LDX3 · NEW YORK · SEPT 2026

The 30 Minute MBA

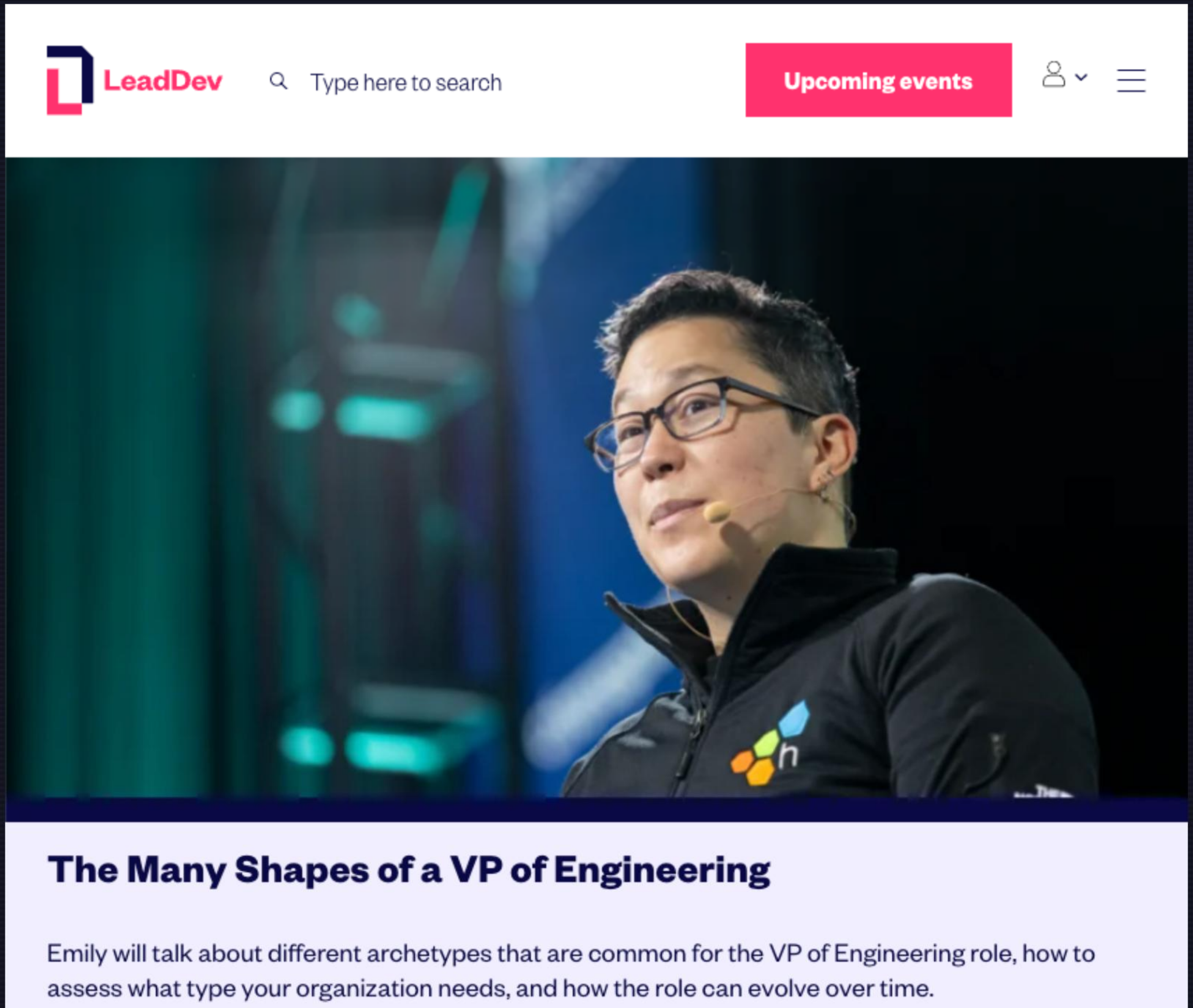
for Engineering Leaders

Emily Nakashima

SVP of Engineering, Honeycomb

THE SETUP

In 2020, I was promoted to VP Engineering



Candidly, I wasn't sure I was ready.

I interviewed dozens of VPs of Engineering and CTOS to prepare.

I also gave a LeadingEng talk on this topic!

THE SETUP

Senior eng leaders only *occasionally* failed at the job for technology reasons

More common failure modes:

- They failed to fully understand the business & overall strategy
- They failed to build strong relationships with new stakeholders (marketing, sales, finance, accounting, operations)
- They were sidelined and left out of big decisions

I wanted to keep a seat at the highest table. How?

Should I get an MBA?

