

FOR ENGINEERING MANAGERS HIRING ON A 20–200 PERSON TEAM

The 30-Day Loop

How to fill a senior engineering role in **thirty days** without lowering the bar, dropping a stage, or paying an agency fee.

68 → 31

Days to hire, before and after, across 24 searches

86%

Offer acceptance once the loop fits inside two weeks

17 hrs

Of engineer time given back on every hire

01 • The funnel is not your problem

02 • Designing a four-stage loop

+ • The thirty-day calendar

03 • Build your loop and scorecard

04 • How Westhill got to 31 days

+ • Two printable worksheets

Written for the manager who runs their own loop. Every worksheet in it is free to copy, adapt and put your own logo on — including inside a company that competes with ours.

WHAT IS IN HERE, AND WHAT IT IS FOR

A hiring loop you can run with the team you already have.

Every figure comes from 24 senior engineering searches Brightline ran or advised on between January and December 2025, at companies of 20 to 200 people. Where a number is a median it says so.

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WHO THIS IS FOR

Engineering managers, heads of engineering and founders who run their own loops — **with no recruiting team**, or with one recruiter shared across the company.

It assumes you can block calendar time and change your own interview stages. If you cannot do either, start with the calendar and take it to whoever can.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

Your current job description · your interview stages and who runs them · the last three candidates you rejected and why · your comp band.

HOW TO USE IT

Read chapters 1 and 2 before your next kick-off. Fill in the worksheets with the panel in the room — it takes forty minutes and it is the only meeting this playbook adds.

24
Searches behind the numbers

Senior and staff-level engineering roles at 17 companies, 2025. Backend, platform and infrastructure; no leadership searches, which behave differently.

31
Median days, kick-off to signature

Measured from the scorecard sign-off meeting to a signed offer, including two searches that ran past 60 days and one that closed in 12.

0
Stages this playbook adds

Nothing here makes your process longer. Two of the four stages below are probably already on your calendar under a different name.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

Decide what you are testing before you meet anyone, run the whole loop inside one week, and write the debrief the same day — the rest of hiring is logistics.

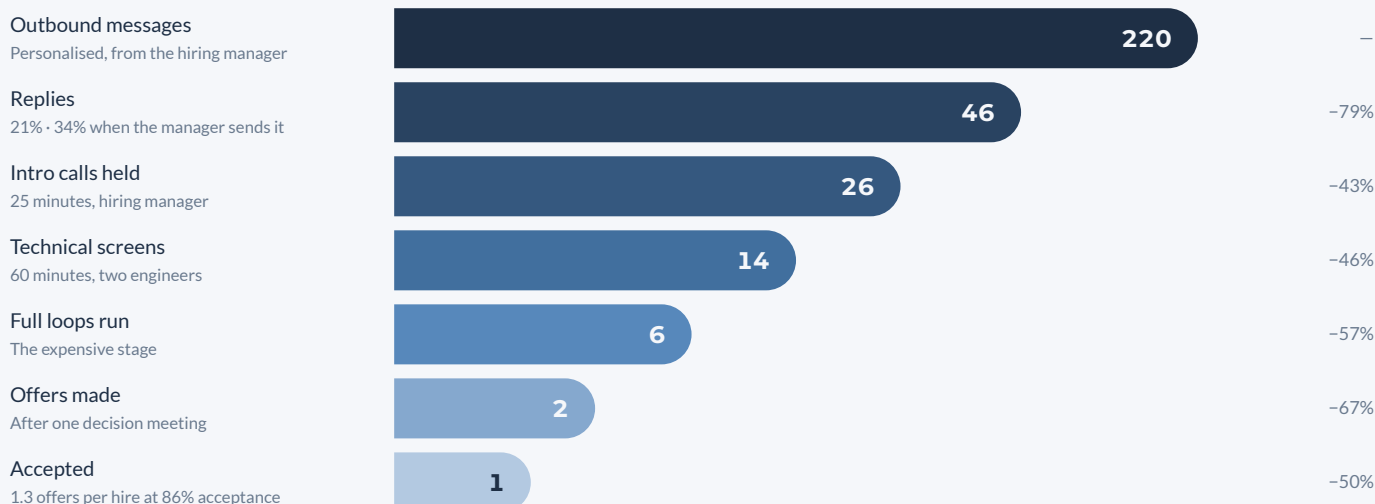
01

The funnel is not your problem, the calendar is

What one senior backend hire actually costs in messages, calls and engineer hours — and the two stages where good candidates quietly disappear.

Nearly every team that says "we cannot find senior engineers" is finding them. They are losing them between the screen and the loop, to a competitor whose calendar moved faster.

