

Systems Engineer Interview Questions

Source: Kate Matsudaira – <http://katemats.com>

Resourceful

- *Have you ever been in a situation where you found yourself having to learn a technology in order to perform a task essential to your job responsibilities? What did you do?*
- *What blogs/sites do you read to stay abreast of current trends?*

Reliable

- *Have you ever been on call before? Did you like it? Did you ever miss a page?*
- *When have you gone over and above at work? If you had to do it over, would you do it again? Why or why not?*
- *Have you ever done something on the job that you were really proud of, but no one else really knew about?*
- *What does being awesome at your job mean to you?*

Best Practices - Monitoring

- *Based on our current website (or ask about a past project or site they worked on – any example will do) what is the minimum set of things you should monitor? What is the optimum set? What has worked well in practice?*
- *Have you ever needed more monitoring and didn't have it? If so how did you get around the problem?*
- *Have you ever setup a monitoring system like Nagios, Munin, Zabbix, etc? If so, what were some of the things you learned from the process? Any changes or improvements you would have made?*

Best Practices - Disaster Recovery

- *What is a disaster recovery plan? Have you ever created one? In your opinion, how (and how often) should you test your plan?*
- *How do offsite backups play into such a plan?*

Technical Knowledge

- *What is a 3-way handshake? Hint: TCP uses it.*
- *How do TCP/IP networks work?*
- *How does DNS work? Have you ever had DNS go down? When should you have backup DNS – have you ever had to set this up for a website?*
- *How does traceroute work?*
- *You have a MySQL DB, once you login how could you find out the schema of the db? (or any other set of basic SQL commands)*
- *What was the last piece of software you installed on a server? How did you do it? Had you done it before? Do updates/installs always go this smooth for you?*
- *What are the pros and cons of using a cloud like Amazon?*
- *Write a regular expression that can find all the [phone numbers | websites | emails addresses] in a file?*

Troubleshooting

- *What is the worst mistake you have made at work? How did you fix it? What did you learn from it?*
- *Someone says the website is slow. How do you troubleshoot the problem? What steps do you take? At what point do you ask for help?*

Working problem

- *You have an application running on its own server and you want to host it at www.yourdomain.com/newservice - what do you need to do so that when users go to that url it will resolve to the right host.*

Note: there are several different ways to solve this, and they can depend on the web server you are using, so you may also want to state the webserver that a candidate has worked with or that you use – i.e. Apache, tomcat, etc.

If they don't know off the top of their head, this is a great one to give them a computer with access to google and watch them figure it out.

- *Write a script that will ping each of the following websites (insert list of 3-4 websites of your choice) and report the time they take to respond and then output these response to the screen. It should do this every 10 seconds for a minute before terminating.*

Feel free to let them use google and there own laptop – whatever makes them comfortable. Note: not all candidates are comfortable with scripting, so you should only ask this if they claim proficiency on their resume.

Documentation

- *What is the best way to keep documentation up to date?*
- *What is the minimum amount of documentation you need to support a service/system?*

Teamwork

- *How do you balance customer service skills and technical skills?*
- *Have you ever had to create a schedule for a project? What was the project? How did it go? Did you always hit your deadlines? If not, what did you learn from the experience?*
- *How do you like to work? By yourself, as a team? At home? At work? What are the conditions under which you do your best work?*
- *Tell me about a time when you "wowed" a customer.*
- *Are there any coworker behaviors that really drive you crazy? How do you deal with them?*
- *What makes you a great teammate? How do you think you could improve your soft skills to be an even better teammate?*

Culture

- *Where do you want to be in 5 years? How does this job/role fit into that vision?*
- *What would your last manager say about you? The good and the bad? How are you working to improve or mitigate the bad parts?*
- *When have you had the most fun at work?*
- *Tell me about a time you have gone over and above the call of duty.*
- *Which project is your biggest success and why?*
- *Have you ever read a book that made a big impact on you? What was it and what did you learn?*
- *Do you consider yourself weird? Why or why not?*