

---

# How to Get a Job at a Startup

Launch a career in one of the most exciting growth areas of today's tech-driven economy.

By Matt Cynamon

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction: Why Work for a Startup?</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Startups 101: Everything You Need to Know About Startup Companies and Culture</b>	<b>4</b>
What Is a Startup?	<b>5</b>
What Is a Tech Startup?	<b>5</b>
The 5 Stages of the Startup Lifecycle	<b>5</b>
What Are Common Job Titles and Roles Within a Tech Startup?	<b>5</b>
Web Development, User Experience Design, Product Management, Data Science and Analysis, Digital Marketing	<b>6</b>
A Guide to Startup Compensation	<b>7</b>
How to Negotiate Your Startup Offer	<b>8</b>
<b>Startup Funding, Explained</b>	<b>9</b>
Meet the Investors	<b>10</b>
The 5 Stages of Funding	<b>10</b>
Arm Yourself With Information	<b>11</b>
<b>“Should I Work for a Startup Company?” First, a Few Reality Checks.</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>6 Essential Tips on How to Apply for — and Get — Startup Company Jobs</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Wrap-Up</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Additional Resources</b>	<b>22</b>



## How I Paved My Path in the Startup World

When I was 24 years old, I landed a job at a 15-person startup as a part-time contractor selling unused inventory for a small commission. It was barely enough money to pay the rent. Within four months, I was sent overseas to launch the company's office in London. Within one year I was running all of its operations in Europe, and three years after that I was the head of a global business unit that touched tens of thousands of customers. Now that tiny startup — General Assembly — employs over 500 people and trains individuals and corporate teams in many cities across four continents around the world.

More important to me than the roller-coaster-type growth I experienced is how much I loved working at that startup. It challenged me in ways I've never been challenged before. I worked on incredible projects that changed people's lives, I got experience across a broad range of opportunities that would have never been afforded to me at a more mature company, and I got to work with some of the smartest, most ambitious people I've met in my life. While I may not work at General Assembly today (though I'm still a proud part of the community), it was that experience that inspired me to write this book.

— Matt Cynamon

## INTRODUCTION

Sometime around 2008, at the height of the Great Recession, a massive shift began to take place across cities, small towns, and universities.

As the comforts and securities of traditional careers began to dry up, excitement in the tech-startup world was reaching a fever pitch. These companies seemed to spin up overnight, raising millions of dollars and impacting millions, if not billions, of people. By 2009, with the economy still reeling, more new businesses were formed than during any time in the previous 15 years. Playing the “safe route” in traditional industries wasn't safe anymore; the wealth of new opportunities emerging in the tech-startup world transformed how people conceived of, and built, their careers.

One of the more famous stories from this period was that of Instagram, a two-year-old photo-sharing app with 13 employees that was bought by Facebook for \$1 billion. To put this into comparison, Walmart, which had thousands of employees, hundreds of physical locations, and almost 30 years of history, was worth only \$31 million in 2017's dollars when it was first listed on the New York Stock Exchange in 1970. Never before could a company get started so quickly and cheaply and be worth so much.

But it wasn't just speed and money that fueled the growth of tech startups. There was also a larger cultural shift in what people wanted out of their careers. Flexibility, freedom, meaning, and purpose started to become intertwined with people's career aspirations. Tech startups provided the perfect respite for all of this. The small size of the organizations allowed for jobs in which one could work intimately with teams

and technology that had the potential to impact millions of people across a broad range of industries.

Since the Great Recession, startups and startup jobs have become a major force in society and nearly all net new job creation. They're sexy, growing, and provide an opportunity to find meaning and purpose in your work (and sometimes you can even get rich).

If you're reading this paper, you probably want in — for your career, for your spirit, for your future. But wanting in and breaking in to this competitive industry are two different things. Landing an opportunity at a startup is about more than luck. There are terms to learn, steps to take, and skills to grow to make you a candidate who stands out from the crowd.