ONE SENIOR BACKEND HIRE · MEDIAN OF 24 SEARCHES, 2025



THE TWO EXPENSIVE DROPS

Screen to loop loses **57% of the people you have already met and liked** — and the top stated reason is not skill, it is a scheduling gap of nine days. Offer to accept loses another third, almost always to a company that got there first.

A

Six loops, not two hundred messages

The top of the funnel is a volume problem you can solve with an afternoon. The middle is a calendar problem, and no amount of sourcing fixes it.

B

41 engineer-hours per hire

Screens, loops, debriefs and the meetings about the meetings. At a loaded senior rate that is roughly \$4,920 of engineering time — before anybody is hired.

C

Manager-sent notes reply at 34%

The same message from a recruiting address replies at 14%. Twenty minutes of the hiring manager's Tuesday is the cheapest lever in this entire document.

BEFORE CHAPTER TWO

Three numbers, twenty minutes, out of whatever system you already keep.

01

Reply rate on your last fifty outbound notes — and whose name was on them.

02

Median days between screen and loop over your last ten candidates.

03

Offer acceptance for the year, with the stated reason beside every no.

THE STAGE NOBODY MEASURES

The best engineer in your pipeline is already in someone else's process.

Senior engineers are not comparing your offer to unemployment. They are comparing it to two other loops running the same fortnight, and **the one that finishes first usually wins** — not because it paid more, but because saying yes ended the whole tiresome business.

4.2 days

Median wait from application to a first human reply

0.9 days

What the fastest quartile of teams manage

3.1×

More likely to accept when the loop closes inside 14 days

68%

Of declined offers named a competing offer already signed

Brightline search data · 24 senior engineering searches at 17 companies of 20–200 people · January–December 2025. Decline reasons are self-reported by the candidate at the close call, so treat the 68% as directional.

RULE ONE

Standing slots

Two loop windows a week, blocked for the quarter, held whether or not there is a candidate. Scheduling stops being a negotiation and starts being an offer of two dates.

RULE TWO

Same-day debrief

Written before anyone goes home, independently, then read aloud. A debrief that waits until Monday is a debrief that has already been rewritten by whoever spoke first.

RULE THREE

One decision meeting

Thirty minutes, everyone who interviewed, a decision at the end. Not a Slack thread that runs for four days while your candidate signs somewhere else.

02

Designing a four-stage loop

Five hours of candidate time, one calendar week, four stages that each test something the others cannot. Anything that fails that test comes out of the loop.

A stage earns its place by being the only place a signal can appear. If two stages test the same thing, one of them is costing you a week and telling you nothing new.

STAGE	WHAT IT IS ALLOWED TO TEST	WHO RUNS IT	TIME	STOP HERE IF
Intro call Day 1–2	Motivation, constraints, comp range, and one project told in their own words.	Hiring manager, alone	25 min	Comp or level is out of band, or they cannot say what part was theirs.
Technical screen Day 3–4	Reading and debugging real code in their language. Not puzzles, not whiteboard trees.	Two engineers	60 min	They cannot explain a trade-off they themselves made.
Working session Day 5–7	A scoped change in a small repository they were sent 24 hours earlier, pairing.	Two engineers, one senior	90 min	No test written and no question asked in ninety minutes.
Scope conversation Day 5–7	How they would take a real project on your roadmap, and what they ask you about it.	Manager plus one peer	45 min	No questions about the team, the code or the customer.

THE SCORECARD · FOUR SIGNALS, SCORED AGAINST WRITTEN EVIDENCE

S Ships Evidence of finished work reaching users, repeatedly, in a team the size of yours. Ask: what shipped, when, and what broke afterwards.	D Depth One system they can explain all the way down, including the part they got wrong. Ask: take me to the bottom of one thing you built.	C Collaboration A disagreement they de-escalated, and what the other person was right about. Ask: a review that went badly and what you changed.	J Judgement A decision they would make differently now, described without blaming the org. Ask: what would you undo, and what did it cost?
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SCORING, SO THAT TWO INTERVIEWERS MEAN THE SAME THING

1 No evidence The question was asked and nothing usable came back.	2 Claimed, not shown "We rebuilt the pipeline" — with nothing underneath it when you push.	3 One worked example Specifics, a trade-off they made, and what it cost them.	4 More than one Two examples, plus what went wrong and what they did about it.
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Two 3s and no 1s is a hire. A single 1 on **Ships** or **Depth** is a no, not a maybe — write it down before the debrief so it is a rule rather than an argument.

THE FRAMEWORK, ON ONE PAGE

The thirty-day calendar

Four weeks, in order, with the work that has to happen before it. Nothing in week one involves talking to a candidate — which is exactly why most searches that start on a Monday are already two weeks behind by Friday.