MBA vs. independent learning

EXECUTIVE MBA

~$200,000 for top programs

~3 days off work per month

Low effort, high reward networking

INDEPENDENT LEARNING

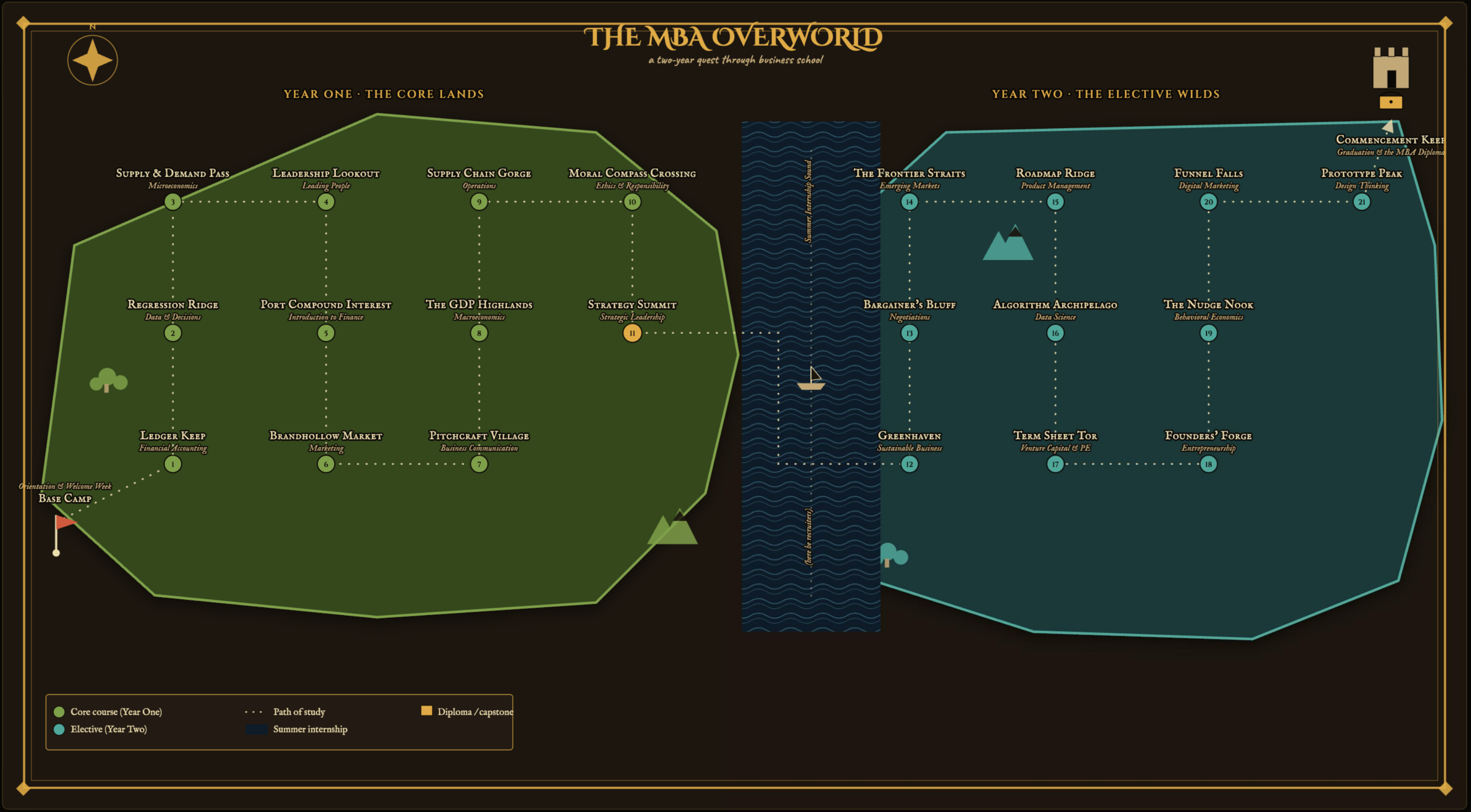
Free and/or much less expensive

Flexible pace but requires lots of discipline

DIY networking

"Everything you could learn in biz school you can learn without school"

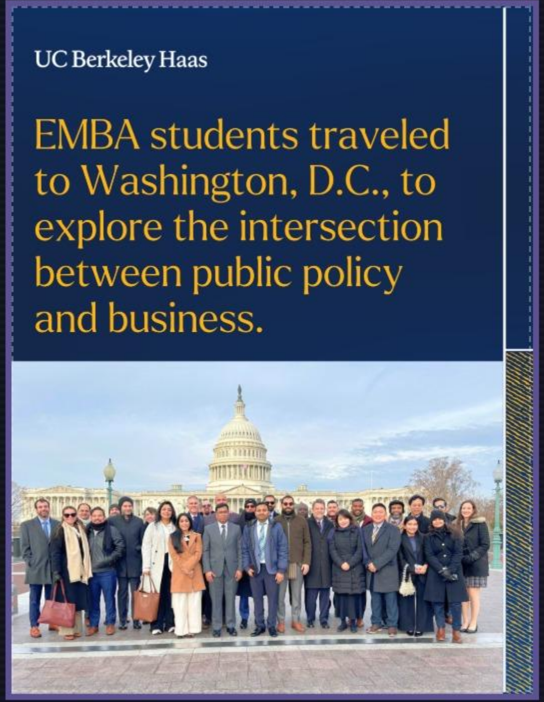
- Jeff Gray, former Honeycomb COO



N
THE MBA OVERWORLD
a two-year quest through business school
YEAR ONE · THE CORE LANDS
YEAR TWO · THE ELECTIVE WILDS
Commencement Kee
Graduation & the MBA Diplom
Supply & Demand Pass
Microeconomics
3
Leadership Lookout
Leading People
4
Supply Chain Gorge
Operations
9
Moral Compass Crossing
Ethics & Responsibility
10
Summer Internship Sound
The Frontier Straits
Emerging Markets
14
Roadmap Ridge
Product Management
15
Funnel Falls
Digital Marketing
20
Prototype Peak
Design Thinking
21
Regression Ridge
Data & Decisions
2
Port Compound Interest
Introduction to Finance
5
The GDP Highlands
Macroeconomics
8
Strategy Summit
Strategic Leadership
11
Bargainer's Bluff
Negotiations
13
Algorithm Archipelago
Data Science
16
The Nudge Nook
Behavioral Economics
19
Ledger Keep
Financial Accounting
1
Brandhollow Market
Marketing
6
Pitchcraft Village
Business Communication
7
Greenhaven
Sustainable Business
12
Term Sheet Tor
Venture Capital & PE
17
Founders' Forge
Entrepreneurship
18
Orientation & Welcome Week
Base Camp
(here be recruiters)
Core course (Year One)
Elective (Year Two)
Path of study
Summer internship
Diploma / capstone

THE SETUP

I went for it!



What do you actually learn in an MBA?

YEAR ONE core · all required

- Financial Accounting
- Microeconomics
- Data & Decisions
- Marketing
- Ethics
- Strategy
- Corporate Finance
- Macroeconomics
- Operations
- Leading People
- Leading Organizations

YEAR TWO electives · illustrative examples

- Negotiations
- Product Management
- Emerging Markets
- Pricing Strategy
- Behavioral Finance
- Sustainable Business
- Data Science for Business
- Venture Capital & Startups
- Portfolio Management
- Power & Politics

While grad school is usually about specialization, an MBA is *generalist*

SPECIAL DELIVERY

My Top MBA Takeaways

Top 3 MBA Tools

01

Time value of money

Understanding interest rates and why “later” costs more than it used to

02

Think like finance

How to think like accounting and finance, and what each cares about

03

Negotiations

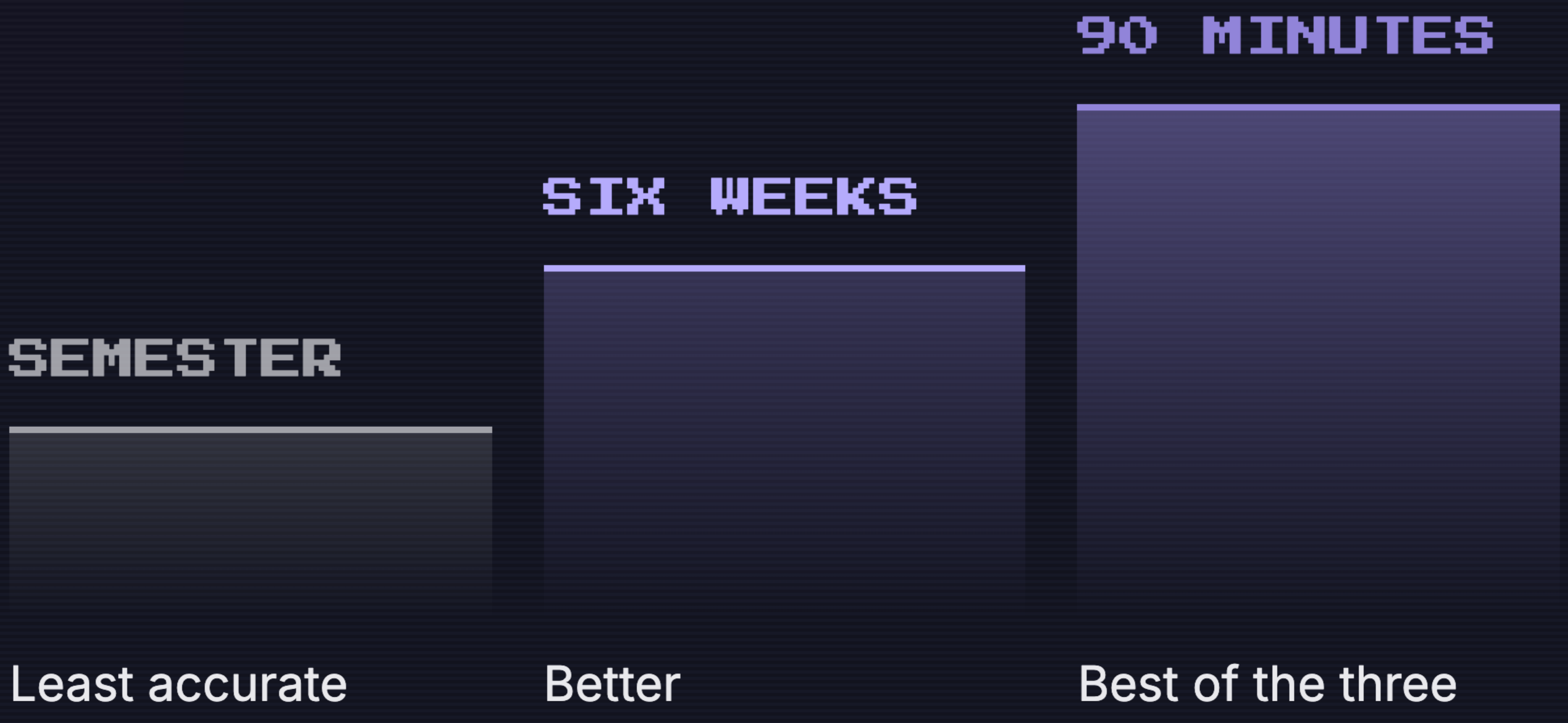
The theory behind pitching what you want and finding win-wins

