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Coinbase Engineering Manager (EM) Interview Guide

Learn how to prepare for the Coinbase Engineering Manager interview and get a job at Coinbase with this in-depth guide.

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Note

This guide was written with the help of engineering manager interviewers at Coinbase.

tl;dr

Coinbase is a cryptocurrency investment company that offers a wide range of products and manages approximately 12% of the global supply of bitcoin as a custodian. Coinbase has 108 million users who engage with their products and storage services. As the world's most popular tool for crypto investors, they continually work to develop and improve crypto trading products, with the stated aim of increasing economic freedom for more than 1 billion people.

Coinbase has grown rapidly since its founding in 2012 as a Y Combinator startup. As of 2024, Coinbase boasts approximately 3,700 employees. Coinbase is currently adding new processes and approaches to its company structure, including its hiring process, as it scales up and expands its role in the global crypto market.

While the transition from a lean startup to a more formalized company structure is ongoing, Coinbase still **stays true to its entrepreneurial roots and values people who bring this approach to their work**. Coinbase prizes employees who function well with a high level of autonomy and responsibility. Coinbase is a remote-first company and offers the vast majority of its workforce the option to work fully remote. If you like figuring things out for yourself or in informal collaboration with others, hustling at work, and working in the crypto space, Coinbase might be a good place for you.

Tip

Prepare for your upcoming interviews with Exponent's Engineering Manager Interview Course, which features a comprehensive breakdown of popular EM interview questions as well as in-depth interview rubrics and answer frameworks.

What does a Coinbase Engineering Manager do?

Coinbase has achieved its incumbent status in the crypto space by developing and iterating on a wide range of products, each oriented to a different end user, market, or use case. These products have their own dedicated engineering teams, as do their various backend, security, data, and infrastructural projects, and each of these teams is led by an engineering manager.

Coinbase Engineering Managers coordinate the short- and long-term planning of projects, set objectives and key results (OKRs), and assign work. They are also the key points of contact between teams, assisting with project planning, coordination, and testing. Coinbase favors hiring EMs who have a high level of technical

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knowledge and skills, as many EMs will spend **~30% of their time** writing or working with and writing code.

Some examples of Coinbase teams an EM might be assigned to are:

- Agent Productivity Tools (APT)
- Platform
- Institutional Products
- Coinbase Card
- Coinbase Wallet
- Automation

The average total compensation for engineering managers at Coinbase is:

- M5: $354,000
- M6: $562,000
- M7: $772,000

Before you apply

- Take some time to **learn about the history and current state of cryptocurrency** and other digital assets. Study the system design principles, functional, and nonfunctional requirements of crypto exchanges, wallets, and custody tools.
- Read through both the Coinbase company blog and engineering blog to learn about Coinbase's current goals and priorities. Because Coinbase offers such a wide range of products, you must be able to speak confidently **about the principles behind these products** and who and what they are meant for.
- You will be expected to do a **deep dive into a past project**, discussing the steps in detail and assessing the tradeoffs that you encountered at each step. Bolster this by learning about project retro interview questions.

Interview process

Coinbase applicants for M5 and M6 roles go through 3 interview steps:

1. A remote recruiter call to review the minimum required skills and experience
2. A technical OA to assess requisite skills
3. A final interview loop conducted remotely of 4–5 rounds

1. Recruiter screening

The goal of this call is to determine your fit for the role and Coinbase more generally. In addition to a high-level discussion of your career, goals, and experience as a manager, the recruiter may ask you what interests you about Coinbase and your experience with crypto or other digital assets.

Some sample questions to prepare for are:

- Why do you want to work at Coinbase?
- Walk me through your career as a leader.
- How do you measure the performance of an engineering manager?
- What is your approach to managing poor performers on your team?

2. Technical screening

The technical assessment at Coinbase is an unproctored and automated online assessment using CodeSignal. The assessment is scored with a maximum score of 1,000, and each role has a particular threshold that candidates must meet to move to the next step of the interview process. Technical questions are broken up into 4 levels, with each level worth 250 points. The questions might be related, for example the first 2 focused on writing a piece of code for sorting data and then the final 2 focused on handling edge cases in datasets.