This paper brings all those things to the forefront for you. It combines the knowledge of startup job-hunters, founders, and employers to give you a concise how-to guide for landing your dream job at a startup. In the coming pages, we'll share firsthand tips on how to break into a startup career, clear up confusing industry jargon, and share important resources that will aid you on your journey.

General Assembly believes that everyone should be empowered to pursue work they love. We hope you'll find this book to be a helpful first step in getting there yourself.

---

# **Startups 101: Everything you need to know about startup companies and culture.**

# The 5 Stages of the Startup Lifecycle

While every tech startup's journey is different, each typically follows this pattern:

- 1 **PROOF OF CONCEPT:**  
In the earliest of stages, founders build a prototype, or early version of a product, and try to establish whether there is any demand for it.
- 2 **FINDING PRODUCT-MARKET FIT:**  
Next, they will bring on a small team to refine the product and bring it to market. Product-market fit occurs when consumer demand proves there is a real need for the product.
- 3 **RAISING CAPITAL:**  
As a startup graduates from each step, the founders will often need to raise money to fuel their growth. This stage may occur in several cycles, described on pages 11-12.
- 4 **SCALING THE BUSINESS:**  
A scalable business is one that can perform the same or similarly regardless of how big it becomes. The process of scaling includes attempting to grow revenues exponentially while not breaking operations.
- 5 **BUILDING OUT SYSTEMS:**  
If the startup can achieve the necessary level of growth and stability, the company invests in building out the infrastructure needed to support a larger organization.

A startup is simply a business attempting to bring a new product or service to market. While startups are known for being young companies in the tech industry, the truth is that a startup can exist in any industry and can be any age.

The real difference between startups and traditional businesses is that startups operate in conditions of extreme uncertainty. For example, most startups operate with unfinished products, undefined business models, and unproven strategies. The whole journey of a startup is about bringing clarity to these questions and figuring out what the company and its good or service truly is. It's that level of uncertainty, and figuring things out as you go, that gives startups their defining culture and what makes them such interesting places to work. The team is literally inventing the future on the fly.

Every startup passes through a series of stages or life cycles, which are marked by important milestones. Once these conditions are met — proof of concept, product-market fit, raising capital, scaling the business, and building out systems — the company graduates from startup to mature business.

## What Is a Tech Startup?

Tech startups use technology as a core part of their product, delivery, or marketing. For example, the taxi business is as old as the automobile itself. But companies like Lyft and Uber use technology — in this case phone apps — to make it easier for people to hail a taxi, provide directions to a destination, tip a driver, provide feedback, and more. Likewise, a few years ago if you wanted to watch TV, you'd need to install cable or a satellite dish. Now, on-demand

video-streaming companies like Netflix and YouTube have led to over 22 million people getting rid of cable in 2017, upending a nearly 70-year-old industry. In both instances, companies leveraged technology to completely change the game in their respective industries. This is known as disruption and all tech startups strive to be major disruptors.

The technical skills that are largely prized at tech startups include web development, data science and analysis, user experience design, product management, and digital marketing.

## What Are Common Job Titles and Roles Within a Tech Startup?

It takes a village to raise a startup — or at least a few dedicated individuals who can do a village's worth of work. At a growing company, roles and duties can change quickly, and many startup employees end up wearing a lot of hats as they tackle the most important needs for the business at any given moment.

Here's a glance at some of the key roles and skill sets that drive most startups.

### Founder

The founder is the person (or people) who starts the company. Some founders, like Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg or Amazon's Jeff Bezos, stay with the organization for long, or permanently, after it takes off. However, it's not uncommon for a founder to leave at any stage of the startup's life. Founders come from diverse career backgrounds, but what they all have in common is an entrepreneurial spirit, some level of business acumen, and a clear

## PRO TIP: CODING JOBS



Michelle Ferreira,  
Web Development Immersive  
Instructor, General Assembly  
San Francisco

**“Working on teams is incredibly important to engineering. People don’t write websites alone, they write them alongside other engineers, so you have to be able to communicate, compromise, prioritize, and follow a plan.”**

product vision. Startup founders don’t need to be experts in web development, UX design, or the other disciplines below, but they should have a high-level understanding of the key skills needed to launch a tech-driven business. In order to see their vision through, founders should be strong leaders who can guide their company through funding, staffing, and scaling.

