

// phase 1 deep dive

Target



How to choose the companies you will build your Signal Project for, why they matter, and how to find the ones that fit your background.

baswe.ai // become a software engineer

This is the in-depth guide to phase one of the Signal Project. Start here after the overview, and work through it before you build anything. By the end you will know exactly who you are building for, and why.

Why the target step comes first

Everything in a Signal Project is reverse-engineered from one decision: who you are building for. The research you do, the problem you pick, the way you architect the build, the story you tell when you launch, and the people you reach out to at the end all flow from your target. Get the target right and the whole project has a clear direction. Get it wrong, or leave it vague, and you end up building something generic that signals nothing to anyone.

This is the step most people rush, because building feels like progress and choosing feels like delay. But a month spent building the wrong thing for the wrong audience is a month wasted. Ten focused minutes spent deciding exactly who you are building for changes the entire trajectory of the project.

The core idea: you are not choosing where to send applications. You are choosing who to build for. A project built for a specific type of company, in a specific industry, reads completely differently than a generic portfolio piece. Narrow is the advantage.

What you are actually deciding

By the end of this step you will have made two connected decisions, plus one practical layer on top. First, the type and stage of company you want to build for, which shapes what kind of work you will do and what a strong project looks like to them. Second, the industry or market segment you are aiming at, which shapes the specific problem you will eventually solve. Third, your own constraints and priorities, like location, compensation target, and how much risk you are willing to take.

The rest of this document breaks each of these down in order: the full range of company types you can go for, how to figure out which of them you actually want, how to find companies if you are starting from a blank page, and how to weigh all of it against your own background so you target companies where you can realistically win.

The types of companies you can go for

Tech is not one job market. It is hundreds of overlapping ones. The same title, senior software engineer, means very different things at a forty-person startup and a forty-thousand-person public company. To target well, look at the landscape through three lenses at once: the stage and size of the company, its relationship to AI, and the industry it operates in. A single good target is really a point where all three lenses line up, for example, an early-stage company building AI tooling for the logistics industry.

▪ Lens 1: stage and size

Stage is the single biggest driver of what your day to day looks like, what a company hires for, and what kind of project impresses them.

Pre-seed and seed startups (roughly 2 to 20 people). These companies are still searching for product-market fit. You wear many hats, ship constantly, and touch the entire stack. They hire almost entirely on whether they believe you can build and move fast, which makes them the most forgiving path for anyone without a traditional pedigree. A Signal Project that looks like a small, working product speaks their language directly, because that is exactly what they do all day. The tradeoff is risk: many will not exist in two years, and pay leans toward equity over cash.

Early-growth startups (Series A and B, roughly 20 to 150 people). These have found some traction and are scaling the thing that works. There is more structure than a seed company but still real ownership and speed. They hire engineers who can operate with some independence and improve systems under load. This stage is often the sweet spot for a mid-level engineer: enough scope to grow quickly, enough stability to not be gambling, and enough name recognition in their niche to matter on a resume. A project that shows you can take something from idea to shipped, and reason about scale, lands well here.

Scale-ups and late-stage private companies (Series C and beyond, often hundreds of people). These are established, well funded, and building out specialized teams. The work becomes more focused; you own a slice rather than the whole thing. Hiring gets more formal, with structured interviews and clearer leveling, and brand value on your resume goes up. A Signal Project matters here as proof you can go deep and think about real users, not just as proof you can build at all.

Big tech and public companies. The large, recognizable names. The upside is a strong brand, high and liquid compensation, deep infrastructure, and the chance to work at scale. The tradeoffs are real: less individual impact, slower shipping, and long ramp times. Hiring is credential and interview heavy, with a strong emphasis on algorithms and system design, and often an implicit filter on school or prior company. A Signal Project rarely gets you through their process on its own, but it strengthens referrals, gives you something concrete to talk about, and matters much more for the smaller teams inside these companies than for the flagship org.

Enterprise incumbents and non-tech companies with engineering teams. Banks, insurers, retailers, healthcare systems, logistics operators, and manufacturers all employ large numbers of engineers, and many are now under pressure to modernize and adopt AI. These roles can be less glamorous but are plentiful, often stable, and frequently overlooked, which means less competition. They value domain understanding highly. A project that speaks to their specific industry problem, in their language, makes you stand out fast, precisely because most applicants show up with generic work.

Agencies, consultancies, and studios. These build software for other companies. You get exposure to many industries and stacks quickly, which is useful early in a career, though you have less ownership of any single product. They hire for versatility and client-readiness, and a broad, polished project demonstrates exactly the range they sell to clients.

