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AI-Driven Software Development

THE 2026 VETTING PLAYBOOK

A CTO's Framework for Hiring Senior Engineers Across Borders

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A practical framework for engineering leaders evaluating senior candidates across the US, EU, AU, and Singapore.

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Executive Summary

A senior engineer who passes a 60-minute video interview can still cost a CTO six figures - in delayed releases, security incidents, or a team that quietly stops trusting the hiring process. After 14 years and 800+ delivered projects across the US, EU, Australia, and Singapore, we have seen the same vetting failures repeat: surface-level technical screens, no async-communication test, no due diligence on IP assignment in the candidate's jurisdiction, and no commercial check on whether the staffing partner can sustain the role for 24+ months.

This playbook is the rubric our own talent and engineering leadership use, adapted for CTOs running their own evaluation process. It covers five vetting dimensions - technical depth, communication, security and IP, cultural and time-zone fit, and commercial sustainability - with region-specific notes for the US, EU, AU, and Singapore.

It will not tell you which country to hire from. That decision belongs in our broader guide on building distributed engineering capacity. What this document gives you is what to do once you have a candidate in front of you.

Part 1 - Why most vetting fails

The pattern is consistent across the engineering leaders we work with.

A CTO under hiring pressure runs a three-stage funnel: a recruiter screen, a technical interview, and a culture call. Each stage takes 45–60 minutes. Total contact time before an offer: roughly three hours per candidate. Three hours is enough
to confirm someone can talk about software. It is not enough to predict how they will perform inside a team for the next two years.

The four failures we see most often:

1. The screen rewards verbal fluency, not engineering judgment. A candidate who has interviewed often becomes good at interviews. That is not the same as being good at the job. A whiteboard problem solved in real time tells you whether someone can perform under social pressure. It tells you very little about how they reason about ambiguity, debug a production incident, or push back on a bad spec.

2. No test of asynchronous work. Most distributed engineering happens in writing - pull request comments, design docs, Slack threads, incident postmortems. Almost no hiring funnel evaluates this directly. Candidates who interview brilliantly on video can be ineffective in writing, and vice versa.

3. Compliance and IP are treated as legal's problem. By the time a contract reaches legal review, the team has already emotionally committed to the hire. IP assignment, data residency, and statutory IP rules vary materially between jurisdictions - Germany's Employee Inventions Act and Singapore's Copyright Act do not behave like a US work-for-hire contract. CTOs who learn this after the offer pay to learn it twice.

4. No check on the staffing partner's commercial stability. Around 30% of offshore engagements that fail in the first 18 months fail not because of the engineer but because the partner cannot retain them. A vetting process that only evaluates the individual misses this entirely.

The framework below addresses each of these failures directly.

Part 2 - The 2026 vetting framework

Score every senior candidate against five dimensions. Each dimension has a threshold; falling below the threshold on any one dimension is a stop, not a discount on the others.

Dimension	What it measures	Pass threshold
Technical depth	Engineering judgment, not memorized syntax	Demonstrated trade-off reasoning on at least one architecture or debugging scenario
Communication	Written and verbal clarity, especially async	Can summarize a technical decision in a 200-word write-up that a non-technical stakeholder understands
Security & IP	Understanding of secure-by-default practices and the candidate's jurisdiction-specific IP rules	Can name and explain at least three OWASP-relevant risks in their stack; IP assignment is enforceable in their country
Cultural & time-zone fit	Overlap with the team's working hours and norms	At least 3 hours of live overlap per working day; track record of working with the target region's business culture
Commercial sustainability	The hiring channel's ability to retain this person	Partner retention >90% at 12 months, financial stability of 3+ years, formal replacement clause

We weight these equally. CTOs who weight technical depth at 70% and treat the rest as soft factors are the ones who later write us asking why their lead engineer disappeared after the probation period.

Part 3 - Technical evaluation: what to test, what to skip

Test these

System design under constraint. Give the candidate a system they have not seen before and a real constraint - "design a notification service that costs under $500/month at 10M events/day, on AWS." The interesting answer is not the diagram; it is the questions they ask before drawing it. Senior engineers ask about retry semantics, ordering, and what happens at 100M events. Mid-level engineers start drawing.

Debugging a system someone else built. Hand the candidate a small repository (200–400 lines) with a real bug - a race condition, an off-by-one, an N+1 query. Watch how they navigate code they did not write. The fastest debuggers we have hired share one habit: they read the failing test before they read the code.