### Web Development

While designers create the professional look and feel of a website or web app, web developers generate the code that makes it work. The technology that supports eCommerce sites, blogs, social networks, video streaming services and more is built by developers.

#### KEY SKILLS:

Front-end web development (HTML, CSS, JavaScript, responsive design, JSON, AJAX, AngularJS), back-end web development (Ruby on Rails, APIs, Node.js, Heroku, MongoDB), collaboration, problem-solving, product development, programming fundamentals

#### POPULAR JOB TITLES:

Chief technology officer, VP of engineering, senior web developer, junior web developer, software developer, full-stack engineer, mobile developer

### User Experience (UX) Design

A UX designer determines the interaction experience of a user with a website, app, device, or piece of software. It’s all about anticipating a user’s needs when using a product, and ensuring an intuitive,

impactful, and delightful experience.

#### KEY SKILLS:

User research, interaction design, interface design, wireframing, prototyping, usability testing, customer journey mapping, card sorting, information architecture, affinity mapping, service design, product design, collaboration, working with clients

#### POPULAR JOB TITLES:

UX designer, user interface (UI) designer, product designer, user researcher, information architect

### Product Management

Product managers are like mini CEOs. They are responsible for identifying market opportunities, defining the product being built, and determining the return on investment. They conduct customer interviews, user testing, and data analysis, and distill the insights gained into an implementable strategy. They then lead the product team to bring that strategy to life.

#### KEY SKILLS:

Customer development, Agile and Lean methodologies, SWOT analysis, communication, prototyping, user interviews, wireframing and storyboarding, business model design, market research, project management, pricing and financial modeling

#### POPULAR JOB TITLES:

Chief product officer, product manager, product lead, product owner

### Data Science and Analysis

Data experts organize and collect data from a variety of sources, evaluate it, derive insights from it, and make actionable recommendations to drive the business.

## PRO TIP: XXXXX XXXXXXX



Alicia Morga, Digital Marketing Instructor, General Assembly San Francisco\*

**“A superstar digital marketer is not satisfied with just following directions but likes to dig deeper, ask more questions, and engage with the data. Superstar marketers are also always learning. Digital marketing changes so quickly that anybody in marketing has to be continually curious and proactive.”**

\*Photo by Gabriela Hasbun

**KEY SKILLS:**

Python, machine learning, SQL, UNIX, Git, R, Tableau, Excel, modeling techniques, data visualization, big data, natural language processing, statistics, critical thinking, storytelling and presentation skills

**POPULAR JOB TITLES:**

Data scientist, data analyst, quantitative researcher, machine learning engineer, data science analyst, data engineer.

**Digital Marketing**

Digital marketers combine traditional marketing tactics with new technologies. Their domains include areas like social media, search engine optimization, online advertising, and content creation. The best digital marketers often utilize both creative and quantitative skills.

**KEY SKILLS:**

Email marketing, branding, content strategy, social media, paid social, customer relationship management (CRM), search engine marketing (SEM), search engine optimization (SEO), marketing analytics, business strategy

**JOB TITLES:**

Chief marketing officer, director of digital marketing, digital marketing manager, email marketing manager, digital marketing coordinator, content producer, content marketer, content strategist, social media manager

## A Guide to Startup Compensation

Compensation at a startup is largely made up of three components: salary, benefits, and equity. The value of each depends on the stage of a company's growth, the role, and an employee's previous experience. A good rule of thumb, though, is this: The earlier a stage the company is in, the lower the salary and benefits will be, but the higher the equity will be. As the company matures, the scales start to tip in the other direction. Let's talk in a bit more detail about each of these.

