

Vibe SWE Job Ladder

Build. Ship. Learn.

For HR, hiring managers, and career conversations

Vibe SWE is a subdomain of vibe engineering: humans in the loop who are AI-native from day one. Models act as senior collaborators; the person owns intent, review, and the ship. This ladder maps familiar IC levels onto Vibe SWE craft so organizations can hire, level, and promote without inventing a parallel career track.

How to use this

- Treat levels as expectation bands, not titles you must rename overnight.
- Approximate mapping: Vibe SWE I $\approx$ Associate / L3 · II $\approx$ Mid / L4 · Senior $\approx$ L5 · Staff $\approx$ L6 · Principal $\approx$ L7+.
- Score people on craft dimensions, not prompt volume or model brand loyalty.
- Prefer evidence: Ship Cards, PRs with ownership notes, stakeholder briefs, security reviews, post-ship learnings.

Craft dimensions (every level)

Dimension	What “good” looks like
Intent & stakeholders	Turns messy human asks into outcomes, constraints, non-goals, and approvers — without laundering ambiguity into confident nonsense.
Build	Briefs models like senior collaborators; juggles tools without losing the thread; reads every shipped diff.
Ship	Lands small, reversible, visible work with proof (tests, evals, screenshots, users) and security as part of done.
Learn	Changes defaults after each ship; taste and judgment show up as cuts, not just adds.
Scope	Breadth of systems, people, and risk the person can own end-to-end.

Levels

Vibe SWE I — Associate / early career

~L3 · new grad or career-redefining builder

- Intent: Restate tickets in one outcome sentence; clarify before prompting.
- Build: Uses AI daily under guidance; never ships unread output.
- Ship: Small ships with a reviewer and basic proof.
- Learn: Short “what I’d change” note after each ship.
- Scope: Single feature / well-bounded task; low blast radius.
- Promotion: Readable diffs; trusted clarifications; zero “I didn’t know the model wrote that.”

Vibe SWE II — Mid

~L4 · solid IC

- Intent: Writes full briefings (outcome / constraints / non-goals / approvers / risks) unprompted.
- Build: Multi-tool fluency; knows when not to use a model; kills model-suggested scope.
- Ship: Owns a vertical slice; security in definition of done.
- Learn: Improves personal defaults (checklists, evals, review habits).
- Scope: Full feature or small service; one–two stakeholder groups.
- Promotion: Peers copy briefing habits; ships land with evidence; fewer fuzzy-ask rework loops.

Senior Vibe SWE

~L5 · senior IC

- Intent: Negotiates scope; kills requests that should die in conversation.
- Build: Sets team norms for AI-assisted work; reviews others' AI diffs for taste and risk.
- Ship: Designs proof strategies (evals, canaries, rollback); security non-negotiable.
- Learn: Turns incidents into shared practice.
- Scope: Multi-feature area or critical path; mentors I–II.
- Promotion: Team ships get safer/clearer; hiring bar for human-in-the-loop rises.

Staff Vibe SWE

~L6 · staff IC

- Intent: Aligns multiple stakeholder streams; prevents org-level ambiguity laundering.
- Build: Architects human + model + agent patterns across teams; picks standards, not fads.
- Ship: Owns cross-team release quality and evidence culture.
- Learn: Publishes durable frameworks others cite.
- Scope: Org-level systems; unblocks several teams.
- Promotion: Other teams adopt practices; measurable drop in AI-assisted thrash/incidents.

Principal Vibe SWE

~L7+ · principal / distinguished

- Intent: Shapes how the company talks to customers and regulators about AI-assisted delivery.
- Build: Long-horizon strategy for human-in-the-loop building.
- Ship: Portfolio-level risk and proof standards.
- Learn: External thought leadership that strengthens practice (not hype).
- Scope: Company or industry influence on what “good” AI-native engineering means.
- Promotion: External credibility + internal systems that outlast individuals.

Interview signals

Level	Look for	Red flags
I	Curiosity; reads own output; clarifying Qs	Pastes model output unread
II	Written brief before build; kills scope	Tool worship; no proof of ship

Senior	Mentors review habits; security in DoD	“The model said so”
Staff	Cross-team standards; durable docs	Heroics without institutionalization
Principal	Strategy + external clarity	Hype without ownership

Anti-patterns (any level)

- Shipping unread AI output
- Treating vibe coding (prompt & hope) as production practice
- Competing with “vibe engineering” instead of nesting under it
- Measuring output by tokens or PR count instead of owned outcomes
- Hiding human judgment behind “the model decided”

Mapping to your existing ladder

Keep your current titles if needed. Overlay these expectation bands on Vibe SWE dimensions during calibration.

Example: an L5 who cannot brief stakeholders or prove ships is not operating as a Senior Vibe SWE — regardless of title.