Bootstrapped and profitable small companies. Not every good company raised venture money. Plenty of small, profitable software businesses hire quietly, pay reasonably, and offer stability and autonomy without growth-at-all-costs pressure. They are harder to find because they are not in the news, but they are worth targeting if lifestyle and stability rank high for you.

▪ Lens 2: relationship to AI

If your goal is to move into AI engineering, this lens matters as much as stage. Companies sit on a spectrum from building the core technology to simply adopting it, and each band hires differently and rewards a different kind of project.

Foundation model labs and AI-native research companies. These build the underlying models. They are few, extremely competitive, and generally expect strong research or systems credentials. For most people pivoting into AI engineering, these are a long-term aspiration rather than a first target. Be honest about that.

AI infrastructure and tooling companies. These build the layer everyone else builds on: vector databases, orchestration frameworks, evaluation and observability tools, inference platforms, and data pipelines. They hire engineers who understand how AI systems actually run in production. A project that builds or extends real tooling, or solves a concrete reliability or evaluation problem, is a near-perfect fit here.

AI-native application companies. These are products built from the ground up around AI, for example, tools that generate, summarize, search, or automate using large language models. They are hiring aggressively and care far more about whether you can build a working AI product than about your pedigree. This is one of the strongest targets for an accelerator student, because a Signal Project is literally a small version of what they do. Build something that uses retrieval, agents, or model orchestration to solve a real problem and you are speaking their exact language.

Traditional companies integrating AI. This is the largest and most underrated opportunity. Established companies across every industry are racing to add AI to products and operations, and most do not yet have engineers who can do it well. They need people who can take an existing product and thoughtfully bring AI into it without breaking anything. A project that shows you can integrate AI into a realistic, domain-specific workflow is exactly the proof they are missing. This is often where a mid-level engineer with domain experience has the biggest edge.

Companies not yet touching AI. Some companies are not working with AI at all yet. They still hire engineers, and you can still position AI skills as forward-looking value, but if AI engineering is your specific goal, weight your target list toward the bands above, where that skill is actually wanted and rewarded.

▪ Lens 3: industry and vertical

Within any stage and any relationship to AI, a company operates in an industry. The industry decides the specific problems that exist, the language insiders use, and how much of your existing knowledge transfers. You do not need deep passion for an industry, but genuine curiosity helps, and prior exposure is a real advantage. A quick scan of fertile verticals, each with active hiring and clear AI-driven urgency:

- ▶ **Fintech and payments:** heavy data, strict rules, and constant pressure to automate; strong demand and good pay.
- ▶ **Healthtech:** enormous, underserved by good software, and full of workflow and documentation problems AI can help with.
- ▶ **Logistics and supply chain:** full of old, manual, paper-based processes, which is exactly where an obscure but real problem can make you stand out.
- ▶ **E-commerce and retail:** personalization, search, support, and operations are all being reshaped by AI.
- ▶ **Cybersecurity:** growing fast, technical, and increasingly using AI for detection and response.
- ▶ **Legal, insurance, and real estate tech:** document-heavy industries where AI is creating obvious openings.
- ▶ **Developer tools and infrastructure:** engineers building for engineers, a natural fit if you want to work close to the craft.
- ▶ **Climate, energy, and biotech:** mission-driven, technically deep, and hiring people who can handle real complexity.
- ▶ **Media, gaming, and entertainment:** creative, product-focused, and often more open to unconventional backgrounds.

The logistics point is worth repeating as a principle: an obscure, real problem inside an industry, like the fact that a specific document is still handled on paper, can pull more attention than a flashy problem everyone already knows about, because it proves you actually understand that world. You will use this insight heavily in phase three.

Putting the lenses together: your best targets are the points where all three lenses line up in a way that fits you. "Early-stage AI application companies in fintech" is a target. "Tech companies" is not. The more precisely you can name the intersection, the sharper every later phase becomes.

Figuring out what you actually want

Knowing the full landscape is only useful once you know what you are optimizing for. Two engineers with identical skills should sometimes target completely different companies, because they want different things from their careers and their lives. Before you commit to a target, get honest about your own priorities. These are the dimensions that matter most.

Compensation, and which kind. Cash and equity are not the same bet. Big tech and late-stage companies pay high, liquid salaries now. Early startups pay less cash but offer equity that could be worth a lot, or nothing. Decide whether you are optimizing for money today or a larger, riskier payoff later.

