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Meet Priyanka Tyagi: Engineering Manager and career risk-taker

19 min read

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Priyanka Tyagi is an Engineering Manager at Cisco Meraki and resides in the Bay Area, California. She is passionate about building teams and the challenges that come with leading. Outside of her role, she is an avid writer and loves experimenting with new technical concepts and technology trends. She taught herself Flutter and went on to share the knowledge she learned during this process with others in her first book, *Pragmatic Flutter: Building Cross-Platform Mobile Apps for Andriod, iOS, and Desktop*.

The other day, I had the pleasure of sitting down with Priyanka and speaking with her about her career and her passion for leadership and volunteering. Take a look at our conversation below.

> How did you initially learn to code?

When I was younger, I didn't have my own personal computer. The only computer I had access to at that point was my brother's. He had just gotten into undergraduate school and got his first computer. I didn't have much access to it because he was relocating to a new city for his school, and it was supposed to go with him.

I used the internet for the first time in high school. I still remember my first interaction with a computer when I got onto my brother's laptop and changed his password. I thought he would praise me for my hacking skills, but he was irritated instead for obvious reasons. This was my first encounter with a computer, which only evolved from there.

A few years later, I was accepted into a Computer Science & Engineering program. In undergrad, I studied Computer Science. At that time, Computer Science students also had to undergo the basics of other engineering disciplines like mechanical, electrical, and electronics engineering for the first two years of the program. I learned how to weld, use lathe machines, and build circuits. Then, in my third and

fourth years, I exclusively focused on computer science coursework.

I only had access to the lab computers, which was very limited, so I would solve algorithms on paper. Then, I would bring the logic back to the computer lab and type it up to see how it would work. Writing it down on paper beforehand gave me the time to think through the solution before running it on the computer. That was my first hands-on experience coding. When my brother graduated and moved away to pursue his Ph.D. program in a different country, I got his computer in my final year.

> Were there any resources that you found useful along the way to learning to code?

The library was like my other home. There was a limit on how many books you could check out at a given time, so I made photocopies and took them home to study.

> What was the journey that led you to your current role as an Engineering Manager? After you graduated from school what were your next steps?

I started working as an intern at a startup in India. The company built software for the auto industry. On the job, I learned to code in Java – that was my first professional coding language.

At this point, I wanted to take the next step in my learning journey, and since I had always learned in the context of going to school until that point, I was open to any structured learning opportunities. As a child, I developed a fascination with visiting the windy city of Chicago. I couldn't resist the opportunity to join a master's program in Chicago when it came knocking at my door. I was excited

explore a new country and multiple cultures. Once I got there, I started working part-time as a web developer in the school library in addition to my full coursework. The library was called the Code of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, and I developed and maintained their website.

After I graduated, I interned with the same company I had originally worked for in India, but at their headquarters in Michigan. Shortly after, I got married, and my husband and I moved to the Bay Area. Once I was out West, I got a new role with a startup in the e-commerce domain. I mostly worked on the backend here. This was around 2008.

In 2010, I got a consulting opportunity with a new company called Zynga. There was a big gaming boom at the time, and I got to experience building the backend for mobile games for the first time. At Zynga, I worked on games such as Mafia Wars and Vampire Wars, which were some of the first phone-based games in 2010-2011. After the contract ended, I found a new position at Disney.

At Disney Interactive, I was working in the gaming division as a part of a core platform team. Around this same time, my husband gifted me an Android phone. So, as a hobby, I began developing Android-based apps on my phone outside of work.

Coincidentally at work, we didn’t have an Android expert and something came up that we needed someone who could do Android development. I volunteered for the project to help my team. After about a year or so, I had enough Android development experience to be able to move into the Android department at Disney, where I ended up leading the Android team.

I worked as a backend engineer for several years and led Android development efforts. As a core platform team, we would create libraries and SDKs that were built into many different games and platforms. I was always eager to learn and build effective cross-platform solutions with a maximum reusable codebase.

From this point, I had a very exciting turn in my career. Disney has a wonderful program called Hour of Code. As part of this program, I got the opportunity to volunteer for the Hour of Code initiative, where you can teach computer science and coding to students for an hour. I found it interesting because my kids were too young for school, so I got to see how the elementary and middle school systems worked in the US.

I started to enjoy the program so much that I decided to quit my corporate job and volunteer full-time. I think it's important to have a variety of experiences in life, and I felt I could take some time off work. I spoke to my family and they supported my decision.