Reviewing a pull request. Send a 150–300 line PR with three planted issues: one obvious (style), one subtle (correctness), and one architectural (the wrong abstraction). A senior candidate finds at least the correctness and architectural issues. A candidate who only finds style issues is not senior, regardless of years on the resume.

A short take-home, scoped honestly. A 4-hour take-home with explicit scope, evaluated for engineering judgment rather than feature completeness, tells you more than three live interviews. Pay for the candidate's time. The candidates worth hiring will not work for free.

Skip these

Trivia questions. "What is the time complexity of Array.sort in V8?" tests memory, not engineering. Skip it.

LeetCode-style algorithm puzzles for non-algorithmic roles. If the role is not building compilers or trading systems, dynamic-programming puzzles select for interview practice, not job performance.

"Write FizzBuzz on the whiteboard." If you are still using FizzBuzz, the bottleneck in your funnel is not the candidate.

One overlooked check

Ask the candidate to describe a time they were wrong in production, what the impact was, and how they detected it. This single question separates engineers who have shipped at scale from those who have only built. The honest answer is uncomfortable to give. The dishonest answer ("I can't think of one") is itself the answer.

Part 4 - Non-technical evaluation: communication, async, time zones

The async writing test

Most distributed work happens in writing. Almost no one tests for it. We do.

Give the candidate a one-page technical decision (real or synthetic - "should we migrate from REST to GraphQL for the customer-facing API?") and ask for a 200–300 word async response that:

- Recommends a direction
- Names the two strongest counterarguments
- Identifies what they would need to know to be more certain

Score on three things: clarity, intellectual honesty, and brevity. A candidate who writes 800 words and recommends both options is not ready for senior work in a distributed team.

The English fluency benchmark

For roles where the working language is English, fluency in conversation is necessary but not sufficient. The harder bar is ***written precision under time pressure*** - Slack at 2 pm on a release day.

Standard frameworks like CEFR (B2 minimum, C1 preferred for senior IC roles) are useful as a starting point. The interview check is more practical: can the candidate run a 30-minute technical discussion in English without losing nuance when the topic gets specific?

Time-zone overlap, honestly

A "follows the sun" model with zero overlap is a model that ships incidents you find out about the next morning. We recommend a minimum of 3 hours of live overlap per working day for senior IC roles, and 5 hours for tech leads. Concretely:

Client region	Live overlap window with Vietnam (ICT, UTC+7)
US West Coast	7am–10am PT (= 10pm–1am ICT) - challenging; partial overlap
US East Coast	7am–11am ET (= 7pm–11pm ICT) - workable with shifted hours
EU (CET)	9am–4pm CET (= 3pm–10pm ICT) - strong overlap
Australia (AEST)	9am–6pm AEST (= 6am–3pm ICT) - strongest overlap
Singapore (SGT)	9am–6pm SGT (= 8am–5pm ICT) - same business day

If you are hiring engineers expected to participate in the US morning standup live, write that into the role spec before the first interview. CTOs who discover this misalignment in week three are already losing trust with the new hire.

Cultural fit, defined practically

"Cultural fit" is overused as a soft signal that hides bias. Define it concretely:

- Does the candidate push back on a bad idea, or absorb it? (Test: present them a flawed plan and watch.)
- Do they ask clarifying questions before committing to estimates?
- Do they distinguish between "I don't know" and "I'll find out by Tuesday"?

These are testable. "Vibes" is not.

Part 5 - Compliance and IP due diligence by region

This section is general guidance, not legal advice. Every cross-border hire should be reviewed by counsel licensed in the relevant jurisdictions.

Intellectual property assignment

The contract template that works in one jurisdiction can be unenforceable in another. Three traps that cost CTOs the most:

Germany - Employee Inventions Act (Arbeitnehmererfindergesetz). Inventions made by employees do not automatically belong to the employer. The employer must claim them within four months of notification, and statutory compensation may be owed for "service inventions" with significant value. A US-style "all IP assigned" clause is partly unenforceable here.

United States - work-for-hire scope. Work-for-hire applies to employees and to nine narrowly enumerated categories of commissioned works. Software is not in the nine. Independent contractor agreements need explicit assignment language; relying on work-for-hire alone is a known pitfall.

Singapore - Copyright Act 2021. Recent reforms changed the default position on commissioned works. Authorship default sits with the creator unless assigned in writing. A pre-2021 template needs review.

Australia - moral rights are not assignable. Economic rights can be transferred; moral rights cannot. Contracts should include a written consent to acts that would otherwise infringe moral rights, structured to comply with the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).