DON'T I NEED TWO YEARS TO LEARN ALL THIS?

Sometimes less is more. A little theory goes a long way.

Michael Raynor taught Clayton Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation in three formats, then asked students to predict which anonymized startups would succeed.

Accuracy went *up* as class time went down
(Statistically significant and material differences)

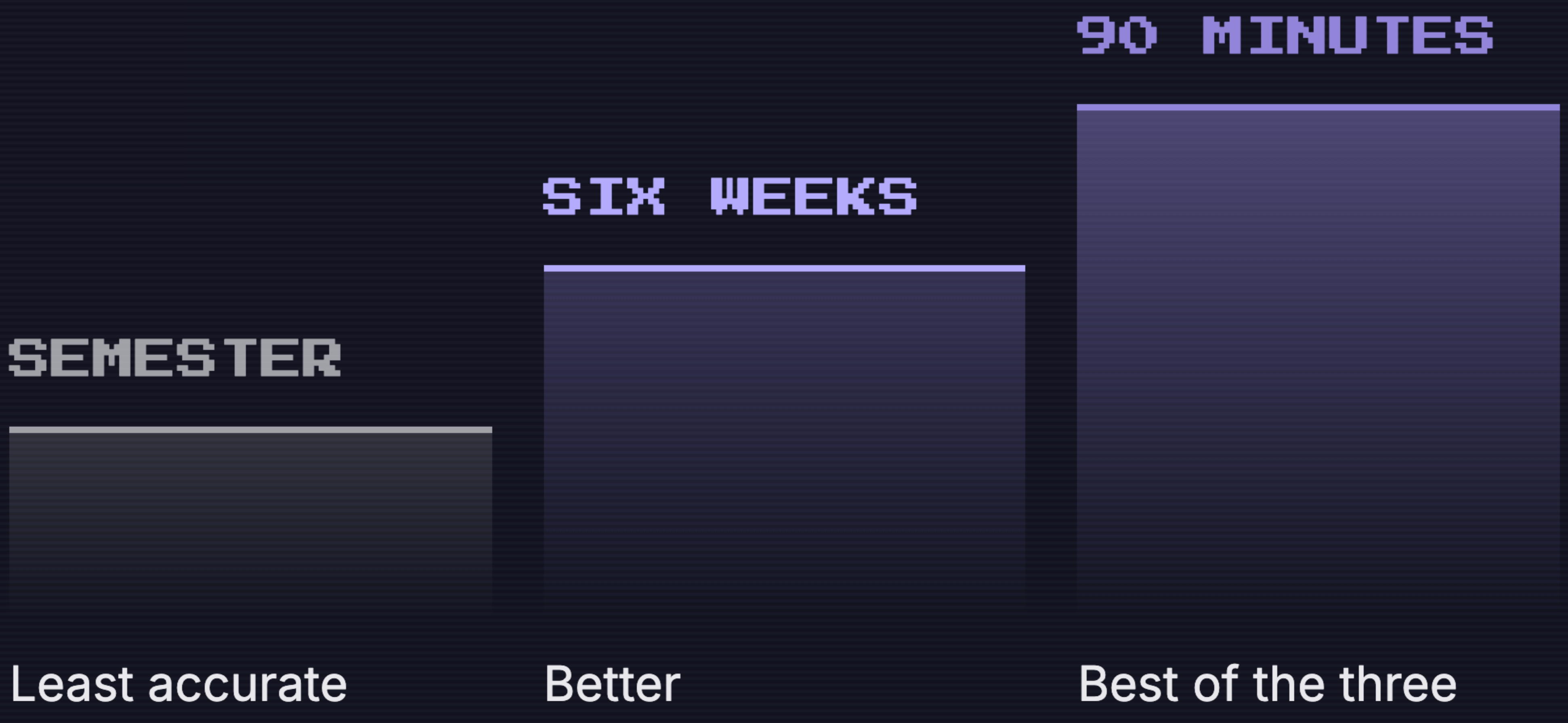


DON'T I NEED TWO YEARS TO LEARN ALL THIS?

Sometimes less is more. A little theory goes a long way.

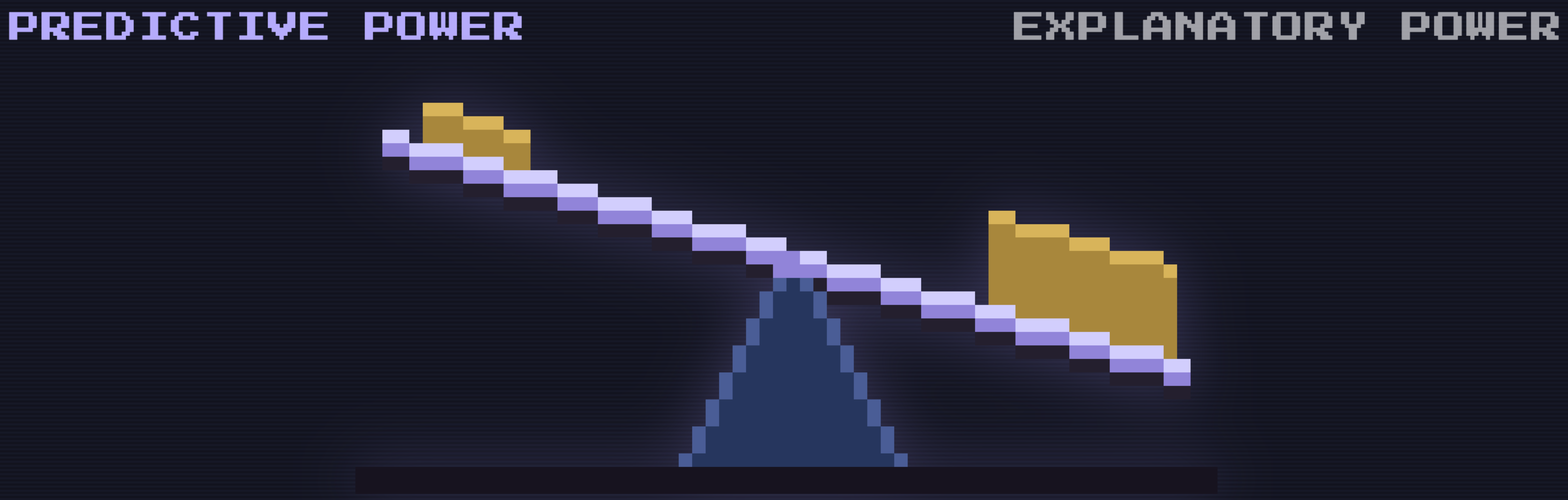
Michael Raynor taught Clayton Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation in three formats, then asked students to predict which anonymized startups would succeed.