Learning speed and scope. Smaller and earlier companies force you to learn fast and touch everything. Larger companies let you go deep on a narrow area with strong

mentorship and infrastructure. Decide whether you want breadth and speed, or depth and polish, right now.

Impact and ownership. At a small company your work visibly moves the business. At a large one your work is one input among thousands. Some people are energized by ownership; others prefer the lower pressure of a well-defined slice.

Brand and future optionality. A recognizable name on your resume opens doors later, sometimes regardless of what you actually did there. If your longer-term goal is a specific tier of company, a strategic stop at a known brand can be a stepping stone. Weigh whether you are optimizing for this role or the one after it.

Stability and risk. Funding runs out, startups fail, and even big companies do layoffs. Be honest about how much uncertainty you can absorb financially and emotionally right now, including any visa or dependency constraints.

Culture, environment, and location. Remote versus onsite, team size, pace, and management style shape daily life more than the logo does. Factor in where you live and whether you would relocate, since that quietly narrows or widens your realistic list.

Mission and genuine interest. This one is easy to dismiss and quietly powerful. The whole Signal Project depends on you doing real research, reaching out to real people, and telling a genuine story about why a problem interests you. All of that is far easier, and far more convincing, when you actually care about the space. Reach out and build because the problem intrigues you, not only because you want the job. People can tell the difference.

You will not maximize all of these at once; they trade off. So rank them. Force yourself to put these in order for where you are right now, not where you think you should be. A useful exercise: pick your top three and your bottom two. Your top three are your filter, and everything on your target list should score well on at least those.

If your top priority is...	Lean toward...
Cash compensation now	Big tech and late-stage private companies
Equity upside and ownership	Seed to Series B startups
Learning speed and broad scope	Early-stage startups
A recognizable brand on the resume	Known big tech, or a hot growth-stage company in its niche
Stability and lower risk	Profitable, public, or well-funded growth-stage companies
Deep, hands-on AI product work	AI-native application and AI infrastructure companies
A mission or domain you care about	Any strong company in that specific industry

This mapping is a starting point, not a rule. Most real targets blend several priorities. The goal is simply to make sure your list is built around what you actually want, so that when you land a role, it is one you are glad to have.

How to find companies when you are starting from zero

Plenty of people reach this step with no specific companies in mind. That is completely fine. The worst thing you can do is default to "I just want a job anywhere," because that vagueness makes it impossible to build a targeted project. Here is a repeatable process for generating a strong list from a blank page.

▪ Start from your advantages, not from a list of famous companies

The best targets usually sit close to something you already know or care about. Before searching anything, write down the industries you have worked in or been close to, even outside of engineering; the products and tools you use every week and genuinely like; the problems that reliably annoy you in your own life or past jobs; and the topics you already read about for fun. Each of these points at an industry, and industries point at companies. Someone who worked in a pharmacy before learning to code has a real edge in healthtech that a generic applicant does not.

▪ Run a consumption audit

List every app, website, and software tool you interacted with in the last week, from the obvious ones to the boring back-office tools you barely notice. Behind each is a company that hires engineers. This simple exercise surfaces dozens of real, relevant companies you already understand as a user, which is a strong starting point, because you already know what good and bad look like in that product.

▪ Follow the pain and the money

Ask where AI is creating urgency right now. Which industries are being visibly disrupted, are hiring aggressively for AI and engineering roles, or are clearly behind and scrambling to catch up. Pressure creates hiring, and hiring creates opportunity. Industries full of old, manual, unglamorous processes are especially fertile, because the problems are real and few people are excited to solve them.

▪ Use discovery sources deliberately

Once you have a few industries and interests, use these to turn them into concrete company names:

- ▶ **Y Combinator's company directory and Work at a Startup**, to browse startups by industry and stage.
- ▶ **Wellfound (formerly AngelList)**, for startup listings and roles.
- ▶ **Crunchbase**, to find companies by industry, funding stage, and recent raises.
- ▶ **LinkedIn**, using company search, the jobs tab, and the people tab to see who is hiring and who works there.
- ▶ **levels.fyi**, to see companies by compensation band and discover names you did not know.
- ▶ **G2 and Capterra**, to find business software companies grouped by category, which is a fast way to map an entire vertical.
- ▶ **Product Hunt**, to spot newer products and the companies behind them.

- ▶ **Job aggregators like hiring.cafe**, which pull openings from many company career pages at once.
- ▶ **GitHub**, to find companies with active open-source work in areas you care about.
- ▶ **Industry newsletters and tech press**, to learn which companies in a space are raising, shipping, and growing.

