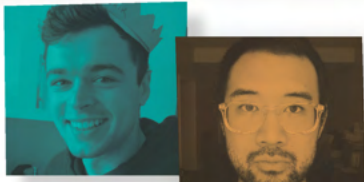Compliments of

NGINX®
Part of F5

97 Things Every
SRE
Should Know

Collective
Wisdom
from the
Experts

Edited by Emil Stolarsky
& Jaime Woo

Storytelling Is a Superpower

Anita Clarke

Shopify

Upon learning my job title would be Engineering Storyteller, I knew I was jumping into some Silicon Valley realness (even though I was in Toronto). It was the Valleyest of titles I'd ever heard—and I've heard some hilarious ones over the years. I chuckled when I told people; wouldn't you? Only after my first story was published did I understand that the title was a brilliant distillation of my role.

So what is an engineering storyteller? Storytelling is a tradition passed down through the millennia, and it has survived because we are built to consume, create, and process the world through stories. Part of my role is to help SREs create smart and engaging technical stories and to find a home for them, whether they are written down in blog posts or told orally through presentations and podcasts.

When I do my job well, something unlocks in the world, and an explosion of excitement pours out from the sharing of information. I'm no longer surprised by the reaction. After all, great storytelling is a superpower that shows you're engaged and passionate about the work you're doing. It shows you have empathy for your peers and want to make collaboration and learning easier. Most important, it shows that not only do you want to share your ideas; you want people to understand them also.

A common misconception exists that working in a technical field means that you won't need to interact with people or develop so-called soft skills. I bought into it too when I first got into software development, thinking I could deal with machines all day. My first couple of jobs drove home that that belief was a fallacy.

I realized the commonalities with my former life as an athlete: teams that communicate clearly, quickly, and effectively are superior to those of otherwise equal skills. A star player on a team is only able to be a star through the

support and alignment with the rest of the team, and so it goes for the team at work.

Storytelling especially matters in SRE because the work that's being done can seem mystical to other teams. How exactly are you diagnosing the system, and what exactly is happening? You have to be able to share in a way that makes sense for other teams. Storytelling brings a greater depth of knowledge to your work and, hopefully, new insights and ideas.

To unlock this power, you must practice, practice, practice. Writing and crafting narratives about your ideas takes time and lots of iterations. The skill of writing is built, not born. It isn't just about the words you're using; it's about breaking down complex topics in a way your audience understands.

Here's how you can intentionally be a great storyteller:

Be clear and concise
    Use accessible language and be direct.

Be detailed
    Brevity isn't always your friend; your decisions and process are as important as the results.

Show your receipts
    Back up your claims with proof, but don't editorialize the results.

Be helpful
    It's about the reader, not an ego trip.

Speak the reader's language
    Ideas need to be understood, so share in a way best suited to your audience.

Storytelling has a home with SRE, especially given the stories you share about memorable outages and incidents, but you can use it beyond recalling horror and hero stories. Storytelling perfects communication skills, establishes expertise, creates essential professional networking opportunities, helps solve problems, and increases confidence. It's a superpower, but one you can manifest.

Make Your Engineering Blog a Priority

Anita Clarke

Shopify

Every engineering manager I know wants to hire the best talent possible, and yet they can neglect one of the strongest tools in their kit: a great engineering blog.

Talented developers are hidden everywhere across the globe. Some may be familiar with your company's work, whereas others haven't discovered it yet. An engineering blog raises a company's profile to an audience that is magnitudes larger than the average conference attendance, especially if your post picks up steam on, say, Hacker News.

Candidates make decisions about your company's offer based on the quality of the engineering blog. I've heard it enough times from senior SREs and leadership to understand this is a major thing. Hell, it's the first thing my Director said to me when I joined their team. Culture is one of the most important factors to a candidate, and to recruit successfully, it should be a mandatory part of your storytelling efforts.

An active, highly regarded engineering blog makes you more attractive to candidates. Yes, it's a lot like dating in a way; SREs want to do that Google investigation on you first, and a great blog makes an effective first impression.

So don't make it fluff. The blog is actually a great place to share information about what you're working on, and fill it with as much substance as you can. Peers experiencing the same issues can use your solutions to overcome them, or if you're sharing an issue not solved yet, peers can reach out after seeing the post. For SREs using open-source tools, these connections and discussions are crucial. We all help each other when collaborating on open-source solutions. These posts kick-start the vital conversations by raising awareness.

Storytelling gives life to inert, vague job titles, adding clarity and excitement instead of head scratches, figuring out what this job title means compared to

industry standards. They see the tech stack and its usage and in-depth analysis of the choices and trade-offs teams make along the way in their projects. In short, an engineering blog gives candidates insight into working for your company that isn't possible during the interview process.

Now, this needs to be intentional. If you hope that high-quality blog posts will randomly spring out of your engineers by themselves, when they already have enough work to do, you'll be disappointed. It's stronger when there's a dedicated individual or team whose sole focus is to help make these compelling stories powerful, professional, and promotable.

Blog posts are collaborative learning efforts. Writing requires research regardless of years of experience. You see a ballet dancer's graceful and fluid motions, but you don't see the bloody toes that go with it; that's writing. However, know that the effort will be worth it. Through the writing and editing process, everyone learns more about the topic through this feedback loop by sharing, discussing, and reevaluating ideas. An engineering blog is not only great for recruiting; it's a key component of a strong learning organization.