Some questions you might see:

- Design a HashMap

- Merge sorted arrays
- Design a task management system interface or backend, depending on the team
- Design a linked list

3. Final interview rounds

Hiring manager interview

This is an unscripted conversation with the hiring manager. It's a much more in-depth discussion of some of the same topics covered in the recruiter screening, with a greater focus on both your recent experience and the details of the role itself. The hiring manager will ask you about your motivations, both in terms of joining Coinbase and your career as a whole, and where you see it going. They'll also ask you to talk about some projects you worked on in the last 5 years that you're proud of.

A key component of this round is **a demonstration of leadership experience**. While managing large teams and working many years in a leadership role is impressive, the interviewer will want you to go deeper into what you learned, examples of difficult choices where you assessed trade-offs, and challenges you faced and overcame with your reports.

Another key component is being conversant in Coinbase's organization, products, and goals. EM candidates who don't research Coinbase before this step will not be considered a good fit, as Coinbase wants people who are excited about the organization's global aspirations and about the crypto space.

Some questions you might be asked in this round are:

- What is the biggest organizational challenge you have faced and how did you handle it?
- Tell me about a time when you failed as a people manager.
- Tell me about a time when you handled a difficult stakeholder.

System design

Because Coinbase uses a team-dependent hiring process, the sort of system design questions you get may have goals specifically focused on your team's role.

Tip

Coinbase's scale and the fact that it handles financial transactions in the hundreds of billions of dollars mean that security is a major point of emphasis for all teams. **Address security early and often in your design** to show the interviewer that you match Coinbase's priority to shift security left as much as possible. It's also important to, if it's relevant, find ways to discuss the security considerations particular to cryptocurrency.

You might face questions that ask you to design a financial services or trading platform like Robinhood, or to design a stock exchange. A common mistake many Coinbase interviewers make at this step is not drawing a diagram of their proposed system during the first half of the process. While designing an optimal system is the goal, this is a time for you to demonstrate how you think through issues or tradeoffs. The diagram is a great jumping-off point for discussion, and it allows the interviewer to understand your process holistically, asking you about why you've structured your stack the way you did, why you chose a certain API, and so on.

Another common problem is focusing too much on granular details and the exact calculations of how your proposed system will work. This round is meant to be more of a conversation and process-based assessment. Coinbase interviewers value **clear communication**, so focus on clearly explaining your process.

As an EM, you will be under extra scrutiny to think through the potential issues your proposed system might face. The interviewer will not just want a functional system but one with built-in redundancies, which accounts for and reduces data bottlenecks or any other points of failure, and which can scale up to 10x users or even more.

Some system design questions you might encounter are:

- Design a cryptocurrency wallet system
- Design Robinhood
- Design an international crypto remittance product.
- Design a stock exchange
- What is the time it takes to send a signal from one computer to all other computers?
- Design a social crypto bank

Coding

Depending on whether you're interviewing for an M5 or M6 role, this round may not be a major point of emphasis. Even though Coinbase prefers to hire technically skilled EMs, writing lots of code will not be the primary focus of your role. This round should be fairly straightforward, asking you to design an algorithm to handle arrays or determine the optimal order to take a set of academic courses. Interviewers will not attempt to trick you or trip you up, but will expect an algorithm optimized for time and space complexity. The interviewer may offer a hint or probe you for a better solution by asking you why you chose a given approach.

If you complete the task quickly, they may assess you further with follow-up questions, changing the parameters of the task; for example, stating that your solution does not fit in memory. Being able to handle these edge cases and new parameters is important for distinguishing yourself, as Coinbase expects its team members to push themselves beyond their limits and eagerly take on new challenges.

Some example coding questions you might encounter are:

- Merge k arrays
- Determine the shortest route from A to B using a set network of roads
- Debug a React app (for frontend roles)

Behavioral

Although Coinbase has a specific work culture, its behavioral interviews are not designed to probe for a particular set of characteristics. Interviewers are mostly interested in uncovering any major red flags, such as a lack of management experience, a track record that shows the candidate shying away from making difficult choices, or an unwillingness to self-reflect.