In 2017, I took a break to do some volunteer work. I found a social platform called Social Coder and signed up as an Android developer to help under-resourced social impact initiatives. I also helped out at local schools to create a family night like Hour of Code to help spread technology awareness and even tried impromptu project management volunteer roles in women empowerment spaces. I wanted to explore all the interesting volunteering options available to me.

A year and a half later, I worked at a few startups and I even tried my hand at my own venture, which I called IttyBittyLearnings. Back then, my children were s

quite young, and I wanted to make sure they could only access safe and appropriate content online. That's why I came up with a launcher app that restricted their access to only the apps and games I had approved, such as a storytime app. To make things easier, I also created a dashboard that let me manage which apps they could or couldn't use.

> How did you eventually become interested in Flutter?

One day, I was at this Google IO conference and was listening to a talk on Flutter by a Google contributor. After the talk, I downloaded the code and ran my first program. But I got stuck because it wasn’t working, so I went to the Flutter office hours, where we discovered a bug. From there, I started contributing and began my first journey with Flutter. I mainly learned Flutter by writing on my blog while I wasn’t working full-time and had time to pay attention to the blog. I soon realized that people enjoyed reading my stuff, and I was learning a lot from the peer feedback I was receiving in return. I loved the community aspect of the experience – it guided me to write my first book.

Before writing my book, I wrote courses on Educative. The platform impressed me because it felt like a notebook where I could keep notes and then refer back to them later. I wrote two Educative courses on Flutter, which was fulfilling, but I was ready for another challenge. So, I began writing my book. Writing a book was very similar to writing a course. However, a book is a much more time-focused and intense project. To write a book you need to dedicate a large amount of time, whereas courses can be written in shorter chunks of time.

When I started writing my book, I was doing some contract work, but it wasn't a full-time gig. Then, COVID came out of nowhere in March 2020 and threw everything into chaos. Despite the craziness, I was able to finish my book in just three months. It was tough, but it felt amazing to finally cross the finish line. A I wrapped up my writing project, I jumped back into the startup world and found

myself working in the MDM space again. I had dabbled in this area before when I created an app for my kids, but this time I was tackling the enterprise side of things. I'm now proud to be leading the charge in this field as a professional.

> Was Engineering Manager a role you had in mind for your career? Was this something you were pursuing?

Being a leader is a huge responsibility that comes with a lot of important tasks. I never had a hierarchy in my head, and I still don’t. As an Engineering Manager, it's your job to have a clear vision for your team's work and make sure everyone is working together effectively. This means managing your time well and staying on top of new developments in your field. You also need to work closely with other departments and always know where your team is headed.

It's a lot to handle, but being a great leader means juggling multiple roles like being a product owner, project manager, architect, people leader, and team builder. The most important role you have is serving your team and helping them be their best. If you're facing roadblocks, that's okay, but don't let those roadblocks hold your team back.

> What aspect of being an Engineering Manager do you enjoy the most?

I enjoy building teams and finding ways to help them grow as a group and as individuals. It's incredibly satisfying to see everyone thriving and reaching their full potential.

> What have you found effective to help your team grow?

In my experience, it's important to set expectations early and help others through this process. This includes helping them set expectations for their career because not everyone knows what comes next.

Usually, people think they are supposed to move from individual contributor to manager, but there are other paths to growth and success too. It's not always about climbing the ladder.

Personally, I'm passionate about helping people find clarity so they can make better decisions. When people feel empowered, they work more efficiently and have a clearer sense of direction. So for me, it's all about removing obstacles and bringing clarity to others.

> What is the unblocking process? As in, what are people getting stuck by and how do you help them overcome it?

There are a couple of scenarios that I encounter. The first, which is the easiest, is when the work is dependent on another team. So they know exactly what is blocking them and they are simply waiting on someone else, or another team to get back to them.

The other, which is harder to manage, is when the person doesn’t understand what is blocking them. Then we have to figure out: are they blocked technically? Are they waiting on someone else? Is it a mixture of both?

If the person is blocked technically, this means that they need more resources or they need to do more research. What becomes a little tricky is if the research needs to be done by another team. That's when the Engineering Manager comes in - they have to figure out how to get everyone on the same page and make sure we're all working together and collaborating to solve the problem.

Overall, it's just a matter of figuring out what's blocking us and coming up with a plan to move forward. It can be a bit of a puzzle, but that's all part of the fun of working in a team!

> What have been some of the more challenging parts of your role as an EM?