Accuracy went *up* as class time went down
(Statistically significant and material differences)



WHY IS THIS?

Explantory power & predictive power can be at odds

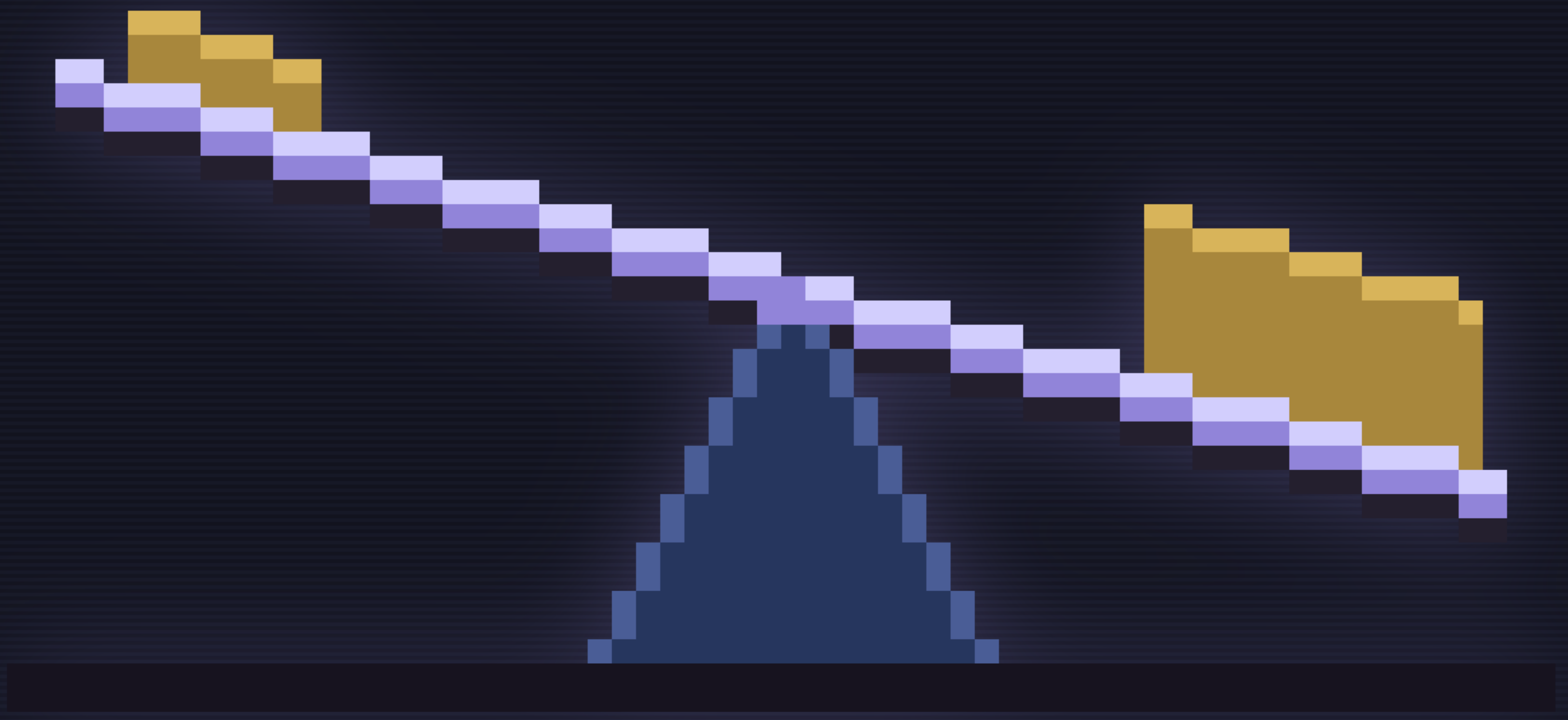


Deeper knowledge explains more, but may encourage us to underweight the simple mechanics that made the model predictive.

WHY IS THIS?

Explantory power & predictive power can be at odds

PREDICTIVE POWER EXPLANATORY POWER



Deeper knowledge explains more, but may encourage us to underweight the simple mechanics that made the model predictive.

LEVEL 1

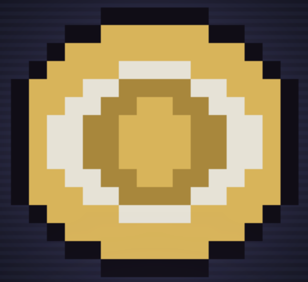
Time Value of Money

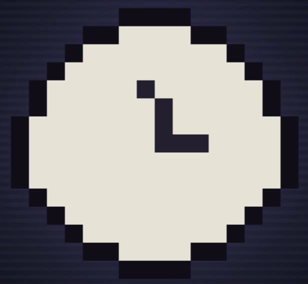
01 · TIME VALUE OF MONEY

What's the difference between $1 today and $1 in a year?

Capital (usually) costs something to hold. This is the "discount rate."

- Our work costs now and pays back later.
- Value that arrives later is worth less today.
- Interest rates determine *how much less*





01 · TIME VALUE OF MONEY

One formula to know: Future Value (FV)

$$FV = PV \times \left[1 + \frac{i}{n}\right]^{n \times t}$$

PV
Present value: what the money is worth today

i
The interest rate (the price of waiting)

n
Times it compounds per period (e.g. a year)

t
Time periods to wait

We should not invest in any project with an FV *lower* than PV.

