Hiring Data Scientists and Machine Learning Engineers

A practical guide

Roy Keyes

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A Practical Guide

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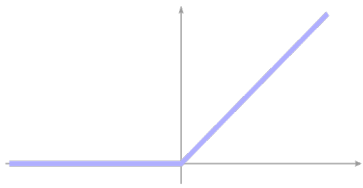
Chapter 1: Introduction



$$f(x) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } x < 0 \\ x & \text{if } x \geq 0 \end{cases}$$

$$f'(x) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } x < 0 \\ 1 & \text{if } x \geq 0 \end{cases}$$

In the past fifteen years, data (big, small, and in between) has taken on a new importance as a core asset and enabler across industries, scientific pursuits, government, and many other areas of society. In business, the ability to extract value from that data has become a necessity rather than something exotic or simply a nice-to-have.

To extract the value from your business' data, you need the right people. Hiring the right people to do that is what this book is about.

What is this book?

This book is designed to be a concise, opinionated, and practical guide to hiring the right data science technologists that your organization needs to achieve its goals. It will guide you through identifying the roles and skills your organization needs, how to source candidates, how to assess candidates, and how to help them succeed once hired. At each step, the book will try to give you a clear set of criteria and choices to create the most effective and efficient hiring process.

This book also has several interviews with data science and machine learning engineering hiring managers from some of the major internet companies. These interviews offer a broad perspective

on the challenges of hiring, along with an inside view into how managers at these companies try to address them.

Who is this book for?

This book is aimed at anyone who wants to build or grow a data science or machine learning team. This may be the CEO of a small startup, a new manager at a large tech company, the leader of a new data-driven project at a non-profit, or the head of "digital transformation" at a massive global industrial company. While the needs and available resources across organizations vary greatly, this book aims to provide a useful framework and game plan adaptable to many different scenarios.

Different readers will come into this book with differing levels of experience related to hiring, data science, and machine learning engineering. Accordingly, some material can be skipped, depending on your background and experience. If you are a data scientist who has been through the hiring process on the candidate side of the table, you'll understand a lot of the pitfalls and difficulties with data science skills and fit assessment, but may be unfamiliar with the logistics and challenges of the overall hiring process. If you have hired lots of people before, but have never hired a machine learning engineer, you'll be familiar with the general hiring process, but may not have experience with the specifics of creating an MLE job description or what to look for in a candidate.

Some material in this book will be more relevant to companies in the United States rather than non-profits, government agencies, or non-US organizations. I will try to note material, such as employment law related information, as being specific to the US or American corporations[1].

[1]Be on the lookout for footnotes.

Why is this book needed?

Data science and machine learning have exploded in popularity in recent years. The sudden popularity and prominence, along with the hope and hype accompanying this explosion, have left many very excited about the promise of data science, but unsure how to get the expected value for their organization. As with any rapidly emerging new field, it's not always clear what skills and qualifications a practitioner needs. The plethora of new boot camps, degree programs, and online courses has helped the potential workforce grow very rapidly, but also created a situation where it's still unclear who is best suited for a given role. This means that hiring managers often find themselves in the situation of dealing with an overwhelmingly large number of job applicants with no clear way to filter on the best candidates.

While there are many resources out there for aspiring data scientists looking for jobs, there are few aimed at those who need to hire data scientists and machine learning engineers. The hope is that this book can fulfill some of that need. To that end, this book aims to clarify your organization's needs, while guiding your hiring journey to reduce confusion and increase hiring effectiveness and efficiency.

A note on my background

The majority of my hands-on hiring experience has been in the setting of small to medium sized tech startups. The primary thing that those settings all had common was a low level of resources for hiring and the tendency towards hiring generalists, who could adapt to the rapidly changing needs of the organization. Because of that, some of the advice in this book will be biased towards that situation.

In the parts of the book where we talk about hiring strategy

> and needs, I will specifically discuss how to think about your available resources and the difference between having generalists versus specialists on your team. Additionally, the hiring manager interviews interspersed throughout the book will add different perspectives on the challenges, strategies, and goals of hiring data scientists and machine learning engineers.

Why is this book any good?

There's no guarantee that this book will lead you to where you need or want to be, but the hope is that it will at least get you close. While this is an opinionated book offering some specific recommendations, there is no such thing as one-size-fits-all in hiring. Nonetheless, I hope that the specific recommendations made will be highly valuable to most readers, but even more importantly that the questions posed to you will put you on the path to hiring success.

In the tech world, hiring and interviewing is a topic that is sure to spark disagreement and endless discussion. It's probably safe to say that no one has solved hiring (a fact that I will repeat throughout this book!). In fact, there are probably many reasonable approaches, a few good approaches, and very few, if any, great approaches to general hiring. Hopefully the questions, guidance, and recommendations in this book will move you much closer to the best hiring approach for your organization's specific hiring scenario.

PLEASE PURCHASE THIS BOOK FOR THE FULL CONTENTS!