Vietnam (where many offshore engineers work). IP assignment is enforceable when explicit and registered where required. Saigon Technology's standard MSA includes full assignment with no carve-outs for background IP unless explicitly listed; we have transferred IP to clients across all four target regions for 14 years.

Data and privacy

Region	Frameworks
United States	HIPAA (healthcare), CCPA/CPRA (California), state breach laws (50+ variants), SOC 2 Type II for SaaS
European Union	GDPR (Articles 5, 6, 28, 32, 35), data residency, DPIA process, EU-US Data Privacy Framework status
Australia	Privacy Act 1988, Australian Privacy Principles (APPs), Notifiable Data Breaches scheme, sector-specific (e.g., My Health Record Act)
Singapore	Personal Data Protection Act 2012 (as amended 2021), PDPC guidelines, sector-specific (e.g., MAS TRM for financial services)

A senior engineer working on regulated data should be able to name the regulation that applies, the core obligations under it, and at least one architectural pattern that satisfies the obligation. If they cannot, they will learn on your data.

Security baseline

Independent of region, a senior candidate should be fluent in:

- OWASP Top 10 - and able to name three risks specific to their stack, with mitigations
- Secrets handling - never in code, vaulted (HashiCorp Vault, AWS Secrets Manager, equivalent)
- Authentication patterns - OAuth 2.1, OpenID Connect, MFA defaults
- Encryption at rest and in transit - AES-256, TLS 1.3 minimums

ISO 27001 certification at the partner level (we hold this through BSI, UK) raises the floor on these defaults but does not remove the need to test the individual.

Part 6 - Region-specific guidance

Hiring for US-based teams

The CTOs we work with in the US most commonly underestimate two things: time-zone friction with Asia-Pacific teams, and the need for SOC 2 alignment when their own customers are enterprise. If you are pre-SOC 2, hiring engineers from a partner that already operates under ISO 27001 controls reduces the gap when you start your audit. Rate ranges from Vietnam-based partners typically run $28–$70/hour depending on seniority - meaningfully below US contractor rates while remaining above the bottom of the offshore market, where security shortcuts are common.

Hiring for EU-based teams

Two distinct concerns: GDPR data flows (especially after the EU-US Data Privacy Framework's ongoing scrutiny) and the German IP rules referenced in Part 5. A candidate working under a Vietnamese employment contract for an EU client is a tractable structure, but it requires Standard Contractual Clauses, a documented Article 28 processor agreement, and a clear DPIA process. We have run this structure for clients in Germany, the Netherlands, and the Nordics for over a decade - including a six-year BOT engagement with a Netherlands-based IT services partner that scaled from 2 to 50 engineers and transitioned 100% to the client.

Hiring for Australian-based teams

The strongest time-zone overlap of any of these regions, which is why Australian CTOs often start with offshore engineering before US CTOs do. The under-discussed risk is moral rights under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth) - covered in Part 5. The other practical note: Australian buyers respond well to written case studies with named clients. We have worked with Paul Upson at ISMS Global (Australia) to take a concept to international product, and Australian references generally carry more weight than abstract certifications in this market.

Hiring for Singapore-based teams

Singapore's PDPA enforcement has tightened materially since 2021, and MAS Technology Risk Management guidelines are non-negotiable for any financial-services product. Singaporean CTOs increasingly want a partner with a regional presence and same-business-day overlap; Vietnam offers both. Wei Kiong Tan at TechTIQ (Singapore) is a reference point we are happy to put forward - strong UI/UX and technical depth were the themes from that engagement.

Part 7 - Case studies from the field

These are anonymized only where the client has not granted public reference rights.

AxiaGram - Healthcare, US

A US healthcare client needed to manage 6M+ medical records under HIPAA with a small in-house team. The vetting process emphasized HL7/FHIR fluency and HIPAA architecture patterns, not generic backend skills. Result: development time cut by 40%, ongoing engagement at $70K/month, no notifiable security events.

Vetting lesson: for regulated workloads, screen for the regulation first, the language second.

Wealth Management Platform - Fintech, US

A US fintech needed senior engineers with portfolio, trading, and fund operations experience, not generic full-stack capacity. We screened 60+ candidates against a five-question fintech-specific rubric (KYC/AML, PCI-DSS scope, double-entry accounting, idempotency in payment flows, audit trail design). Two passed. Both are still on the engagement two years in.

Vetting lesson: narrow the screen to the domain. Generic senior engineers fail in regulated finance.

