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Microsoft Software Engineer Interview Guide

Learn how to prepare for the Microsoft Software Engineer interview and get a job at Microsoft with this in-depth guide.

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Note

This guide was written with the help of software engineer interviewers at Microsoft.

tl;dr

Microsoft has been a major player in the tech industry for 50 years, creating everything from operating systems to video games, VR/AR, and artificial intelligence. They're also heavily involved in new fields of tech research and development, are one of the key providers of critical cloud infrastructure, and are a primary partner of the most popular AI organization: OpenAI.

Software engineers at Microsoft are asked to work on a huge range of different domains. Microsoft typically looks to hire people with demonstrable domain expertise, who understand and exhibit a growth mindset, and who have a track record of productively interacting and learning from customers and end users to improve their work. While their culture screen is not as deeply defined as some other tech companies, they generally favor employees who are eager learners and adaptable to changing priorities and circumstances.

Tip

Prepare for your upcoming interviews with Exponent's Software Engineer Interview course, which features a comprehensive breakdown of popular SWE interview questions as well as in-depth interview rubrics and answer frameworks.

What does a Microsoft Software Engineer do?

Because Microsoft offers so many products and services, the nature of your work as a SWE will be highly team- and technology-dependent. For example, work on the Windows operating system will differ greatly from work on Azure, Microsoft's cloud computing product. Some common threads across all products and departments include a heavy emphasis on scalability as befits a company of Microsoft's size, regulatory and industry compliance, and privacy.

Here are some of the primary products you might work on as a SWE at Microsoft:

- Cloud services and Azure
- AI and Copilot
- Microsoft 365 and Office Suite
- Gaming services
- Site reliability and IT engineering
- Microsoft Teams and B2B product engineering

Microsoft also has a proprietary job leveling structure. As you might expect, the levels and roles correlate with a specific set of expectations and contain multiple levels of SWE roles. During the interview process, you will apply for a particular level or role, and your experience and skills will be assessed on that basis, with a possibility of leveling up or down depending on your performance. In this guide, we'll explore the following levels, and the different expectations of each of them:

Junior: L59–60

Mid-level: L61–62

Senior: L63–64

Staff: Surprisingly, Microsoft doesn't use the "staff" designation

Principal: L65+

Before you apply

- **Develop and deepen your understanding of the role and team you're applying to.** At Microsoft, your interview will be mostly focused on your understanding of the product, service, and subject area that the team focuses on. It's also important to identify the specific ways that scale applies to your team's work, as well as how your team might interact with other teams and with end users.
- **Research and practice common coding and system design questions and skills related to the team's work,** as you will go through several rounds of basic and advanced skills assessments. Microsoft does not utilize a question bank, so expect the questions to be built on common issues or use cases your team deals with.
- **Practice for your interview with** peers or get feedback from Microsoft interviewers who can help you identify any potential issues.
- **Think about examples of how you have interacted with customers and end users** in previous roles. Microsoft values SWEs who are well-versed in assessing their work and performance based on customer and user feedback.
- **Make sure you have a grasp of what a "growth mindset" is,** as this is a major organizational concept and value, and one you'll need to demonstrate during behavioral assessments.

Interview process

The interview process for Microsoft SWEs will depend on the level and role, but will have the same general process, with higher levels of difficulty and experience expected of higher levels and roles:

1. Recruiter screen
2. Hiring manager informational interview (optional)
3. Technical screen

Final round:

4. Coding round
5. System design
6. Domain-specific assessment
7. Behavioral

1. Recruiter screen

Once you submit your resume and other information, it will be screened by the hiring manager. The people who pass will start with a recruiter screening call.

Note

For Senior and Principal engineers, the expectations for the resumes will be much more stringent. If you're applying for L63 and up, your resume should focus on speaking about your experience managing and mentoring people, as well as other senior-level responsibilities.

The recruiter call will be a very high-level discussion about the role and expectations on both sides. You'll be expected to walk through your career and describe your direct experience working with the technology and products relevant to the Microsoft team you're applying to. The recruiter will assess your experience level and skills and determine if you're a good fit before moving you to the next round.