**Salary**

As mentioned above, salary is largely contingent on the company's stage, the role, and the employee's previous experience. There is no one-size-fits-all here. At an earlier-stage company, you can almost certainly expect a lower salary than the industry norm, regardless of your previous experience. As the company matures, the salaries of all positions start to get closer and closer to market rate. If you're curious what to expect, we recommend playing with the [salaries and equity tool by AngelList](#) or researching salary ranges at specific companies on Glassdoor.

**Benefits**

Benefits at a startup are also largely dependent on stage. If good benefits are important to you, then an early-stage startup is likely the wrong place to work. However, as a startup grows, its benefits often become an extension of its culture and are used in all recruiting efforts. Take, for instance, Airbnb, which offers a \$2,000 travel stipend to all



Macia Batista,  
Lead Career Coach,  
General Assembly New York

## How to Negotiate Your Startup Offer

GA New York career coach Macia Batista walks you through essential steps for building your ideal job offer.

**KNOW YOUR MINIMUM NUMBER.** Leverage sites like [PayScale](#) and [Glassdoor](#) to learn what employers in your city are paying for similar roles and industries. Do your research ahead of time to fully understand the fair market value for the position, taking into account background and experience. Know your worth!

**PROVIDE A SALARY RANGE.** Determine a range for yourself, then ask for the upper half of it, so you can negotiate down if needed. Giving a range demonstrates flexibility. It gives you the opportunity to ask for more when an offer is presented, and negotiate other variables, like 401k contribution, remote work options, or vacation days. Tell the hiring manager, “I’m targeting roles with a range of X, but I’m focused on the entirety of the package including culture, growth, and mission.”

**CONSIDER THE WHOLE PACKAGE — NOT JUST SALARY.** Compensation goes beyond your paycheck. When weighing a job offer, look at factors like bonuses, equity, health care and retirement plans, transportation costs, schedule flexibility (e.g., working from home and vacation time), and potential for growth at the company.

**ENSURE YOUR PAY INCREASES WITH FUNDING.** If you’re joining an early-stage startup, equity (stock options) is oftentimes part of the compensation package, since these offers often fall below market salary. However, you should be earning a fair market-value salary as soon as the company raises real money. I recommend signing a written agreement with your employer to guarantee a pay increase once the company has more capital.

## STARTUPS 101

employees. Other startups may allow pets at the office, or offer gym and other discounts, catered lunches, generous vacation policies, or flexible remote-working options.

### Equity: Stock and Vesting Schedules

Equity is often the most confusing and intriguing part of a compensation package at a startup. Equity refers to ownership of the company, and this can be extremely valuable if the company ever sells or goes public (more on that in the fundraising section on pages 10-11). What’s important to know here is that no employee is ever “given” equity. Instead, employees often receive stock options, which are the option to purchase equity in the company at a heavily discounted price. You also are not given all of your stock options up front; rather, you earn an increasing amount of options over a four-year period. That four-year period is often referred to as a vesting schedule. The typical vesting schedule gives you one-fourth of your options at the end of your first year, and then 1/48th every month after that. Once your options vest, you have the right to purchase them (or not).

Getting into a company early has a big impact on the amount of stock options you receive and at what price. If you join a company early, you are often rewarded with a higher number of options at a much lower price. As the company matures, the risk gets lower and its ability to pay market-rate salaries improve, so you will typically receive fewer stock options and at a higher purchase price.

The benefit of purchasing your options is that eventually — fingers crossed — the company will sell or go public and you will get a big payday. For example, early Instagram employees turned their stock

options into an average profit of nearly \$8 million! And there’s the famous example of the Facebook muralist who was compensated in stock options that were eventually worth north of \$200 million. Of course, these examples are far on the ludicrous side of the scale, and many people don’t make any money from stock options — but risky or not, they’re part of what makes joining a startup so exciting.