The toughest part is building trust; it is not easy. I pick this one because it is crucial and it goes into the well-being of your team. Building trust within your team is massively important, but you cannot just buy it; it takes time.

The other big challenge is prioritization. As an Engineering Manager, depending on how big your company is, your day is so full of different meetings and tasks that you can get distracted easily and you still have your own work to get done. I have a process that has helped me ensure that my team is working on the most important tasks and projects:

- **Understand your team/company's vision:** The first step is to understand the overarching vision/goal of your team or company. It's important that your task's priority is aligned with these goals.
- **Identify the most critical tasks:** Once you understand your company's goals, identify the tasks that are most critical to achieving those goals. These tasks should be given the highest priority.
- **Determine the impact and urgency:** Assessing the impact and urgency of each task helps determine how they should be prioritized. If a task is high-impact and urgent, usually it is at the top of my priority.
- **Urgency vs. importance priority matrix:** I evaluate a task based on its urgency and importance. The goal is to not get carried away with urgent issues every time and keep important projects on the back burner forever. As Engineering Manager, it's your responsibility to identify how critical an urgency is. Important tasks need to be scheduled to work on as well.

- **Work with your team:** It’s essential to involve your team in the prioritization process. They may have insights and ideas that you haven’t considered and involving them can build buy-in for the priorities you set.

> How as a leader have you been able to build trust?

Trust is a crucial factor in any team's success, and one way to build it is by understanding and managing people's motivations. It's important to recognize that everyone is different and needs to be managed as an individual.

Think of it this way: your fingers all have different functions, and none of them are the same. Your team is just like that. Each person has their own strengths and is motivated by different things. Some may be driven by a pay increase, while others are more excited by challenging projects. Some may love public recognition, while others prefer private praise. By discovering what motivates each team member individually, you can build trust and create a more effective team.

> What are some of the ways that you have learned to lead a team effectively? Do you have any advice for new or early career managers?

Definitely have a mentor. While I personally prefer self-learning for coding, managing is a whole different ball game. Sure, you can take courses and get a master's degree, but that alone won't make you an effective manager. It takes time and experience, and that's where a mentor comes in.

A seasoned manager can provide practical guidance when you are faced with challenging situations. They won't give you all the answers, but they'll ask you thought-provoking questions that help you find solutions. It's not just about

following their instructions; it's also about gaining valuable insights from their experiences.

One important tip for new managers is to prioritize their tasks effectively. It's easy to get caught up in endless meetings and forget what needs to be done. To avoid this, I've learned to write things down within 5 minutes after a meeting. Take notes and summarize your action items in just one line. This way, you can refer to them later and stay on top of your priorities.

Did you know Priyanka has written courses on Educative?

- Developing Web Applications with Dart
- Beginning Flutter: Android Mobile App Development

> Let's circle back to your book: how did your fascination with Flutter evolve into your book?

It was mostly a challenge I took on for myself. I was focused on my own idea of success, not what others thought. My fascination with Flutter didn't come in one day, it was over years-long fascination with cross-platform app development. It's been a fantasy in the app world for a long time to be able to code once and run it everywhere, and I was personally invested in this debate. I started to write my learnings through my blog and courses on Educative. However, I wanted to build a one-stop guide from a beginner's perspective. Consolidating my idea of this e

end learning experience evolved in the form of this book. I realized that creating content isn't enough if you don't put it out there. So, if you create something, share it, get feedback, and keep improving.

I also wanted to do something focused, just like my older brother who always inspired me. He finished his Ph.D. a couple of years before me, and I didn't want to spend five whole years in a program like he did. But I still wanted to create something meaningful like a thesis project. I wanted to dive into extensive learning experiences and push myself to grow. It was a personal challenge I was willing to take on!

> Could you tell me more about the topics discussed in your book?

My book is a beginner's guide to Flutter because that was what I wanted to read myself at that point. I found when I was writing this book that there were not many beginner guides on this subject. The courses I wrote on Educative are very similar, but my book goes deeper of course. I would say that my courses on Educative are a foundational piece for my book. They helped me create my table of contents.

Even if you know nothing about Flutter, you can pick this book up and learn the different aspects of building mobile apps. Flutter is slightly different from native app development. It takes you from the basics of UI to building a full-fledged app. This is a “Book Explorer” app that consumes Google’s book of APIs - the API used to build the “Book Explorer” app step-by-step throughout this book. If you haven’t done any mobile application development, this book will take you from the Dart refresher to the published app in the play store.

