

Operational Platform Engineer: Interview Process

foundationsofscale.com

2025

Operational Platform Engineer: Staff-Level Interview Process

This document outlines our structured interview process for evaluating Operational Platform Engineer candidates for Staff-level positions. Each stage is designed to assess specific competencies aligned with our “Foundations of Scale” framework.

Interview Process Overview

Our interview process consists of three remote screening stages followed by a mandatory full-day, in-person onsite interview:

1. **Remote Screening:** Initial qualification via phone/video calls
 - Recruiter Phone Screen (30 minutes)
 - Hiring Manager Phone Screen (45 minutes)
 - Senior Engineer Technical Screen (60 minutes)
2. **In-Person Onsite Interview:** Comprehensive, full-day assessment at our headquarters
 - Six interview sessions (45-60 minutes each)
 - Lunch with team members (not evaluated)
 - Full tour of our facilities

Important Note: The in-person onsite interview is a mandatory component of our hiring process. We believe face-to-face interaction is essential for proper assessment and for candidates to experience our culture firsthand. No exceptions to the in-person requirement will be made.

1. Recruiter Phone Screen (30 minutes)

Purpose: Initial qualification and role alignment

Areas to Assess: - Staff-level qualifications match (10+ years progressive experience)
- Career trajectory and motivation - Compensation expectations aligned with Staff-level engineering compensation - Work arrangement expectations - Overall communication style

Sample Questions: - Walk me through your background in platform or infrastructure engineering, highlighting your progression into more senior roles - What interests you about our Staff-level Operational Platform Engineer role? - Describe significant infrastructure platforms or developer tools you’ve built that had organizational impact - What experience do you have with our tech stack (Python/Go/Rust, Linux, Kubernetes, Prometheus/Grafana, Terraform)? - Do you have experience with AI infrastructure components or ML workflow optimization? - What are your expectations for work arrangements and compensation for this Staff-level position?

Expected Outcome: Initial qualification of candidate’s senior-level experience, strategic impact, and alignment with role requirements

2. Hiring Manager Phone Screen (45 minutes)

Purpose: Evaluate role fit, strategic impact, and leadership alignment

Areas to Assess: - Strategic problem-solving approach - Platform engineering philosophy and vision - Tool builder vs. tool user mindset - Technical opinions and decision-making framework - Security and reliability approach - Organizational impact and leadership experience - Career aspirations aligned with Staff-level expectations

Sample Questions: - Tell me about a complex infrastructure challenge you solved that had significant organizational impact. What was your approach? - How do you balance building custom solutions versus leveraging existing tools? Give examples of where you've made these tradeoffs. - What strong technical opinions do you hold about branch strategy, security practices, or infrastructure design? How do you adapt these opinions to different organizational contexts? - How have you approached security in platform design? How do you balance security requirements with developer experience? - Describe a situation where you improved developer experience at scale. What was the impact on the organization? - How do you approach incident response and what systemic improvements have you implemented based on lessons learned? - What technologies or skills are you currently developing to enhance your effectiveness as a Staff-level platform engineer?

Expected Outcome: Assessment of candidate's strategic thinking, technical leadership, and alignment with our platform engineering philosophy

3. Senior Engineer Technical Screen (60 minutes)

Purpose: Technical validation and hands-on experience assessment at Staff level

Areas to Assess: - Technical depth in systems, networking, and infrastructure - Kubernetes and container orchestration expertise - Experience with HPC or specialized compute clusters - Programming and scripting capabilities at an advanced level - Practical experience with monitoring and observability at scale - AI infrastructure integration experience - Security-first approach to platform design - Advanced automation philosophy and implementation

Sample Questions: - Technical deep dive into a platform or infrastructure project on the candidate's resume that demonstrates Staff-level impact - Discuss your experience designing and managing Kubernetes at scale. What complex challenges did you overcome? - What experience do you have with HPC environments or specialized compute clusters? How do they differ from conventional cloud infrastructure? - What approach do you take to securing container-based infrastructure? How do you implement defense-in-depth? - Explain your stance on branch strategies (trunk-based vs. GitFlow) and the implications for CI/CD pipelines - Describe your experience integrating AI/ML workloads into operational platforms - What tools have you built that transformed engineering workflows? What was the organizational impact? - How do you approach designing observability solutions for complex distributed systems?