▪ **Let an LLM do the heavy lifting**

This is the prompt referenced in the video, expanded. Fill in the brackets with your real situation and paste it into ChatGPT, Claude, or your model of choice. It will turn your background and interests into concrete industries and companies, and even suggest under-the-radar problems to build around.

PASTE THIS INTO YOUR LLM (CHATGPT, CLAUDE, ETC.)

You are helping me choose which companies to target for a software engineering job search. Here is my situation:

- Current role and level: [e.g., mid-level backend engineer, 3 years]
- Tech stack and strengths: [e.g., Python, Node, Postgres, some AWS]
- Domains I know well: [e.g., fintech, e-commerce]
- Education: [e.g., self-taught / state-school CS / bootcamp]
- Location and remote preference: [e.g., Los Angeles, open to remote]
- Target compensation: [e.g., \$150K+ total]
- Risk tolerance: [e.g., open to startups / prefer stability]
- What I want more of: [e.g., ownership, AI work, learning speed]
- Role I am aiming for: [e.g., AI engineer building LLM features]

Based on this, do the following:

1. Suggest 5 to 8 industries or market segments where I would have an advantage and where hiring is active.
2. For each segment, explain in one or two sentences why it fits me specifically.
3. Give me 20 to 30 real companies across those segments that hire people with my profile, mixing stages, and note the stage next to each.
4. Flag which of these are actively integrating AI or building AI products, since that is my focus.
5. Point out 3 to 5 obscure, under-the-radar problems in these segments that a small portfolio project could tackle to stand out.

Be specific and realistic. Do not just list the biggest famous companies.

Treat the output as a research starting point, not gospel. Verify that the companies are real, currently hiring, and a fit for your level, then keep the ones that genuinely interest you.

▪ **Filter down to a working list**

From everything you have gathered, keep companies that pass a few simple filters: they hire engineers at your level, they are in a location you can work in or hire remotely, you can imagine building a relevant Signal Project for them, and they actually interest you. Aim to end this step with a rough list of at least ten and no more than

around a hundred companies. That list becomes the direct input to phase two, market research, where you will dig into each one.

Targeting companies you can actually win

Interest is half the equation. The other half is fit. A great target list balances companies you want with companies where your background gives you a real, honest shot, and where a strong Signal Project can close whatever gap remains. This is not about limiting yourself; it is about aiming your effort where it converts.

▪ Audit your assets honestly

Write down what you actually bring, without inflating or discounting it: your current title and level, years of experience, the languages and tools you are strong in, the industries and domains you have worked in, your most impressive shipped work and its impact, your education, any certifications, your location, your network, and any work-authorization constraints. This inventory is what you match against companies.

▪ Match on the dimensions that actually move hiring

Domain match. Prior experience in an industry is one of the strongest signals a company can see, because it lowers their perceived risk and shortens your ramp. If you have worked in or near a vertical, weight companies in that vertical heavily, and plan a project that uses that domain knowledge. This is how you turn past experience, even non-engineering experience, into an edge.

Stack match. Companies filter hard on the tools you already know. Targeting companies whose stack overlaps yours makes you an easier yes. Where you want to move into a new stack, like AI tooling, your project is how you demonstrate the new skill before anyone hires you for it.

Level match. Calibrate your aim. Targeting only senior roles at the most famous companies when you are a mid-level engineer with no brand is a low-conversion strategy. So is underselling yourself well below your ability. Aim mostly at companies where your experience maps cleanly to what they need, with a few reaches.

Brand ladder. Think in steps, not leaps. If you are at a lesser-known company now, a strong project plus a move to a respected growth-stage company can be the bridge to a top-tier company later. You do not have to reach the final destination in one jump, and trying to often backfires.

▪ If you have a strong pedigree, and if you do not

Be clear-eyed about how credentials work, in both directions.

With a strong school or company brand. A recognized CS program or a well-known former employer opens doors, especially at big tech, which often filters on exactly these signals, and gives you alumni and former-colleague networks worth using for referrals. If you have this, you can aim a bit higher, and you should still build a Signal Project, because pedigree gets you looked at while proof of building gets you hired.

Without a degree, or from a non-traditional path. This is the path this whole approach was built for. Self-taught engineers, bootcamp graduates, and career changers should weight their lists toward companies that hire on demonstrated skill rather than credentials: startups, AI-native companies, and any company that uses work samples or take-home projects. At these companies, a strong Signal Project is not a nice extra; it is the single best equalizer available, because it replaces the credential with direct proof that you can do the work. Target the places that reward that proof, and spend your energy making the proof undeniable.