01 · TIME VALUE OF MONEY

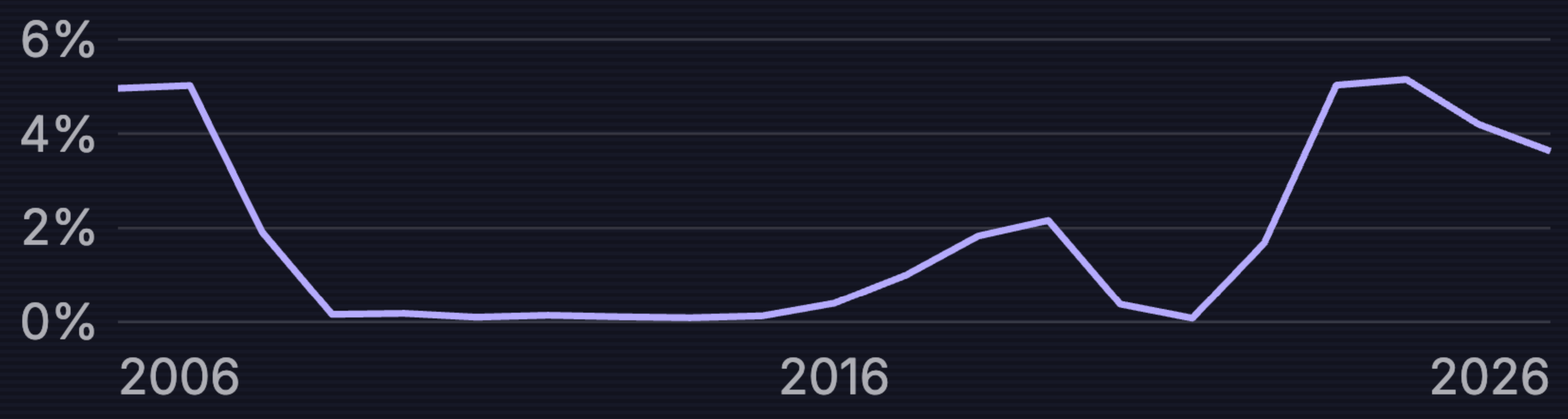
How do we know what interest rate to use?

r = ?_

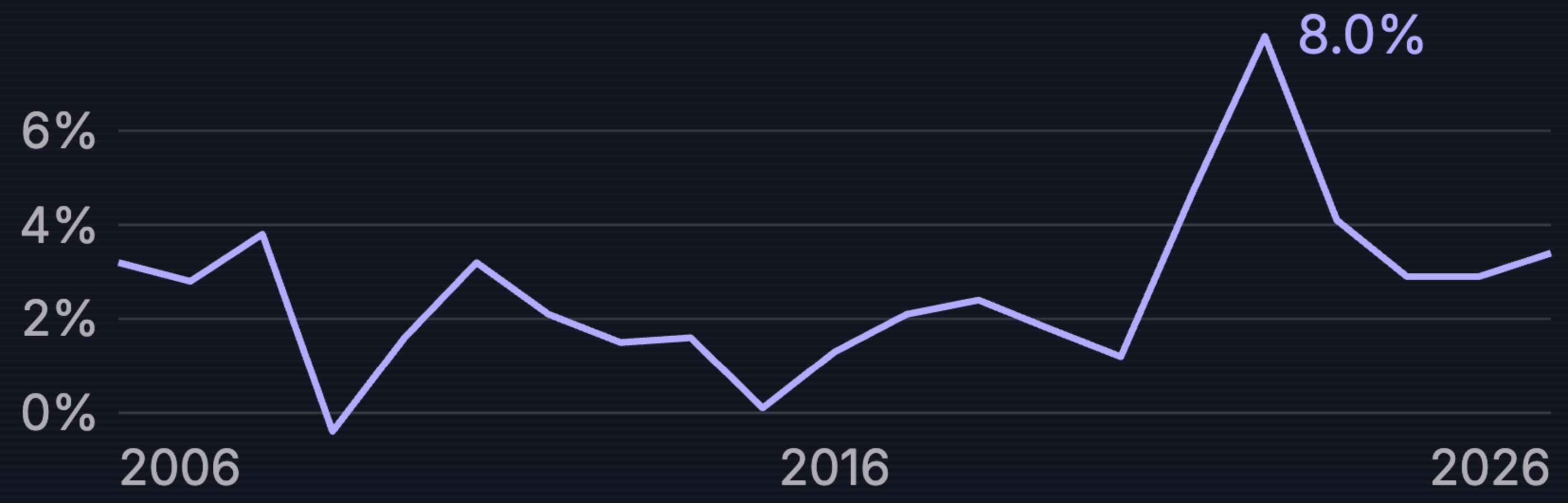
01 · TIME VALUE OF MONEY

Our internal % will rise & fall with public rates (but higher)