One of the most important things you can do is to develop a solid to excellent understanding of cryptocurrency technology and issues. As you research, learn every term that you can, as you will be expected to know concepts like “crypto wallet custody” and the difference between “self-custody” and a “custodial exchange wallet.” Even if you aren't a deeply knowledgeable crypto expert, showing enthusiasm for and an understanding of the ways blockchain can be used will help you stand out.

EMs will also be asked about key elements of their past work, including any challenging people management problems they faced, times when they collaborated successfully with cross-functional stakeholders, how they go about planning the day-to-day of their team's work, and how they balance workload complexity and different priorities. Coinbase expects employees to hustle at work and not to be overly reliant on processes. Speaking about why you thrive in autonomy and unstructured collaboration will show the interviewer your alignment with Coinbase's values.

Some example topics you may be asked in this round:

- What excites you most about the cryptocurrency space?
- Where do you see crypto and other digital assets going in the next 5 years?
- Tell me about a time you made a mistake.
- Describe a time when your project failed.
- Tell me about a time when you dealt with a conflict with engineers.

Resume deep dive

A newer element of the interviewing process, this deep dive focuses on your recent work, allowing you to **highlight the role you played as a leader on a major project**. As an EM, think carefully about which project you choose, as the goal of this exercise is not just to highlight your successes but to give you a chance to make an honest and objective assessment of your decisions, good and bad. As such, you may want to choose a recent project that involved a lot of difficult decisions, workload issues with your team, or other management challenges.

Another thing the interviewer will want to hear is how your project engendered exponential growth, for example, 10x-ing the number of active users or reducing the latency by a massive amount. Linear performance gains will not be considered good enough for Coinbase's standards and goals. As a growing platform in a relatively new market, Coinbase is deeply invested in scalability and wants you to show your process and forward-thinking when working on a project that will require scale.

Tip

A common issue many EM candidates have with this interview is not being able to point out areas for improvement in their past projects. As they describe the details of the project and their approach to team management, the interviewer expects to hear some constructive self-criticism, identifying areas where a lesson was learned or a mistake led to an invaluable new insight or approach. Presenting your project as a complete and flawless triumph will lead the interviewer to doubt your ability to self-assess, be objective, and improve your skills.

Additional resources

- The Coinbase blog
- The Coinbase Engineering blog
- Coinbase Culture Doc
- Coinbase Security page
- Get a Job at Coinbase: Interview Process and Top Questions
- Engineering Manager Interview Course
- Top Coinbase Engineering Manager Interview Questions
- Top Coinbase Interview Questions
- Top Engineering Manager Interview Questions

FAQs about the engineering manager interview at Coinbase

How should I prepare for a Coinbase Engineering Manager interview?

Start by reviewing system design, coding, and behavioral questions. Even if you are a crypto or digital asset expert, read crypto news, blogs, or other resources you can find and brush up on any new developments or issues.

How much do Coinbase Engineering Managers make?

According to Levels and Glassdoor, Coinbase Engineering Managers are paid the following:

- M5 (entry level): $354,000
- M6: $562,000
- M7: $772,000

How long is the Coinbase Engineering Manager interview process?

The Coinbase job portal states that their hiring process from application review to offer typically takes 60 days, although the candidate is not directly involved in all of these stages.

Does Coinbase offer internships?

Coinbase offers internships to students during the summer break, with 2 start dates to accommodate students who study both in quarters or semesters. Read more about internship benefits on Coinbase’s internship page and view emerging talent opportunities on Coinbase's job site.

Do I have to be a cryptocurrency owner or investor to work at Coinbase?

There is no requirement to have any financial investment in crypto, but all employees are expected to have a solid understanding of the blockchain, cryptocurrency, and digital asset marketplace. Coinbase is forthright about their high standards for employee investment and productivity, and they aim to hire people who are already enthusiastic about their mission and cryptocurrency in general.

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