for software devs and UX designers. They build proper relationships and the calibre of candidate they provide is always top notch. I've dealt with dozens of agencies over the years and Carson Harris will always be one of my favourites for the professionalism they provide as well as the relationships I've built with them. Could not recommend them more highly!"
Sarah Lamontagne

" I have used Carson Harris for both perm and contract placements and wholeheartedly recommend them. I always feel incredibly well taken care of and like I am their number one priority. The quality and speed of the short-listing is unmatched and the way they understand how to pitch my company and to manage the candidate flow is great. No-nonsense, refreshingly honest recruiters."
Adina Kuse