Some questions you might hear in this round are:

- Why do you want to work at Microsoft?
- What kind of experience do you have building products at scale?

Tell me about your past projects. View 4 answers →

What does a growth mindset mean to you? See question →

2. Optional hiring manager interview

For higher-level roles like senior and above, the recruiter may offer to schedule an informational interview to help you gain better insight into the role from someone on the team. Although the recruiters are briefed on the sort of experience the team is looking for, they may not be able to provide the kind of direct experience that a hiring manager can offer. This is a chance to learn more about the team and products, and can be worthwhile if you feel you need more clarity.

3. Technical screen

This interview, conducted by the hiring manager, will be a primarily conversational assessment of your skills and ability to think through a problem the team has faced or, in some cases, is currently facing. While you won't necessarily be writing code or diagramming your solution, the interviewer will expect you to design a solution that is extensible and scalable. It is very likely that the problem will be somewhat open-ended, and you should be able to explain why you chose the solution you did.

For senior engineers and up, be prepared to design a solution that accounts for the functional and nonfunctional requirements that the system has, and shows your understanding of the importance of handling a significant load. For example, system demands in different high-usage regions, and how you can use concurrency to offset these demands.

Some problems the manager might ask you to solve include:

- Design a solution to handle a high volume of AI prompts in a particular region.
- Develop a tool to monitor and assess potentially fraudulent behavior in the Microsoft store.
- Design a virtual machine based on a specific set of customer requirements.

Final round:

For these interviews, the hiring manager will assign interviewers to conduct particular skill assessments, while also measuring the candidate on a set of 4 criteria:

1. Collaboration and cross-team work
2. Adaptability and how you handle changes or conflicting requirements
3. Technical excellence and coding or design skills
4. Customer obsession and how you cater to customer or user needs

4. Coding

This assessment will focus on a question chosen by the interviewer. Microsoft teams are given a lot of control over what they can ask in interviews; the questions they choose will be straightforward and involve something that relates to the work their team does. This assessment will likely not be very difficult, nor will it be structured to trip you up or trick you, but you must be able to clear it capably and within the 60 minute time limit, no matter which level you're applying for.

To prepare for this assessment, refresh yourself on data structures, like linked lists, trees, tries, and graphs. Keep in mind the four criteria mentioned above. In addition to technical excellence, the interviewer may assess your ability to adapt to changes by adding or altering the question while you're working on a solution.

Some of the questions you might be asked are:

Given an array of integers, return the pairs with the minimum absolute difference between them. View 2 answers →

Implement LRU Cache. View 26 answers →

Implement k-means clustering. View 2 answers →

Delete Node in a Binary Search Tree (BST). View 4 answers →

5. System design

A more difficult round than the coding assessment, the system design round is one that interviewers tend to lean on to set your level, moving you up or down based on your performance. As you work through your solution, the interviewer will assess your performance in a number of key areas:

- Does your approach account for the scale that Microsoft products typically deal with? A company with a suite of products and services used by millions of people needs to have systems that efficiently deal with the load and account for any bottlenecks.
- Does your solution account for the security, privacy, and compliance benchmarks that customers and regulators expect from a company as large as Microsoft?
- Are you communicating and explaining your process as you go, or does the interviewer have to prompt you to talk through your approach? This includes asking questions, even ones that indicate that you don't know or understand something. Interviewers would rather see you make "coachable" mistakes than not ask questions at all.
- Are you showing attention to detail and willingness to incorporate data into your answers? Even if you're just using estimates, making sure your solution accurately reflects the data you are using is key.
- For Senior and Principal SWEs, the interviewer will also expect you to show the depth of your domain understanding. Because this is a level-setting interview, a lack of domain knowledge might mean getting downleveled, even if your solution is performant. In some cases, the manager does this to allow you to soak up more domain-specific experience before leveling you up to the Senior or Principal SWE levels.

Some system design questions you might see are:

- Design a chat feature for users of Microsoft Azure.