### STOCK VALUE



## 8 Million

Instagram employees turned their stock options into an average profit of nearly \$8 million.

## 200 Million

There’s the famous example of the Facebook muralist who was compensated in stock options that were eventually worth north of \$200 million.

---

# Startup Funding, Explained

---

# Meet the Investors

Get to know the types of investors that could help fund your startup.

## ANGEL

Angel investors are typically entrepreneurs who have wealth to share. They invest their own capital in startups and businesses they believe in, with their involvement in the company ranging anywhere from sole investment to a portion of ownership.

## VENTURE CAPITAL

Venture capital firms (VCs) are established groups of investors who generally write the biggest checks. But unlike angel investors, they're only interested in pitches from more established companies that have a solid business plan to share.

## PEER-TO-PEER

Peer-to-peer lending is set up exactly as it sounds: Projects are listed on dedicated websites for funding consideration. If a potential lender sees a business idea that seems promising, the business and lender work out the terms with each other.

## PERSONAL

Though friends and family may not write checks worth billions, many startups report raising money from personal connections. Personal investors are unique in that they usually lend money based on trust rather than a solid business plan.

## BANKS

Similar to angel investors, VCs, and peer-to-peer lenders, a thorough description of your business is necessary in order to secure a bank loan. Because startups are often unproven, securing funding from a traditional investor like a bank is extremely rare.

## STARTUP FUNDING, EXPLAINED

**E**arlier we mentioned that tech startups often go through different life stages, and that those stages greatly impact things like compensation, work-life balance, risk, and upside. It's hard to know exactly what stage a company is in from the outside, but a great way to get an approximation is to look at the company's fundraising history. Fundraising can feel like an entirely foreign language, but understanding it is essential as you pursue a career in startups.

Not all startups raise money from outside investors, but many do and they often follow a sequential order that looks something like 1) seed round, 2) Series A, 3) Series B, 4) Series C, and so on. While these funding rounds typically correspond with business milestones, they are not always an external indicator of success. Startup investors value high-risk opportunities and expect most of their portfolio to fail while one or two will be so successful that they make a nice return. Those successful startups are often called unicorns.

### STAGE 1

#### The Seed Round

The seed round is typically the first round of funding a startup will raise. It usually ranges from \$50,000 to \$2 million and often comes from angel investors. Angel investors are high-net-worth individuals who use only personal finances to make investments. At this stage, a company is usually just the founders and maybe a handful of employees. The company typically has a promising prototype of its product and will use the money to build it out and start putting it in the hands of customers.

### STAGE 2

#### Series A

After a seed round, a startup will typically raise a Series A round, which will range from \$2 million to \$15 million. This money will typically come from one or more venture capital firms. A venture capital (VC) firm is an investment firm that specializes in startups. At this stage, a company likely has some satisfied customers and will use the money to make improvements and start to market its product more heavily.

### STAGE 3

#### Series B

The next round is a Series B, which is usually upwards of \$7 million. At this point, the startup will likely have some direction around its business model and will use the funding to try to capture a greater market share. Depending on the type of company, at this stage the organization could potentially be heading toward 100 employees.

### STAGE 4

#### Series C, D, E...

The Series C round is typically between \$20 million and \$100 million. At this point, a startup has a proven product, business model, and marketing engine. The new funding is about doubling the size the company. This is the stage at which most startups become mature. There isn't really a limit to how many rounds of funding a startup can raise, but each subsequent round is always about growing and getting better.

---

## Arm Yourself With Information

As you research startup job opportunities, track companies' growth stages and financials with these resources.

[TechCrunch](#) is an excellent resource for keeping up with fundraising news. It reports on just about every dollar raised in the startup world.

[Google Alerts](#) are a great way to keep tabs on a particular company so you can be the first to know whenever a new round of funding comes in.