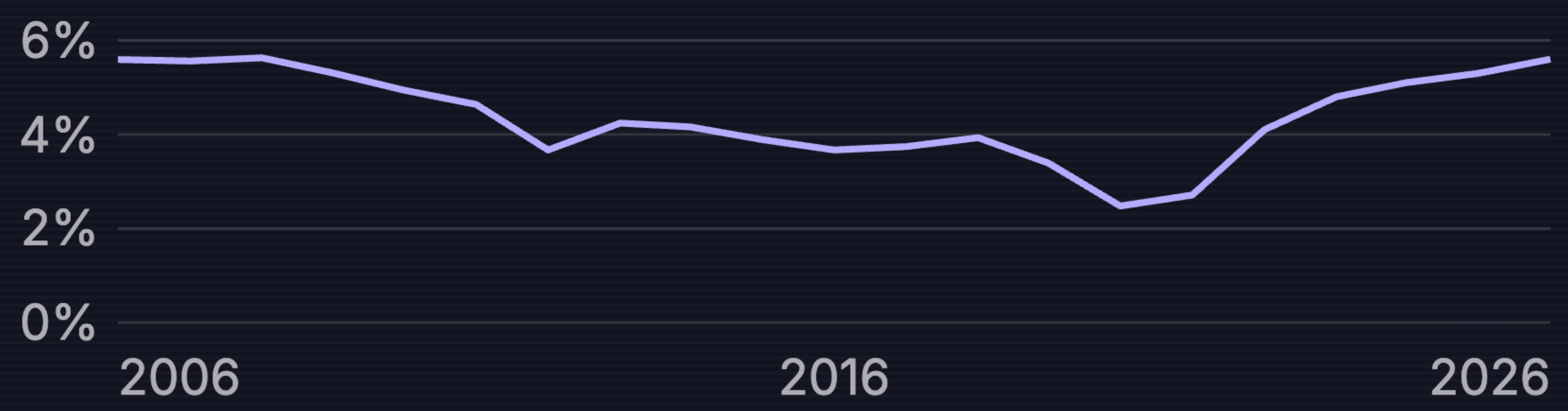
Fed funds rate policy · now 3.6%



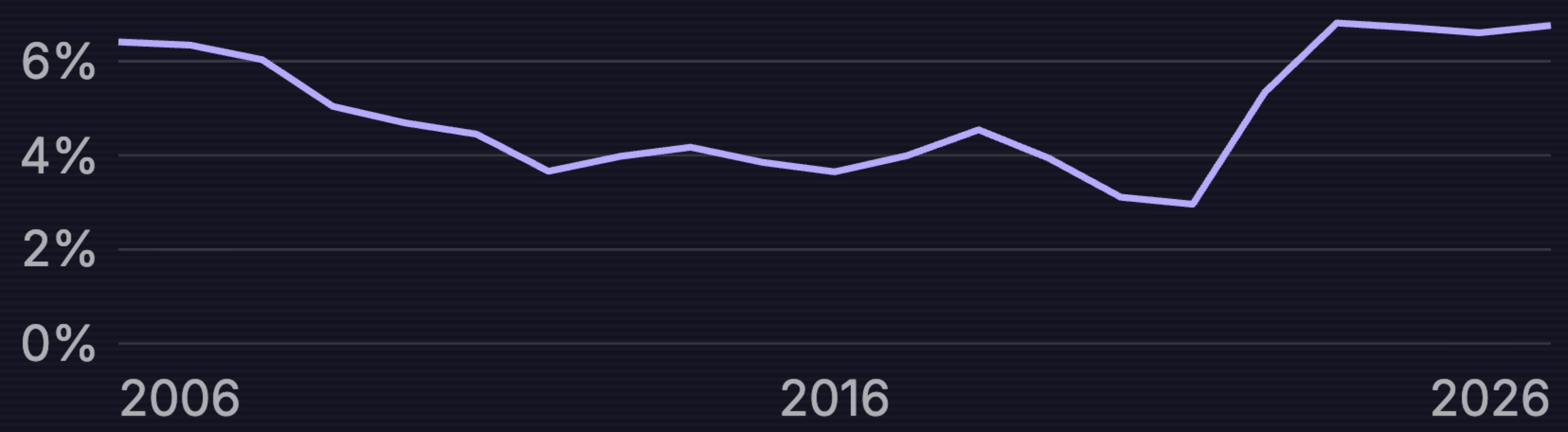
U.S. inflation (CPI) year over year · now 3.4%



Corporate bond yield Moody's Aaa · now ~5.6%



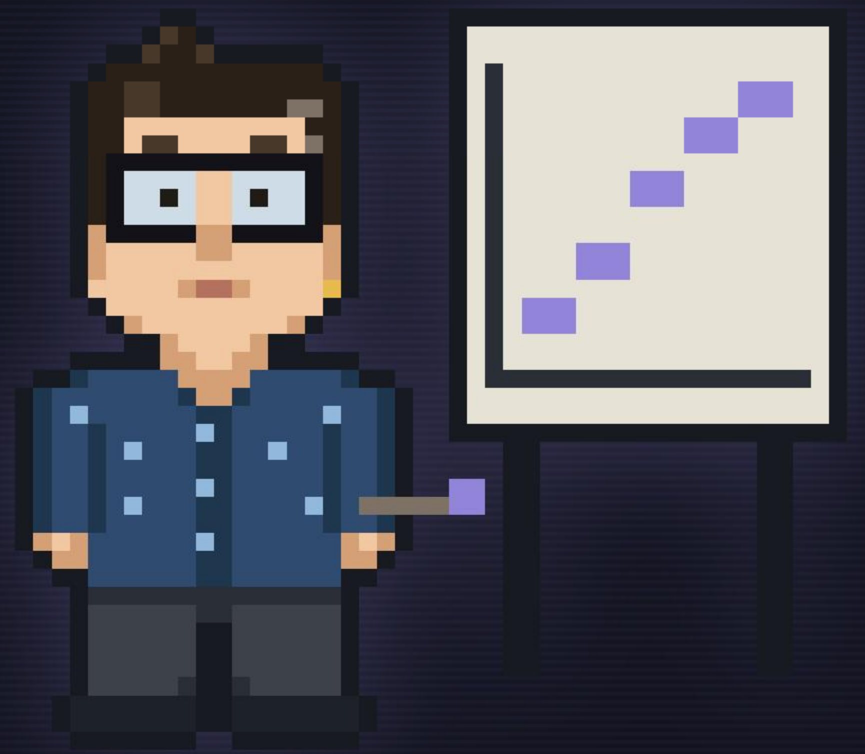
30-year mortgage Freddie Mac · now 6.8%



Follow interest rates and accurately predict the future

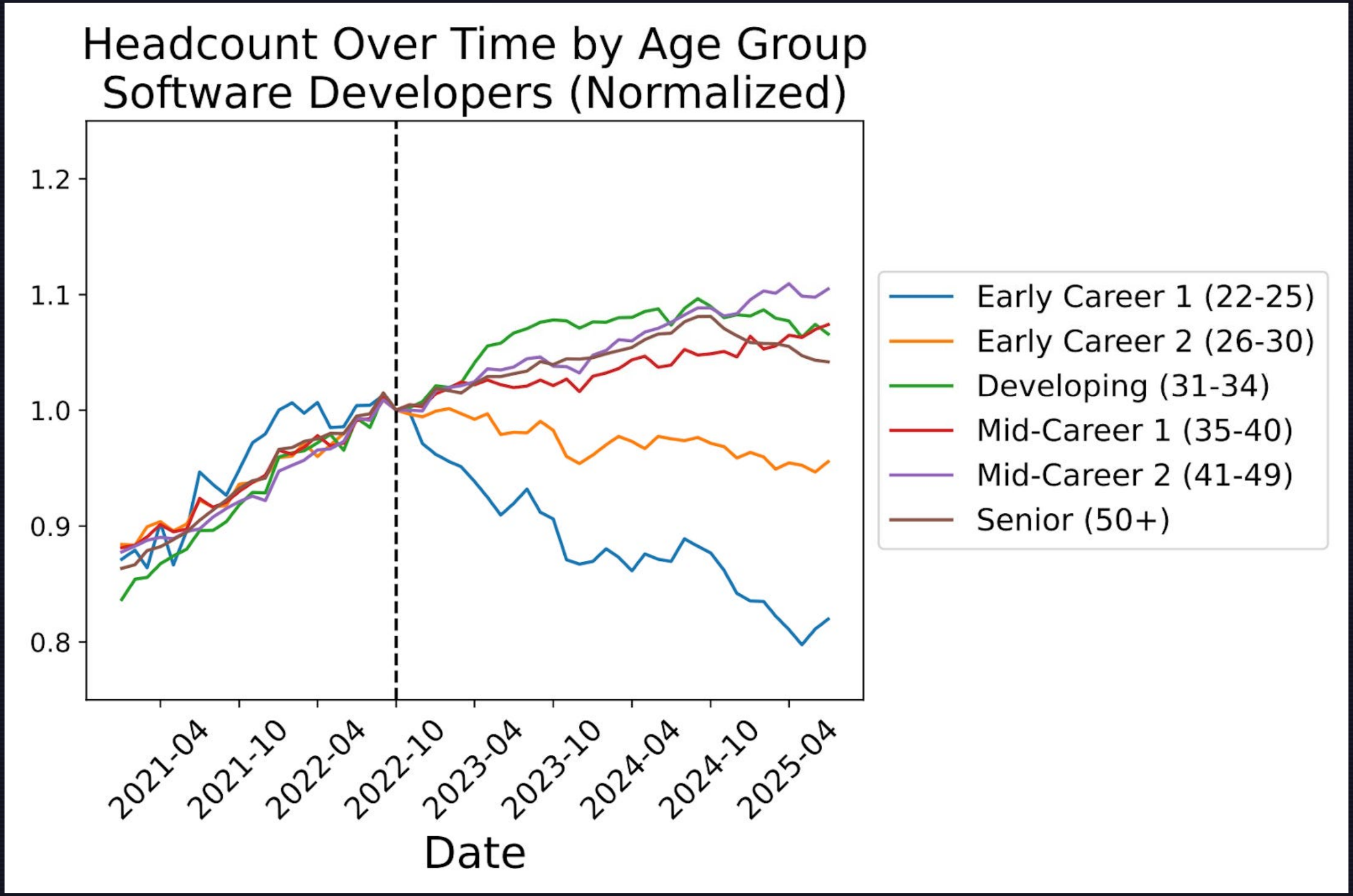
One example: AI and hiring

In 2022, hiring began to slow down. Why?