Week 1 DECIDE	Week 2 MEET	Week 3 TEST	Week 4 CLOSE
Scorecard signed Four signals and the evidence you will accept, agreed by everyone who will interview.	120 notes out Sent by the hiring manager, in two sittings, referencing something they built.	Loops Mon–Wed Working session and scope conversation on one day where you can manage it.	Decision Monday Thirty minutes, everyone who interviewed, a yes or a no before it ends.
Loop designed Four stages, who runs each, and the stop-here line written down.	Intro calls Tue & Thu Twenty-five minutes each, six per week, no exceptions and no reschedules.	Debrief same day Written independently before anyone leaves, then read aloud together.	Offer within 24 hrs Verbal the same afternoon, paperwork the next morning, band already agreed.
Calendars blocked Two standing loop windows a week, for the whole quarter. This is the week's real work.	Screens within 48 hrs Booked at the end of the intro call, while they are still on the phone with you.	References started Two, arranged in parallel with the loop rather than after the decision.	Close conversation Founder or VP, fifteen minutes, about the work — not a negotiation.
List of 60 Named people, not a search string. Sixty is one focused afternoon.	Comp said out loud The band, in week two. Nothing wastes four weeks more reliably.	Second batch out Another 60 notes, so a no in week four does not restart you at zero.	Loop retro Fifteen minutes: which stage told you the least? Cut it before the next role.

01

Week one has no candidates in it

Every search that skips it pays the time back later, in a debrief where two interviewers discover they were assessing different jobs.

02

Standing slots beat fast scheduling

"Tuesday at two or Thursday at ten" closes in one message. "When are you free?" takes four days and one lost candidate.

03

Thirty days is a ceiling, not a target

Nine of the 24 searches closed inside three weeks. None of the fast ones ran extra stages, and none of the slow ones failed on talent supply.

WHEN YOU DO NOT HAVE FOUR WEEKS

Monday

Scorecard in the morning, loop in the afternoon, sixty names by five o'clock. No candidate contact.

Tuesday–Wednesday

Notes out at eight, intro calls from eleven. Screens booked while the candidate is still on the line.

Thursday

Loops all day in the standing slots, debriefs written between them, references started at four.

Friday

Decision at nine, verbal offer by noon, close conversation before the weekend takes them.

Three of the 24 searches ran this way, all for backfills where the team already knew the shape of the role. It works exactly once per quarter — the standing slots are what make it possible, and they are the thing that gets given away first.

03

Build your scorecard and your loop

Print this page and fill it in with the panel in the room. Forty minutes now is the meeting that removes three later.

Worksheet 1 • The role scorecard

SIGN IT BEFORE YOU SOURCE

A Role, level and the manager it reports to

B The outcome twelve months in

One sentence. If you cannot write it, the role is not ready to open.

C Signal 1 — Ships • evidence you will accept

D Signal 2 — Depth • evidence you will accept

E Signal 3 — Collaboration • evidence you will accept

F Signal 4 — Judgement • evidence you will accept

G Not required, however tempting

The three things you will stop screening for. Write them down or they come back.

H Comp band, decision date, and who says yes

Worksheet 2 • The loop planner

ONE ROW PER STAGE • FOUR STAGES, FIVE HOURS

STAGE

THE ONE THING IT TESTS

WHO RUNS IT

LENGTH

STOP HERE IF...

1 • Intro call

2 • Screen

3 • Working session

4 • Scope talk

Cut this stage

Last row first. Before you add anything, name the stage you are removing. Five hours of candidate time is the budget; every loop that runs long got there one reasonable-sounding addition at a time.

04

How Westhill got to 31 days

A 140-person logistics software company with two senior backend roles open for four months, and no budget for an agency.

Westhill was not short of candidates. Sam Ortiz's team had run 19 loops in four months and made two offers, both declined. The interview stages had grown to six, the debrief lived in a Slack thread, and the median gap between the screen and the loop was eleven days.

We cut two stages, wrote one scorecard, and blocked Tuesday and Thursday afternoons for the quarter. **Nothing about the bar changed** — the working session got harder, not easier. Both roles closed in the following six weeks.

WESTHILL · PLATE 1

Debrief, Thursday 4 p.m. — written before anybody leaves the room

FOUR MONTHS BEFORE, SIX WEEKS AFTER — SAME TEAM, SAME BAR

MEASURE	BEFORE	AFTER	CHANGE	WHAT DID IT
Days from kick-off to signature	68	31	-54%	Standing loop slots
Screen-to-loop drop-off	42%	18%	-24 pts	Booked on the call, not after
Offer acceptance	55%	86%	+31 pts	Decision meeting, offer next day
Loops run per hire	9.5	5.2	-45%	Scorecard agreed up front
Interviewer hours per hire	41	24	-17 hrs	Six stages cut to four
Roles filled in the quarter	0 of 2	2 of 2	—	Both still there at 12 months

“We did not talk to more people. We stopped losing the ones we had already met.”