[AngelList](#) can help you stay ahead of the curve. It has a directory of all startups looking to raise their first round of funding, and is also an excellent job board.

[Crunchbase](#) provides financial and other data about companies. Check to see if a startup has enough money to make payroll the next three months.

[General Assembly](#) General Assembly workshops and events offer access into top industry pros. Connect with peers and leaders in tech who can share experience, career tips, and insight into trends and funding.

## STARTUP FUNDING, EXPLAINED

### STAGE 5

#### Selling the Company (aka The Exit)

Why do investors pour all of this money into startups? Their hope is that one day the startup will make a nice return for them, which typically happens in one of two ways.

#### Acquisition

When a startup gets acquired by a larger company, the larger company pays a fixed amount to the acquiree's shareholders. Examples of this include Facebook acquiring Instagram, Microsoft acquiring Skype, and Google acquiring YouTube.

#### Initial Public Offering (IPO)

In this scenario, a company goes from being privately owned to publicly owned. This means that anyone can buy or sell shares on the stock market at any time, and the value of the company is variable. An acquisition or IPO is also when employees who have been given equity can cash out for big paydays.

---

### FUNDING STAGES



## Seed Round

The seed round usually ranges from \$50,000 to \$2 million and often comes from angel investors.

## Series A

The Series A round typically ranges from \$2 million to \$15 million.

## Series B

The next round is a Series B, which is usually upwards of \$7 million.

## Series C

The Series C round is typically between \$20 million and \$100 million.

## The Exit

The company may make a nice return when sold through acquisition or IPO.

---

---

**“Should I work for a startup company?” First, a few reality checks.**

**“Working for a startup is incredibly exciting because you will work harder than you ever have, hand in hand with people who will likely become some of your closest friends. But the pressure and responsibility is enormous.”**

**O**K, so you’ve got your feet underneath you and you’re equipped with just enough knowledge to start navigating the complex startup job landscape. Before you start sending out resumes, it’s important that we have a heart-to-heart. If you’re serious about dipping your toes in the startup world, you’re about to embark on one of the most challenging, exhilarating, sometimes heart-breaking, and oftentimes fulfilling journeys of your life. So, we think it’s important that you hear some real talk.

**Working at a startup is not just a career. It’s a lifestyle.**

Working at a startup can be an all-encompassing experience in which many people often devote their entire selves to the larger mission of the company. After a few months you may find that you’re giving elevator pitches on first dates when someone asks you tell them about yourself. Now, for the most part, it’s a special feeling to be so bought into your job that you lose track of where your company ends and you begin. But some of this newfound commitment is born out of necessity.

At an early-stage startup, survival of the company is not guaranteed. If the company isn’t growing at an exponential rate, then oftentimes it goes out of business or won’t be able to secure that next round of funding. It’s incredibly exciting because you will work harder than you ever have, hand in hand with people who will likely become some of your closest friends. But the pressure and responsibility is enormous. Before you start applying, make sure you’re ready for the challenge.

**Every startup is different.**

Saying “I want to work at a startup” is kind of like saying “I want to live in a city.” Sure, New Orleans and Kansas City have a lot in common, but there’s just as much, if not more, that makes them different. Startups vary in industry, size, amount of funding, values, priorities, work-life balance, and culture. Each of these components has a major impact on what your experience will be working at company, as well as interviewing there. The best way to differentiate one company from the next is to talk to the people who work there. If that option isn’t available to you, check out its company profile on [The Muse](#). Things to watch out for are work-life balance, compensation, how goals and objectives are set, and what the founders value.

---

**COMPANY CULTURE**



## Talk to the *Employees*

The best way to differentiate one company from the next is to talk to the people who work there. If that option isn’t available to you, check out its company profile on [The Muse](#). Things to watch out for are work-life balance, compensation, how goals and objectives are set, and what the founders value.