Design a system to log messages in order View 12 answers →

Design a health app within the Microsoft ecosystem. See question →

Design a service like Azure Key Vault that securely stores and retrieves secrets, certificates, and keys for applications and users. See question →

6. Domain skills assessment

This assessment will be a deeper look at your domain knowledge and an assessment of your understanding of the expectations and standards at a company like Microsoft. This will be catered both to your past experiences and to the limitations you might have based on those experiences.

For example, if you're applying to work as a SWE on the Azure team, you might get a question about cloud architecture, explaining how CMS content hosted in one region of Azure is stored and made accessible in other regions. This question is meant to test your ability to think about things like scale and efficient operations, because many SWEs, including those with a high level of technical skill, may not be deeply familiar with cloud operations on the scale of Azure.

This round is domain-specific, so prepare by researching the product or service offerings of the team you are applying to, including understanding how many users it has, and what its most common issues and security risks might be.

Some examples of domain-specific questions you might see:

- Azure Cloud services on the West Coast are having issues. How would you migrate these services to another region?
- What are some of the biggest risks when pushing AI models into production?

You're a financial security product PM. How would you use AI to enhance security across banking systems? See question →

What happens when you navigate to a website? View 9 answers →

7. Behavioral

Depending on the level you're applying for, this round will focus on determining your ability to either collaborate within your team or collaborate across teams. For SWEs applying for the first two levels, the interviewer will ask you about your past experiences working with other team members, how you handle changing priorities, and for examples of times when you showed a growth mindset. Looking over your career and writing out notes on different examples can help you answer with confidence, as will practicing your answers in a mock interview.

For the Senior and Principal levels, SWEs will also be expected to speak about the role that a senior team member plays as a mentor and manager, and their direct and measurable impact on the successes of their team and organization.

As a level-setting round, the interviewers want to hear you speak candidly and honestly about your successes and failures, and to show that you understand the way that mentorship has helped you and how your mentorship can help your reports. Another important aspect is describing your experience collecting, understanding, and acting on customer and user feedback. Microsoft places a lot of stock in "customer obsession", so speaking to how you've created processes for gathering feedback and acting on that feedback will help you shine.

Some behavioral questions they might ask include:

Tell me about a time you helped someone else succeed. Have you ever succeeded because of someone else's help? View 2 answers →

Tell me about a time when you showed growth mindset. See question →

What would you do if you disagreed with your manager? View 12 answers →

Describe a time when your project failed. View 10 answers →

Tell me about a time when you faced a conflict while on a team. View 4 answers →

Additional resources

- Microsoft's Blog
- Microsoft Developer Blog
- Microsoft's Growth Mindset
- Culture at Microsoft
- Microsoft Candidate COC and interview guide
- Microsoft Interview Questions
- Software Engineer Interview Questions

FAQs about the Microsoft SWE interview

How should I prepare for a Microsoft Software Engineer interview?

Research as much as you can about the role and team, focusing on the kinds of users and customers who depend on the product or service. Practice the most common SWE and code assessment questions, and work on your interviewing skills and confidence with mock interviews. Read about the concept of a growth mindset and the values that it contains, and then review your professional history for examples of times when you embodied these values.

How much do Microsoft Software Engineers make?

According to a leaked Microsoft document, software engineers at Microsoft make the following base salary on average, along with possible stock:

Below-senior

- L59: $132,500
- L60: $145,300
- L61: $160,100
- L62: $174,000

Senior

- L63: $191,300
- L64: $207,250

Principal

- L65: $227,400
- L66: $243,700
- L67: $264,100

How long is the Microsoft Software Engineer interview process?

The length of the process will change depending on the role and team you are applying to, the availability of the interviewers, and whether the role is an immediate need or not. Interview cycles at Microsoft tend to take between 3 to 8 weeks.

Do I have to have experience at a large company to get a job at Microsoft?

The short answer is no, but it will depend on which level you are applying to. For example, having a high level of skill and meeting their criteria for behavioral and culture fit might be enough to get a job in the L59–60 range, but higher-level roles will be expected to have some direct domain experience. If you apply for a higher level role and do well, they might choose to downlevel you to give you that experience before considering you for a promotion. In other words, you might get a job, but it may not be at the level you applied to.

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