Expected Outcome: Validation of advanced technical expertise, strategic impact, and hands-on experience relevant to the Staff-level role

4. Onsite Interview (Full Day, In-Person)

Location: Company Headquarters **Format:** Six in-person sessions with different interviewers

Duration: Full day (approximately 6 hours including breaks and lunch)

Session 1: Systems & Infrastructure Architecture (60 minutes)

Purpose: Assess depth of knowledge in operating systems, networking, cloud infrastructure, and container orchestration

Areas to Assess: - Linux/Unix systems expertise - Network architecture and troubleshooting at scale - Cloud infrastructure optimization - Kubernetes and container orchestration mastery - HPC or specialized cluster experience - Security architecture and implementation - Performance optimization at scale

Sample Questions/Exercises: - Design a secure, resilient Kubernetes platform for a multi-tenant environment with strict compliance requirements - How would you design a hybrid infrastructure that efficiently supports both traditional applications and ML workloads? - What's your stance on Kubernetes operators vs. external orchestration? When would you choose each approach? - How would you design a secure service mesh implementation that balances performance with observability? - Troubleshooting scenario: A Kubernetes cluster is experiencing pod scheduling issues and network latency; walk through your systematic investigation process - How do you approach capacity planning for unpredictable, burst-prone AI workloads? - What's your position on secure-by-default configurations vs. developer flexibility? How do you reconcile these tensions?

Expected Outcome: Assessment of systems thinking, architectural expertise, and security-first mindset at a Staff engineering level

Session 2: Platform Engineering & Tool Building (60 minutes)

Purpose: Evaluate ability to design and build transformative platform solutions

Areas to Assess: - Platform design philosophy - Developer experience optimization - Tool builder mindset in practice - Strategic impact of platform decisions - Technical opinions and their articulation - Cross-functional platform integration

Sample Questions/Exercises: - Design a comprehensive internal developer platform that addresses the needs of application developers, data scientists, and ML engineers - How would you approach standardizing and securing CI/CD pipelines across dozens of teams without creating bottlenecks? - What's your stance on platform adoption—mandatory vs. optional use? How do you drive adoption of platform tools? - Describe a platform or tool you designed

that transformed how engineers worked. What was the process from conception to adoption?

- How do you balance flexibility vs. standardization in platform design?
- How would you design a self-service infrastructure provisioning system that enforces security and compliance while delighting developers?
- What technical opinions drive your platform engineering approach, and how do you adapt them to different organizational contexts?

Expected Outcome: Assessment of the candidate's ability to design transformative platforms and articulate their technical vision

Session 3: Coding & Automation Assessment (60 minutes)

Purpose: Evaluate programming skills and automation mindset at Staff level

Areas to Assess: - Advanced programming proficiency (Python, Go, or Rust) - Systems-level problem-solving approach - Architecture and design of automation systems - Testing, reliability, and error handling strategies - Security integration in automation solutions - AI/ML integration capabilities

Sample Exercises: - Design and implement a critical component of a platform automation system - Create a solution for securely managing and rotating credentials in a Kubernetes environment - Build a prototype tool that implements your preferred branching strategy enforcement - Design an API for a self-service infrastructure provisioning system - Implement a solution for automated anomaly detection in infrastructure metrics - Design and sketch the architecture for a workflow automation system that integrates with ML pipelines

Expected Outcome: Assessment of Staff-level coding abilities, systems thinking, and automation architecture capabilities

Session 4: Observability & Resilience Engineering (60 minutes)

Purpose: Evaluate advanced expertise in monitoring systems, incident management, and resilience engineering

Areas to Assess: - Observability platform architecture - AI-powered monitoring and anomaly detection - Advanced incident response management - Chaos engineering and resilience testing - Blameless postmortem leadership - SRE practices implementation - Performance optimization at scale

Sample Questions/Exercises: - Design a comprehensive observability strategy for a heterogeneous environment that includes traditional services, Kubernetes-based microservices, and ML workloads - How would you implement AI-powered anomaly detection within an observability platform? - Incident scenario: A distributed system is experiencing cascading failures during peak traffic. Lead the incident response approach from detection to resolution. - How would you design and implement chaos engineering practices in a regulated environment? - Describe your approach to establishing and evolving SLOs across diverse services - How

do you transform incidents into systemic improvements? Provide examples of how you've led this change. - How do you balance observability needs with performance overhead in high-throughput systems?