You can take a look at purchasing Priyanka's book here.

> Do you think that you will follow your book up with another book?

Yes, but my time is very constrained right now. I think I will probably write a book about leadership because that is something I am learning more about these days.

> Did you enjoy the process of writing a book?

It was a very exhilarating process, it really brought me to life. Monday mornings were never “Monday mornings” for me. It was very chaotic at the time because the pandemic had hit. I had to work from home and also take care of my two young kids. On top of that, I had to make sure each chapter was complete while also going back and editing the previous ones. It was tough, but also super fun!

> What do you think is the impact of writing about tech?

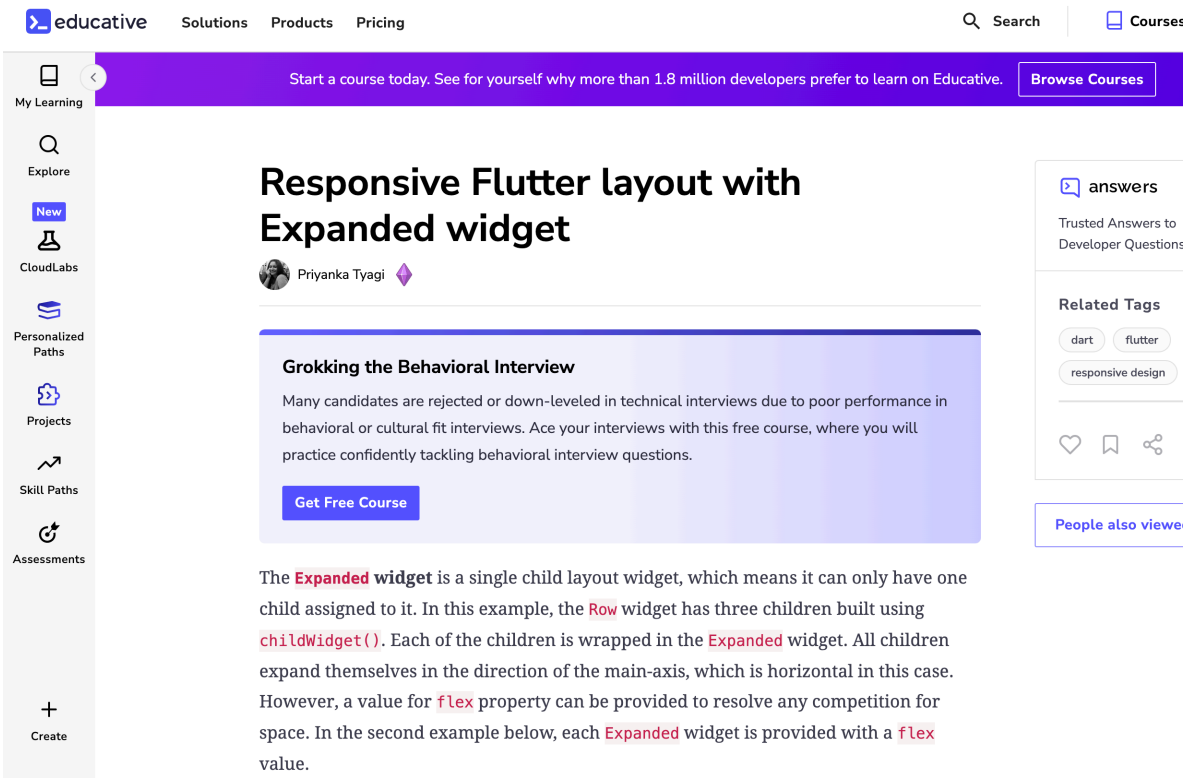
It was scary at first. Every time I shared my writing, I was nervous that someone would tell me I didn't know what I was talking about. When I first started my blog, hitting the publish button after writing something was a real challenge. But in the end, it's always humbling. People have shown appreciation for my work and have asked some really great questions. Some even reached out to me privately, telling me that they landed a new job because of what they learned from my book! ***I really love giving back to my community; you can’t put a price tag on that.***

> What do you feel is next for you?

Writing is my calling, it's something I know I'll always do in my career. But, to make it work, I need to strike the right balance. I'm not much of a title chaser,

I'm not fixated on what my next role should be. Instead, I'm more interested in projects that challenge me and aid in my growth. Currently, I'm all about building strong teams and honing my leadership skills. That's where my focus is at the moment.

Take a look at Priyanka's Answer



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