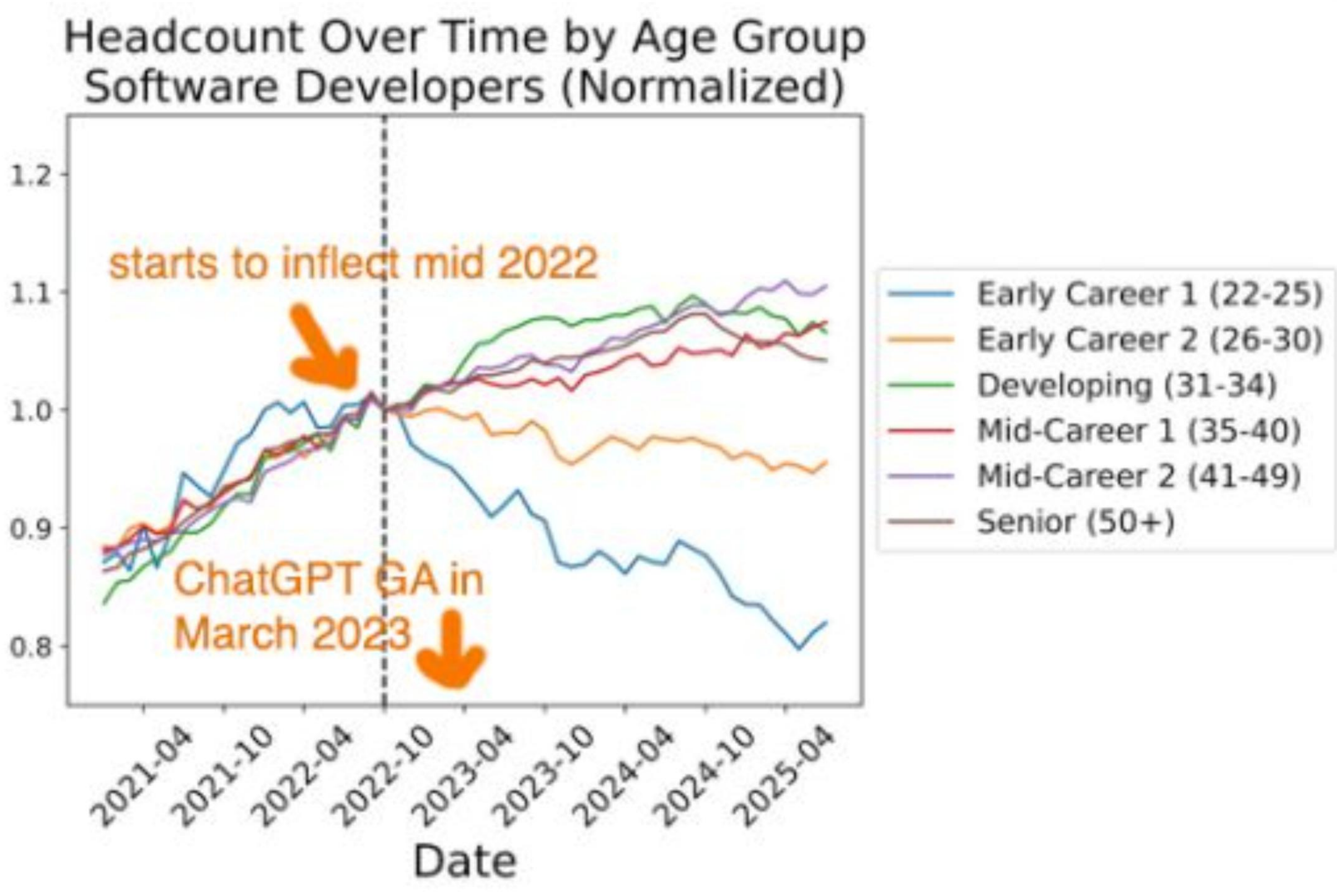


Did you see this chart on LinkedIn?

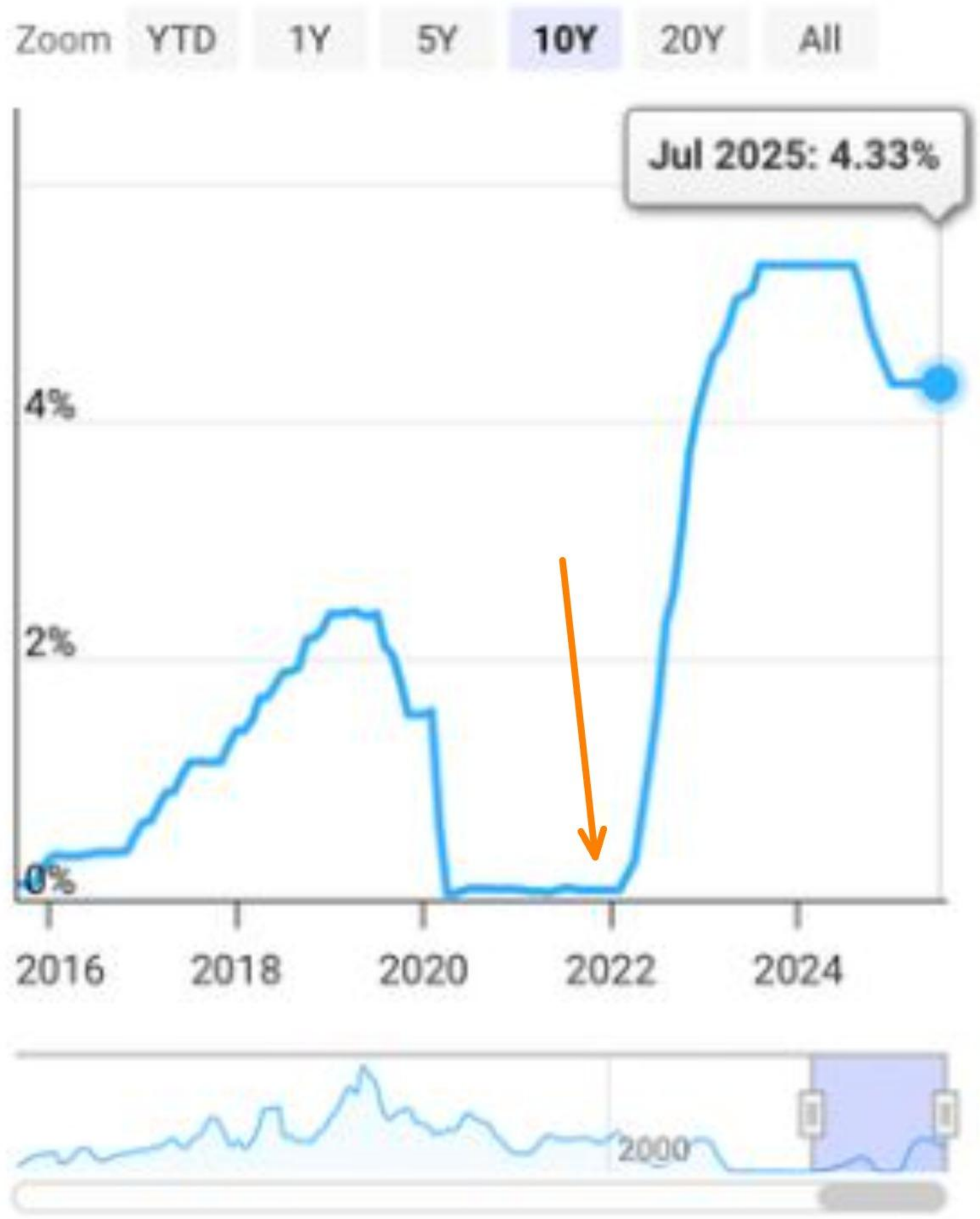
"AI is killing jobs!"