- **Sort your list into reach, match, and safety**

Borrow the logic students use for college applications. For each company, ask how well your profile lines up with what they hire for.

Match. Your experience, stack, and level map cleanly onto what they need, and a solid project makes you a clear candidate. The bulk of your list should live here, because this is where effort converts best.

Reach. A step above your current profile on brand, level, or selectivity. Worth including a handful, especially where a standout project and a warm referral could tip the odds.

Safety. Companies where you comfortably clear the bar. A few of these keep momentum and options open, and can serve as stepping stones on the brand ladder.

A healthy target list is weighted toward matches, with a few reaches and a few safeties. That balance keeps you aiming high enough to grow without betting everything on long odds.

- **Let the Signal Project close the gap**

The point of all this matching is not to only target companies you are already obviously qualified for. It is to target companies where a great Signal Project makes you qualified. The project is the lever. It proves domain understanding you could not otherwise claim, demonstrates a stack you have not been paid to use yet, and stands in for a credential you do not have. Pick targets where that lever is long enough to move the outcome.

- **Three worked examples**

The domain-rich backend engineer. Three years writing backend services at a mid-sized fintech, state-school CS degree, wants to move into AI engineering. Strong move: target early-stage and growth-stage AI application companies in and around fintech and adjacent regulated industries, where the domain knowledge is a rare asset. Build a project that brings AI into a realistic fintech workflow, for example, an assistant that handles a specific, tedious compliance or reconciliation task. The fintech background plus AI proof is a combination few applicants have.

The self-taught full-stack developer. Two years shipping features at a small agency, no degree, wants a higher-paying product role. Strong move: weight the list toward startups and AI-native companies that hire on portfolios and take-homes, avoid companies known for rigid credential filters, and make a highly polished,

well-launched project the centerpiece of every application and referral request. Here the project does the heavy lifting a degree would otherwise do.

The experienced engineer from a non-tech industry. Six years in software inside a large logistics company, strong domain knowledge, limited exposure to modern AI tooling. Strong move: target companies bringing AI into logistics and supply chain, where deep industry understanding is exactly what generic AI candidates lack. Build the obscure-but-real kind of project the video described, something that solves a genuine, unglamorous industry problem, and let it prove both domain depth and new AI skill at once.

The pattern across all three: start from what you already have, target the companies where that background is an advantage rather than a liability, and use the Signal Project to supply whatever is missing.

What you should have before moving on

By the end of the target step, you should be able to state your target in a single, specific sentence and back it with a working list. Concretely, you should have:

- ▶ A chosen company stage and type profile, for example, early-stage to growth-stage product companies.
- ▶ One to three target industries or verticals you have genuine interest in or an advantage in.
- ▶ A clear position on where these companies sit relative to AI, matched to your goal.
- ▶ Your ranked priorities, so the list reflects what you actually want.
- ▶ Your own constraints written down: location or remote, compensation target, and risk tolerance.
- ▶ A rough list of at least ten and at most around a hundred real companies that fit all of the above.
- ▶ A one-sentence target statement you can say without hedging.

FILL THIS IN

YOUR TARGET PROFILE

Company stage / type: _____

Target industries (1 to 3): _____

Relationship to AI: _____

Top 3 priorities: _____

Location / remote: _____

Compensation target: _____

Risk tolerance: _____

One-sentence target statement:

That target statement and that list are the raw material for phase two. Do not move on until you can write the sentence without hedging.

Common mistakes to avoid

- ▶ **"I just want a job anywhere."** Vagueness makes a targeted project impossible and a targeted search inefficient. Pick a direction even if it is not perfect; you can adjust later.
- ▶ **Targeting all of tech.** A list with no focus produces a project with no signal. Precision is the entire point of this step.
- ▶ **Chasing only the famous names.** Aiming your whole list at a handful of the most prestigious companies means maximum competition and, for most profiles, minimum conversion. Include them if you like, but build the list around fit.
- ▶ **Ignoring your own advantages.** Overlooking the industry you already worked in, or the tools you already know, throws away your biggest edge. Start from your assets.
- ▶ **Picking a space you have zero interest in.** If you do not care about the industry, your research will be shallow, your outreach will sound hollow, and your launch story will fall flat. Curiosity is not optional in this system.
- ▶ **Optimizing for prestige over fit.** The best target is not the most impressive logo; it is the company where you can win and be glad you did.
- ▶ **Choosing companies you cannot build a relevant project for.** If you cannot imagine the Signal Project you would build for a company, it does not belong on the list yet.

→ Lock in your target and your company list, then move on to Phase 2: Market Research.