



# HOW TO INTERVIEW A TECH COMPANY: THE AI NOW GUIDE WITH PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS ADDED

To help jobseekers investigate employment options in the technology industry, the AI Now Institute published How to Interview a Tech Company, a list of questions designed for posing to potential employers. The aim is to help jobseekers – and others – probe the ethical character of today’s technology organizations.

To help navigate the AI Now questions, this publication contributes responses jobseekers may encounter, along with explanations of their philosophical and ethical underpinnings. The aim is to illuminate the wide range of ethical profiles characterizing today’s technology organizations.

To each AI Now question, two responses are added, one representing a purified libertarianism, and the other a vigorous justice-oriented utilitarianism. They correspond to corporate stances commonly found in technology ethics, though most real-world participants locate themselves between the two extremes portrayed here.

Definitionally, libertarianism can be initially construed as freedom maximization: personal autonomy is the highest value and guides decisions. Justice-utilitarianism seeks collective welfare understood as fairness across society’s identifying groups. As fundamental ethics, individuals and freedom contrasts with collectives and equality.

Two elements of real-world ethics emerge from this addition to the AI Now publication. First, in strict terms, there is no such thing as “ethical” or “unethical” organizations or people, there are only better and worse understandings of precisely which ethics – which values – drive companies and individuals. Second, academic literature frequently cites the problem of measuring advances in AI ethics, and of ranking organizations in ethical terms. The underlying difficulty that frustrates measuring and ranking is the intractability of conflicts between ethical theories. This publication provides a case study of those conflicts on the level of men and women in the world seeking jobs.

**Q1 MERGED WITH Q2 FROM THE AI NOW INSTITUTE**

**How do you ensure you are you inclusive in hiring, and provide equity in pay to people of different backgrounds, identities and abilities?**

**SAMPLE RESPONSE FROM A LIBERTARIAN COMPANY:**

Applicants are hired to solve business problems and compensated on those grounds. Background and identity are considered only when fortifying problem-solving ability (a native Spanish speaker may benefit a natural language processing team).

**SAMPLE RESPONSE FROM A JUSTICE-ORIENTED UTILITARIAN COMPANY:**

Attributes that count as identifying and diversifying are located. (Spanish versus German heritage may not count, European versus African may.) With diversity defined, we filter to ensure it on teams before hierarchizing for ability. Finally, compensation is a tool for maintaining identity diversity.

**ETHICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL REASONING**

The libertarian approach evaluates individuals in terms of their actions, and consequently substantive attributes including race and gender are initially invisible. The justice-utilitarian starts with the attributes, and then considers actions, which makes identifying traits an initial focus. In essence, libertarian companies understand who people are by what they do, and justice advocates understand what people do by who they are. That initial dichotomy determines where companies end up in the diversity-in-the-workplace discussion.

**Q3 MERGED WITH Q6 FROM THE AI NOW INSTITUTE**

**What percentage of workers at your company are contractors, temporary workers, or vendors, and how do you ensure that they are protected from exploitation?**

**LIBERTARIAN:**

Contractors, temporary workers, and vendors have the right and responsibility to decide for themselves whether they are being exploited. You should decide for yourself, only.

**JUSTICE-ORIENTED UTILITARIAN:**

Contractors, temporary workers, and vendors have a responsibility to company projects, and consequently all company members must together ensure they receive compensation adequate to their responsibility.

**ETHICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL REASONING**

The libertarian links freedom and responsibility: just as it is disrespectful to make others' decisions for them, so too it is condescending to not hold them accountable for what they decide. Both are equally patronizing. The idea, therefore, that some workers need protection from their own choices isn't comforting so much as insulting. (This is a version of Kant's argument that it's respect for the human dignity of criminals that requires their punishment, and Nietzsche's assertion that pity implies humiliation). By contrast, adhering to utilitarianism means transferring personal decisions to the larger community in the name of solidarity with the general welfare. This solidarity doesn't mean everyone thinks identically – solidarity isn't brainwashing – but that people agree that conclusions reached by the collective will also be their individual commitments: the group decision *is* my decision. It follows that the collective protecting individuals from exploitation is no long disrespectful, but supportive. (This is Rousseau's argument that individuals need to be forced to be free, and Bentham's imperative that the greatest good and happiness be distributed to the greatest number.) Ultimately, the question about protecting others from exploitation is a value choice: What's worth more, individual freedom and responsibility, or general wellbeing and happiness? That initial company decision governs downstream determinations about protecting contractors, temporary workers, and vendors.

**Q4 MERGED WITH Q5 FROM THE AI NOW INSTITUTE**

**How does your company protect workers' rights to organize and engage in collective action? Are any parts of your company unionized?**

**LIBERTARIAN:**

The kind of people we hire logically reject unionization.

**JUSTICE-ORIENTED UTILITARIAN:**

Support for collectives follows naturally from the kind of people we hire.

**ETHICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL REASONING**

Libertarians believe that excellent individual lives lead to flourishing communities, while utilitarians see flourishing communities as breeding excellent individual lives. The dividing question is, *Where does thriving begin with the person, or the collective?* Because libertarians start with the person, their companies will hire people who value personal autonomy and therefore resist having professional decisions subsumed under an anonymous group. Unionization rejection follows automatically. By contrast, the justice-utilitarian begins with communities before moving to the personal, and since solidarity with social wellbeing is sought

initially, individual goals are defined within the collective. Unionization as the foundation of professional lives follows organically.

**Q7 MERGED WITH Q8 FROM THE AI NOW INSTITUTE**

**Will I know how my work and the company's research and product development is applied in the world, and do you have a process in place to ensure that I can object safely if it is ultimately used in ways I consider unethical?**

**LIBERTARIAN:**

If your work is being used in ways you deem unethical, you should leave the company.

**JUSTICE-ORIENTED UTILITARIAN:**

If your work is being used in ways you deem unethical, you should engage the company in a discussion about what counts as unethical.

**ETHICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL REASONING**

Libertarians endeavor to maximize freedom for themselves, while also leaving space for other people and organizations to express their own autonomy. Therefore, solutions allowing all parties to proceed as they wish are optimal. Splitting away from scenes of ethical disagreement is sanctioned to the extent that it ensures that all those involved are free to operate in conformance with their own diverse moral postures. Conversely, because utilitarians privilege the larger collective above individual rights, employees are obligated to engage disagreements, and to participate in forming an inclusive consensus about what counts as an unethical project. This may involve changing their values, those of the company, or both. Regardless, the agreed premise is to seek a common and incorporative understanding.

**Q9 MERGED WITH Q10 FROM THE AI NOW INSTITUTE**

**Does your company provide technology to support military, law enforcement, criminal prosecution, incarceration, deportation, surveillance?**

**ETHICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL REASONING**

Technology frequently intersects with larger social and political debates. Google maps provide directions to gun shops and abortion clinics, Amazon sells surveillance doorbells that stream information to homeowners and police departments, Facebook displays ads from all stripes of organizations. Ethical responses by employees resemble those discussed after Questions 7/8.

## NOTES

1.

Organizations may employ a bifurcated ethics. A libertarian model may govern one side of the C-suite/worker spectrum, while a justice-utilitarian model governs the other. Such bifurcation may be suggested by diversity hiring statistics of tech companies.

<<https://www.revealnews.org/article/heres-the-clearest-picture-of-silicon-valleys-diversity-yet/>>

2.

Selected sources libertarian model: Locke, Nietzsche, Heidegger (early), Nozick, Deleuze.

Selected sources utilitarian model: Rousseau, Bentham, Mill (late), Rawls, Habermas.

3.

AI Ethics Site

AIEthics.Site

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4.

Original AI Now publication: <https://ainowinstitute.org/how-to-interview-a-tech-company.pdf>