Chapter 2: What is data science and machine learning?

$$\min_{w \in R^d} \frac{1}{n} \|y - \mathrm{X}\, w\|_{R^n}^2 + \lambda \|w\|_{R^d}^2$$

Data science is as wonderful as it is ambiguous. If you ask ten data scientists what exactly data science is, you are likely to get ten answers different enough to leave you wondering if data science really exists as "a thing". In this chapter we'll cover some of the basic themes and common definitions behind data science, machine learning, and machine learning engineering. While you will not come away with the "one, true" definitions of these, hopefully you will feel that you have a better grasp of how these terms are used.

This chapter covers background information that data science and machine learning practitioners can safely skip, though hopefully you'll find something of interest.

What is data science and who is a data scientist?

Very broadly, data science[2] is the application of computational and statistical methods to data in order to answer questions, make

[2]For most of this book I will use "data science" in a very broad sense, encompassing a wide range of activities and roles, including machine learning. As will be discussed in later chapters, some organizations use the term "data science" in a much narrower context.

predictions, and automate tasks. One way to break down data science is to look at the kinds of things data scientists typically do.

Two types of data science activities

1) Data analysis

One broad category of data science activity is performing data analysis to answer questions. Questions that data scientist seek to answer could include:

- Is product version A superior to product version B?
- How do the different components of our system or process affect the outcome?
- How can we best measure our performance?

These types of problems are often addressed with statistical and analytical techniques. The output is typically a report or a dashboard.

2) Data products

Another broad category of data science activity is building data-driven functionality into products. Examples of this include:

- Recommendations systems
- Search engines
- Arrival time estimates
- Automated demand forecasting
- Ad placement

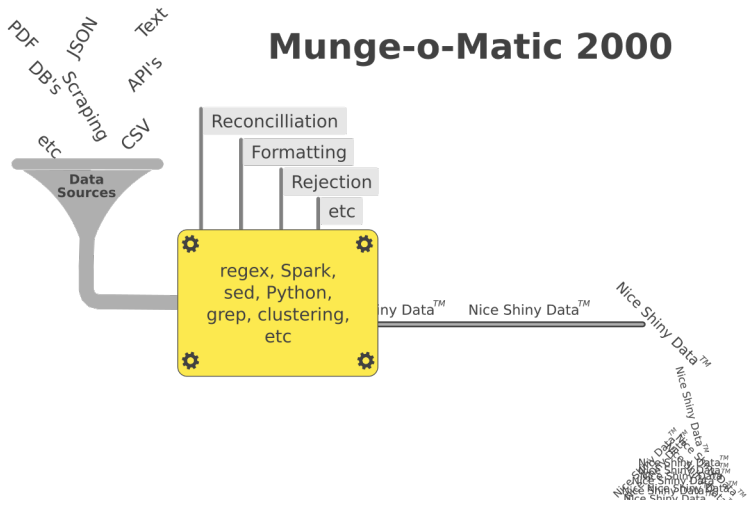
These types of problems are often addressed with machine learning or other statistical modeling techniques.

Both categories require supporting infrastructure and activities, such as data collection, data engineering, software engineering, and devops. How all of these fit together will be discussed more in the chapter on defining roles.

Data science tasks

Data science is a set of techniques and technologies used to solve business problems, which are ultimately what an organization cares about. To solve a given business problem a data science team typically needs to carry out a very wide range of tasks. Some of those tasks include:

- Finding and collecting data
- Cleaning data
- Exploring data
- Building data transformation pipelines
- Formulating metrics
- Creating reports
- Creating dashboards
- Designing and interpreting experiments
- Developing predictive models, e.g. machine learning models
- Deploying predictive models
- Maintaining predictive models
- Creating web apps and APIs
- Communicating with stakeholders (internal or external)
- Fixing problems in any of the above



Data scientists and data engineers spend much of their time on data preparation

As you can imagine, many data scientists have knowledge of all of these tasks, but very few have substantive experience with the full range. How these tasks and responsibilities are typically broken down is something that will be discussed later.

Why is data science happening now?

While people have been undertaking similar approaches to problem solving since the advent of the computer, the modern discipline under the moniker of "data science" emerged at the end of the 2000's in the tech world. Data science came about as the methodology to generate value from so-called "big data", which was a description of the suddenly large amount of data being generated from mobile devices, social media, and other sources.

Several related trends were driving the growth of data and the ability to handle it at scale. The explosion of data has been driven by the continued growth of internet use, especially via mobile

phones, adoption of social media, and the growth of the internet of things. This growth was in part enabled by the cost of data storage, processing, and bandwidth dropping exponentially, following trends similar to Moore's Law[3] [4] [5] [6]. At the same time open source software to handle and analyze big data was picking up steam - in particular Hadoop and the R and Python ecosystems. The open publication of new techniques enabled rapid advances by the community and incorporation of new methods into freely available software. Additionally, the rise of cloud computing put this all in reach of even relatively small businesses.