Personal Loans Platform - Fintech, US

20 senior engineers staffed in 3 months, supporting the full loan lifecycle for a US lender. The vetting compression was possible because the partner-side pipeline was already filtered against a fintech rubric - the client did not vet 200 generic candidates, they vetted 35 pre-filtered ones.

Vetting lesson: the partner's pre-filter is part of your vetting. Audit it before you trust it.

BOT Partnership - IT Services, Netherlands

Scaled from 2 to 50 engineers over six years, with a contractual 100% transition to the client at the end. The original vetting screen included a hard test: every senior hire had to be acceptable to the client's own technical leadership in a 30-minute interview, in addition to internal screening. Of 80+ engineers we put forward, 50+ ended up on the team.

Vetting lesson: if the partner refuses a client-side technical veto, that is the answer.

Part 8 - Printable vetting checklist

Print this page. Use it as the cover sheet for every senior candidate.

```
CANDIDATE: _____  ROLE: _____  DATE: _____

TECHNICAL DEPTH
[ ] System design under constraint — passed
[ ] Debug session on unfamiliar code — passed
[ ] PR review with planted issues — found correctness + architectural
[ ] Take-home (paid, scoped) — passed
[ ] "Time you were wrong in production" — answered honestly

COMMUNICATION
[ ] 200-300 word async write-up — clear, brief, intellectually honest
[ ] English fluency — CEFR B2 minimum (C1 for senior IC)
[ ] 30-min technical discussion held without nuance loss
[ ] Pushback on a flawed plan observed

SECURITY & IP
[ ] Named 3+ OWASP risks specific to stack with mitigations
[ ] Fluent in relevant data regulation (HIPAA / GDPR / APPs / PDPA)
[ ] IP assignment enforceable in candidate's jurisdiction (counsel-reviewed)
[ ] No carve-outs for background IP (or carve-outs explicitly listed)

CULTURAL & TIME-ZONE FIT
[ ] Live overlap window confirmed (3+ hrs IC / 5+ hrs tech lead)
[ ] Track record working with target region's business culture
[ ] Distinguishes "I don't know" from "I'll find out by [date]"

COMMERCIAL SUSTAINABILITY (partner-level)
[ ] Partner retention > 90% at 12 months — verified
[ ] Partner financial stability 3+ years — verified
[ ] Formal replacement clause in MSA
[ ] Client-side technical veto allowed

DECISION:  [ ] Hire   []Hold for second round     [ ] Pass

Notes: _____
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Part 9 - About the author and Saigon Technology

Thanh (Bruce) Pham is the CEO of Saigon Technology, an AI-driven software development company headquartered in Ho Chi Minh City and Da Nang, Vietnam, with global offices in the USA, Germany, Australia, and Singapore. He has led the company since its founding in 2012, building it to 400+ engineers across 3 development centers, 300+ clients, and 800+ delivered projects.

Saigon Technology credentials

- ***Founded*** 2012 - 14 years of continuous operation
- ***400+*** software engineers across 3 Vietnam development
- ***300+*** centers clients in the US, EU, Australia, and Singapore

- ***800+*** projects delivered, including 160+ mobile apps and 150+ web applications
- ***85+*** offshore dedicated teams currently active
- ***40+*** engineers transferred via Build-Operate-Transfer to client entities

Certifications (independently audited)

• ISO 9001 Quality Management - BSI, UK

• ISO 27001 Information Security Management - BSI, UK

• Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For Southeast Asia 2025 • Great Place to Work Asia 2023

• VINASA Top 10 ICT Companies (Vietnam)

• Clutch 4.9 / 5 average rating

Why these credentials matter to vetting

ISO 27001 raises the floor on the security baseline every candidate operates within - encryption defaults, access controls, audit trails, vulnerability management. ISO 9001 raises the floor on delivery process. Fortune 100 SEA recognition correlates with retention; engineers who stay 3+ years have shipped enough to be worth vetting in the first place. None of this replaces the candidate-level checks in this playbook. All of it raises the probability that the candidate-level checks find someone worth keeping.

Part 10 - Next steps

If you are running a vetting process now and want a second opinion on your rubric, or you want pre-filtered senior candidates for a specific stack and region, the most useful next step is a 30-minute call with our engineering leadership.

For broader context on building distributed engineering capacity - engagement models, team structures, when to choose a dedicated team versus staff augmentation versus a Build-Operate-Transfer setup - start with our complete guide to distributed engineering for product companies.

Talk to our team: https://saigontechnology.com/contact/

Read more case studies: https://saigontechnology.com/case-studies/

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