Change in Hiring



Historical Interest Rates



01 · TIME VALUE OF MONEY

For VC-backed companies, a predictable shift

STEP 01

Rates rise

Risk-free returns increase.

STEP 02

LPs re-weight

Pensions and endowments compare VC to that number.

STEP 03

VC slows deployment

Less capital committed to VC.

STEP 04

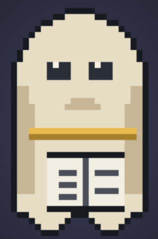
Reqs disappear

LEVEL 2

Think Like Finance

02 · THINK LIKE FINANCE

Know the difference: Accounting vs. Finance



ACCOUNTING

"The ghost of Christmas past and present"

More backward-looking: measurement, verification, categorization.

- Cares about: was it counted correctly, in the right period, under the right rules?
- Accountable for: quarter/year close, audit, filings, capitalization policy.
- Allows us to: understand how the business is doing; accurately report out to investors, stakeholders, IRS.

FINANCE

"The ghost of Christmas yet to come"

More forward-looking; plans and makes investments & evaluates results.

- Cares about: the state of our investments and what they might return. Are we using resources well?
- Accountable for: financial plan, forecasts, runway management, margin, and the board’s expectations.
- Allows us to: understand, plan for, and build our future.

Know the difference: Accounting vs. Finance

ACCOUNTING

"The ghost of Christmas past and present"

More backward-looking: measurement, verification, categorization.

- Cares about: was it counted correctly, in the right period, under the right rules?
- Accountable for: quarter/year close, audit, filings, capitalization policy.
- Allows us to: understand how the business is doing; accurately report out to investors, stakeholders, IRS.

FINANCE

"The ghost of Christmas yet to come"

More forward-looking; plans and makes investments & evaluates results.

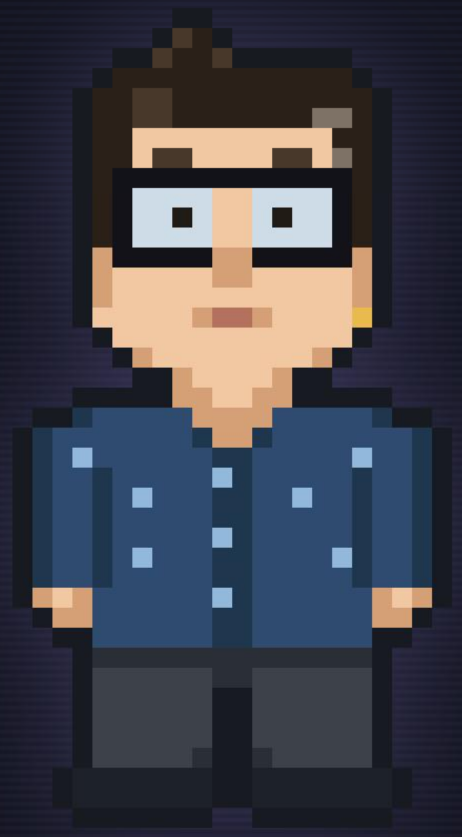
- Cares about: the state of our investments and what they might return. Are we using resources well?
- Accountable for: financial plan, forecasts, runway management, margin, and the board's expectations.
- Allows us to: understand, plan for, and build our future.

02 · THINK LIKE FINANCE

Where I went wrong: pitching new headcount

Why was finance not approving my SRE headcount requests?

- Reliability and toil can sound like a cost.
- I focused on why headcount was needed, not showing the return.



02 · THINK LIKE FINANCE

How I got to "yes"

SHOWED

What the SREs would actually do

We added some cost optimization projects to the reliability roadmap.

SHOWED

When the savings land

We modeled how their work would pay off in cost reduction.

SHOWED

What it is worth today

Same request, different focus.

02 · THINK LIKE FINANCE

What Finance Is Actually Asking

"Why is AWS spend up 20%?"	Is this real business growth, or is it waste?
"When does this work yield results?"	Have you considered the time value of money?
"Could we do it with 10% less?"	How granular is your model/thinking? What are the error bars on our math?

LEVEL 3

Negotiations

Negotiator stereotypes will lead you astray

TV and movies make you think good negotiators are pushy, angry, and relentlessly stubborn.

Does this work? *No.*

Here's what is *actually* required to get to "yes"

#1 Your counterparty must *like* you — or at least not actively dislike you.

#2 They must think you *deserve* what you're asking for.

#3 They must have the power (internally) to *act on* your asks.

From XMBA 252 Managerial Negotiations taught by Prof. Laura Kray

03 · NEGOTIATIONS

Negotiating with software vendors

We needed to buy an AI software license. The number quoted was 10x my expected price, for no good reason.

How could I fight a proposal that seemed to make no sense?

Negotiations have three overlapping flavors

INTEGRATIVE

Growing the pie

We value different negotiation elements differently. Can we find pieces that you value receiving more than I value giving up?

e.g. term length, scope, timing, references, marketing.

DISTRIBUTIVE

Splitting a fixed pie

In these negotiations, every dollar I gain is exactly a dollar you lose.

Try to avoid framing negotiations this way when possible.

RELATIONSHIP

Playing a repeated game

You'll face this vendor, peer, or partner in the future.

Keeping the relationship positive may be worth giving up value for.

From XMBA 252 Managerial Negotiations taught by Prof. Laura Kray

Grow the pie, *then* split the gains

03 · NEGOTIATIONS

I was able to negotiate down by over 50%

STEP 01

Gave real reasons for pushing back on the price

STEP 02

Got into integrative mode: suggested elements that were cheap for us and dear to them.

STEP 03

Got creative on time and terms

Know Your BATNA

BATNA

"Best alternative to negotiated agreement," aka what happens if you walk away

- Identify your BATNA before the conversation starts.
- Do whatver you can to improve it.
- Guess at theirs. It explains most of their behavior.
- Try not to bluff. Get caught once, never be believed again.

You might be asking...

CONCLUSION

Do I need to learn business stuff? Can't I just ask AI now?

AI makes a business education *more* valuable

- AI is reshaping roles and turning all of us into mini-GMs
- Now, it's our judgment, values, and creativity that set us apart

THANK YOU

These disciplines shape our work whether we understand them or not.

Be one who understands!

Emily Nakashima

SVP of Engineering, Honeycomb

QUESTIONS? Find me at the break!