In the late 2000's and early 2010's the term "data scientist" started to become popularized. Early successes at companies such as LinkedIn (e.g. the People You May Know feature) and OKCupid fueled interest in the idea that businesses could apply statistical techniques to the data that they were already collecting for their day-to-day operations and extract additional value. Articles making lofty proclamations, such as "the sexy job in the next 10 years will be statisticians"[7] or even loftier, such as data science being the "sexiest job of the 21st century"[8], drove the interest in data science as a career and promoted the idea that there would be an extreme shortage of people with the needed skills.

Who is a data scientist?

Because data science is still a new and emerging field, the educational background and qualifications of a data scientist are not necessarily clear cut. Being such a new profession, until recently all data scientists were necessarily coming from other fields. In the early days a lot of those people were coming from scientific

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moore%27s_law
[4] Data Age 2025, IDC
[5] A history of storage cost, mkomo
[6] 42 Years of Microprocessor Trend Data, Karl Rupp
[7] For Today's Graduate, Just One Word: Statistics
[8] Data Scientist: The Sexiest Job of the 21st Century

fields, such as physics. Fields that already involved a lot of statistical thinking, question answering, and computing were fertile grounds for finding potential data scientists.

Does a data scientist need to have a PhD?

There are a lot of data scientists that have PhD's and it is a common question whether a PhD is needed to be a data scientist. I think the answer is pretty clearly "no".

A PhD is a degree designed to train people in doing academic research. Academic research is very different from what most data scientists typically do (aside from those in academia). There are in fact successful data scientists in the business world that came into the field without even having obtained undergraduate degrees. That said, the skills that PhD students in several fields learn and practice have large amounts of overlap with the skills needed by data scientists. Arguably the number one skill for data scientists is being able to rapidly learn new techniques, technologies, and domains, something the PhD students are typically good at.

For some very specialized data science roles, especially roles with the expectation of publishing lots of research, a PhD is probably an appropriate qualification. Even then, it is not necessarily required, depending on experience and aptitude.

Nowadays there are many routes to data science, some more "official" than others. A student can now receive both undergraduate and graduate degrees in data science from reputable universities. Online courses, both paid and free, are ubiquitous[9] [10]. There are also many data science "boot camps", which purport to train people up in a few weeks.

[9] Machine Learning by Stanford University
[10] Practical Deep Learning for Coders

Like many other fields of technology data science has evolved very quickly. It's arguable that the foundations and basics are still up in the air and may take a while to solidify, if ever. New university-based programs have made progress in preparing students, but the field itself has also progressed in that time and remains a moving target. Ultimately data scientists have to fill in the gaps via self-study and on-the-job learning.

Which academic fields do data scientists typically study?

More and more new graduates are coming into data science with degrees specifically in data science, machine learning, or analytics, but other related fields that are heavy on math and computing are often what data scientists have studied. Typical fields of study include, but are not limited to:

- Computer science
- Statistics
- Mathematics
- Physical sciences
- Engineering
- Biological sciences
- Psychology and cognitive science
- Quantitatively focused social sciences (e.g. economics)

Ultimately anyone with the right skills, experience, and the ability to keep up with the latest developments in the field can be a data scientist. No specific degree or qualification is required.

What is machine learning and machine learning engineering?

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Machine learning engineering

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Who is a machine learning engineer?

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Wrapping up

Data science is a broad set of data-centric approaches used to solve a diverse set of problems. Machine learning is one subset of those techniques that has enjoyed increasing popularity and success in the last decade. Because data science is a wide-ranging and relatively new field, data scientists come from a wide variety of backgrounds. No single educational background is required, rather the ability to perform the tasks of data science and the ability to consistently learn new skills are the primary requisites. While data scientists often work on machine learning, machine learning engineers specialize more narrowly on various aspects of machine learning, from model development to model deployment and maintenance.

Interview: Julie Hollek, Mozilla

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Chapter 3: Determining what roles you need

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Defining your business goal

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Why would you *not* need data science or machine learning?

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When can you move forward with data science and machine learning

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The many roles in data science

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The universe of data science roles in 2021

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Determining the roles you need

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Scenario I: A blank-slate proof of concept

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Scenario II: Productionizing or scaling a prototype

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Scenario III: Adding an additional role player

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The skills you need to hire for follow from the tasks you need to complete

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Examples of task to skills translations

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Translating from tasks to skills

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The roles you need to hire for follow from the task-related skills

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Determining your resources and constraints

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Resources

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Constraints

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The Covid-19 pandemic and the emergence of remote work

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High volume, early-career level role

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Making decisions

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Narrowing the funnel

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Setting thresholds

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Decision making strategies

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Which skills should you be assessing?

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A typical low-to-mid candidate volume sequence

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Chapter 8: Setting up your team for success

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Summary

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Appendices

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Appendix I: Task and skills breakdowns, with associated roles

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Appendix II: Skills of different roles

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Summary and Cheat Sheet

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Steps to effective DS/MLE hiring

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