Expected Outcome: Assessment of advanced observability design, resilience engineering, and incident management leadership

Session 5: Technical Leadership & Dual Empathy (60 minutes)

Purpose: Evaluate engineering leadership capabilities and developer experience focus

Areas to Assess: - Mechanical empathy for systems - Developer empathy for user experience - Technical mentorship and leadership - Cross-team influence without authority - Strategic platform advocacy - Balancing standardization with flexibility - Communication of technical concepts across audiences

Sample Questions: - How do you balance the needs of application developers, data scientists, and ML engineers when designing platforms? - Describe how you've influenced engineering practices across an organization without direct authority - How do you identify and address critical friction points in development workflows? - Tell me about a time when you had to make unpopular technical decisions for the long-term health of a platform. How did you handle resistance? - How do you ensure security requirements don't create excessive friction for developers? - What strategies have you used to drive adoption of platform tools and best practices? - How do you approach mentoring and developing more junior platform engineers? - How do you translate complex technical concepts when communicating with different audiences (executives, product managers, developers)?

Expected Outcome: Assessment of leadership capabilities, dual empathy, and ability to drive technical change at an organizational level

Session 6: Strategic Thinking & Cross-disciplinary Thinking Assessment (60 minutes)

Purpose: Evaluate breadth of knowledge, learning orientation, and strategic vision

Areas to Assess: - Cross-domain knowledge integration - Continuous learning mindset - Strategic technical vision - AI/ML understanding and integration - Adaptability to emerging technologies - Business impact orientation - Technical opinions supported by experience

Sample Questions: - How have you applied knowledge from diverse domains to solve complex infrastructure problems? - What emerging technologies are you exploring that could transform platform engineering in the next 2-3 years? - How do you see AI/ML changing operational platforms, and what are you doing to prepare? - Describe how you've aligned platform strategy with broader business objectives - What strong technical opinions have you developed throughout your career, and how have they evolved? - How do you evaluate when

to adopt new technologies versus optimizing existing systems? - Describe a time when your diverse interests or knowledge helped you solve a particularly difficult technical challenge - What technical books, resources, or thought leaders have most influenced your platform engineering philosophy?

Expected Outcome: Assessment of the candidate's strategic thinking, breadth of knowledge, and cross-disciplinary thinking qualities

Session 7: Behavioral Interview with HR/Senior Management (45 minutes)

Purpose: Evaluate cultural fit, behavioral competencies, and Staff-level leadership potential

Areas to Assess: - Cultural alignment with organizational values - Conflict resolution and influence skills - Adaptability and resilience under pressure - Executive communication capabilities - Career aspirations aligned with Staff+ trajectory - Leadership impact without direct authority - Strategic partnership with business stakeholders

Sample Questions: - Tell me about a time when you drove significant organizational change through a platform initiative. How did you handle resistance? - Describe a situation where you had to adapt your technical strategy due to changing business priorities - How have you navigated technical disagreements with senior stakeholders or executives? - What approach do you take to building relationships across engineering, product, and business teams? - How do you balance platform engineering excellence with business objectives and constraints? - Describe how you've influenced engineering culture across an organization - What impact do you want to have at our company as a Staff-level Operational Platform Engineer? - How do you see your career evolving beyond the Staff engineer level? - What aspects of our company culture and values resonate with you most as a technical leader?

Expected Outcome: Assessment of Staff-level behavioral competencies, organizational impact potential, and alignment with our values and culture

Each interviewer should evaluate the candidate across these dimensions: - Technical expertise (1-5) - Problem-solving ability (1-5) - Tool builder mindset (1-5) - Systems thinking (1-5) - Developer empathy (1-5) - Communication skills (1-5) - Continuous learning orientation (1-5)

Additionally, interviewers should provide: - Specific examples supporting their ratings - Areas of strength - Areas for development - Overall recommendation (Strong Yes, Yes, No, Strong No)

6. Decision Making

The hiring team will meet to discuss candidate evaluations, focusing on: - Technical qualifications at Staff engineer level - Alignment with the "Foundations of Scale" disciplines - Strategic impact potential within our organization - Leadership capabilities and influence potential - Strong technical opinions balanced with adaptability - Security-first thinking and implementation - Team and cultural fit - Growth trajectory beyond Staff level

A consensus decision will be reached on whether to extend an offer, with the Hiring Manager and at least one Principal Engineer or Engineering Director required for approval.

7. Offer and Onboarding

If selected, the candidate will receive: - Competitive compensation package aligned with Staff-level engineering positions - Detailed role expectations and impact objectives - Comprehensive onboarding plan with 30/60/90 day goals - Mentorship from an OP Engineer - Introduction to key stakeholders across engineering, product, and business teams - Access to necessary resources and systems - Initial platform projects aligned with organizational priorities