---

## SHOULD I WORK AT A STARTUP COMPANY?

**“Startups vary in industry, size, amount of funding, values, priorities, work-life balance, and culture. Each of these components has a major impact on what your experience will be interviewing and working there.”**

It's important to remember that you'll be joining a small organization, and as a result, each new addition impacts the collective culture more than they would in a larger, older company. Aligning with the people in the room will be far more important for sussing out whether a startup is for you than some of the traditional trappings like a ping-pong table, 24/7 keg, or working remotely.

### **There are no universal golden rules.**

HR team? Internal recruiters? Formal hiring processes? Maybe. But chances are, the person who's interviewing you may be the same person you're working for. They may have hired someone before, they may not have. It's entirely likely that you can interview for different jobs at the same company and be offered a role you didn't even know you were a candidate for. As a result, there truly are no golden rules to getting hired at a startup.

There may be some trial and error, some failure, and a lot of confusion — and that's OK! If you find yourself seeing a lot of rejection when you're on the job hunt, the best thing you can do for yourself is be diligent in understanding why, and at what points, you aren't getting the results you desire.

Which leads to...

---

# 6 Essential Tips on How to Apply for — and Get — Startup Company Jobs

---

## Networking Destinations

The easiest way to get yourself out there is at local networking events. Pack your calendar with events from:

[General Assembly campuses, ga.co](#)

[Meetup.com](#)

[BuiltIn.com](#)

[Local coworking spaces](#)

If you don't live near a metropolitan area, join startup communities on:

[Facebook](#)

[LinkedIn](#)

[Slack](#)

[Product Hunt](#)

## Networking Questions

Get the conversation started with inquiries like:

- How'd you become a (UX designer, tech lead, etc.)?
- What's the most challenging part of your job?
- What's next for you?
- What advice do you have for someone like me?

## 6 ESSENTIAL TIPS

Whether you're a recent college graduate, someone with 10 years of executive-level experience, recently completed a career accelerator program, or are just making a jump from a more traditional work background, there is a pathway to a dream job at a startup for everyone. While there is no foolproof method for landing a job, we've compiled six proven tips that can help you narrow your focus, get a leg up on the competition, and look like the most prepared person in the room.

### TIP 1

#### People can get you further than job boards.

One of the nice surprises about the startup ecosystem is how supportive and helpful some of the people are. In every city, leaders in grassroots startup communities host events, give educational talks, make introductions, and offer advice. These individuals can serve as your early guides as you start out on your journey.

If you're just breaking into the startup world, you may not have a strong network to draw upon. That's OK. Go to events, meet people, and listen. As a new entrant into the community you might feel like you have little to offer in return, but one of the biggest favors you can do for someone is just ask them questions about their work. Don't be too forceful, but where appropriate, invite people for a coffee. It may seem intuitive, but being generally interested in others and what they do will help you foster relationships that aren't only valuable, but fulfilling.

When it comes time for you to start applying, warm introductions from someone within the community will go

much further than a resume submitted on a job board. Founders often cite hiring as the biggest obstacle to successfully growing their company. It's a timely and difficult process that they love to circumvent with a nice, warm introduction to top talent (aka you).

One of the most common mistakes people make when trying to get introductions is assuming that if people don't get back to you, hope is lost. Be prepared for repeated failure. Ninety percent of people will say they want to help you. Ten percent actually will. Why most people don't follow through is due to a variety of factors, but just know it's rarely about you. If you go into every conversation with this attitude, you will more easily be able to sustain your energy when your inbox sounds like crickets.

### TIP 2

#### Polish your elevator pitch with a job-search thesis.

We're living in an age of self-driving cars, private spaceships, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, on-demand everything — and startups often lie at the center of these innovations. It's completely normal for someone starting on their journey to want to be a part of all of it. While you will encounter many people who are willing to help you in your job hunt, you need to make it easy for them to do so. To that end, nothing will get you further than clarity and focus.