SAM ORTIZ · VP ENGINEERING, WESTHILL · DENVER

What did not work

A take-home replacing the working session. Two candidates never returned it and the third spent nine hours on it. Reversed after three weeks.

What was hardest

Cutting the panel from six interviewers to four. It took a conversation about who was actually being asked to decide.

What we got wrong

We advised dropping the scope conversation. Sam kept it, and it is the stage her team now says changes their mind most often.

THE OFFER

Send us your loop. Get it back marked up.

Email your job description, your current interview stages and the last three candidates you rejected. We send back the loop redesigned against the four signals, a scorecard draft you can take into a kick-off, and the two stages we would cut. Then a 45-minute call to argue with any of it. Free for teams hiring two or more engineers this quarter.

BOOK THE REVIEW

brightline.works/loop-review

OR SEND IT BY EMAIL

hello@brightline.works

OR CALL

(303) 555-0148 • Mon–Thu, 9–5 MT

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU SEND IT

01

You send three things

The job description, the stages as they run today with names against them, and three recent rejections with the reason. That is enough; we do not need your ATS.

02

Forty-five minutes, within a week

We walk the redesigned loop, the scorecard and the two cuts. Bring the engineer who interviews most — they usually have the sharpest objection.

03

You keep everything

Loop, scorecard, debrief template and a sourcing list of 40 named people in your market. Yours to run yourself, with us or without us.

IF YOU WOULD RATHER NOT TALK TO ANYONE

Take the worksheets into your next kick-off and run them yourself. Every template in this playbook is **free to copy, adapt and put your own logo on** — including inside a company that competes with us.

brightline.works/templates • no email required

TIMING, HONESTLY

The useful moment is the week before you open a role, not the month after. If a search is already running and stalled, send it anyway — a stalled loop is the easiest thing in this business to diagnose, and usually the cheapest to fix.

WHAT THIS IS NOT

It is not a pitch for a retained search. About half the teams we review never hire us, run the loop themselves, and tell us how it went — which is where the next edition of this playbook comes from.

“Will you talk to our candidates?”

Not on a review. Your loop stays yours; we never contact anyone in your pipeline, then or later.

“We are not hiring until Q3.”

Good — that is the right time to design a loop. Send it now and run it when the role opens.

“We hire outside the US.”

The loop and scorecard travel. The sourcing list does not, and we will say so rather than sell you one.

WHO WROTE THIS

Brightline Denver, Colorado • since 2018

We are six people who run engineering searches from inside the team rather than beside it — your calendar, your inbox, your loop, our hours. Seventeen companies between 20 and 200 people worked with us in 2025, mostly on backend, platform and infrastructure roles.

We publish our funnel data every year, including the searches that went badly, because a hiring number nobody can take apart is a number nobody should act on. This playbook is that data with the arithmetic left in.

24	Searches run or advised in 2025 • median 31 days, longest 74, shortest 12
17	Companies, from a 22-person seed team to a 190-person platform organisation
91%	Of hires still in the role at twelve months, measured across 2023–2024 placements
0	Exclusivity clauses • every engagement is cancellable with two weeks' notice

THE AUTHOR

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PARTNER, BRIGHTLINE

Eleven years in engineering teams before this — five as a manager at a payments company, where the loop ran to seven stages and took nine weeks. Most of this playbook is a correction of things done wrong there.

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ONE MORE THING, AND IT IS FREE

The Loop — one letter a month

Nine hundred words on one hiring problem, with the numbers behind it: what a take-home really costs you, why your best interviewer is your harshest, how to say no in a way people forward to their friends. About 2,600 engineering managers read it. brightline.works/letter

Studio

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Reach us

hello@brightline.works
(303) 555-0148 • Mon–Thu, 9–5 MT
Reviews booked within five business days.

Templates

Scorecard, loop planner and debrief form
brightline.works/templates
Free, no email, no attribution needed.

The 30-Day Loop, second edition, Spring 2026. Figures are drawn from 24 senior engineering searches Brightline ran or advised on at 17 companies between January and December 2025. Medians unless stated. Candidate decline reasons are self-reported and should be read as directional, not measured.

Company names in the case study are used with permission; candidate details are composite and no individual is identifiable.

Share it freely — forward the PDF to anyone who runs a loop.