When you tell people what you are looking for, you want them to think, "I know who you should talk to." The easiest way to get there is to distill what you're looking for into three distinct points. We call this a job-search thesis.

A job-search thesis is a clear description of the type of job you're looking for.

“I want to work as  
a product manager at  
Desired role  
a post-Series A company in  
Desired company size  
the fashion industry.”  
Preferred industry

---

## 6 ESSENTIAL TIPS

The best job-search thesis will contain:

1. Your desired company size.
2. Your preferred industry.
3. Your desired role.

For example, if you can tell someone at a cocktail party, “I want to work as a product manager at post-Series A company in the fashion industry,” there’s a good chance they’ll remember you the next time they hear about a PM role at a company that makes smart athletic gear. Speaking about yourself with that level of specificity will instantly make connections in the mind of whomever you find yourself talking to.

### TIP 3

**Got experience? Great.  
Not so much? Then make it.**

If you are moving into the startup world from a career in a different industry or type of role, make sure to play up your relevant experience. If you feel like your job title really doesn’t translate to the position for which you’re applying, break apart the components of your current role into the factors that would be relevant at a startup. For example, if you were a lawyer then you likely have strong attention to detail, analytical problem-solving skills, an ability to explain complex problems to many stakeholders, a strong work ethic, and a history of achievement. These are all things a startup would want out of a product manager. This exercise is especially important for more senior individuals trying to move into the startup world.

Of course, you don’t have to rely only on your previous experience — the best candidates never do. Fortunately, the rules around experience have shifted and there are ways for you to start developing skills

within a given field even if you’ve never worked in that field before.

Let’s say you’re really interested in doing digital marketing for a fashion tech company. For less than \$50 you can start running Facebook advertisements for a friend’s T-shirt website, cultivating skills in running paid social media campaigns. If you want to do UX design for an eCommerce startup, you can publish a series of UX critiques about popular eCommerce sites on a blog. Engineers rarely depend on resumes alone anymore; they demonstrate their experience by publishing their code to GitHub.

Even opening an account on Medium.com and writing commentary on the industry you’re interested in can go a long way. Coupling this level of initiative with your previous (or nonexistent) work experience is the best way to demonstrate your talents and potential. In addition to gaining relevant skills that will assist you in a new role, you’ll appear to be both passionate about the subject matter and a knowledgeable self-starter who practices it in your spare time.

### TIP 4

**Do your homework.  
Then, do some more.**

With a solid network, clear thesis, and foundation of experience, it’s only a matter of time before you start landing interviews. Most recruiters will tell you at this point to spend 12 hours preparing for an interview. We think that’s child’s play.

You aren’t interviewing to be a cog in a massive corporate machine. You are being assessed on whether the founder or manager would bet the future of their

---

## Research Tips

Equip yourself with knowledge that will prep you for any question, give you timely industry news to discuss, and show that you're truly interested in the role.

- Read the company's website top to bottom.
- Read its competitors' websites top to bottom.
- Head to Crunchbase and learn who the company's investors are.
- Take a look at every single press article ever written about the company.
- If you can, interview people in similar roles at other companies.

## 6 ESSENTIAL TIPS

budding company on you. Make them comfortable — and confident in you — by being the most prepared person in the room.

Find founders on Twitter, LinkedIn, or in the blogosphere and consume every bit of content you can find. The information you'll find there is priceless because you will gain a deep understanding of how founders think and feel about the world. You can even head to Facebook and see if you have any mutual friends.

Does all of this seem a little overboard? Perhaps, but startups expect a different level of commitment than many traditional careers. So if this sounds like a lot, you'll be in for a big surprise once the job begins.

### TIP 5

#### **Play the numbers game. Ask metrics-driven questions.**

In an interview with a startup, you really have three goal goals: 1) Clearly communicate why you're capable of doing the job, 2) be the most passionate person in the room, and 3) ask the best questions. You certainly should ask standard interview questions, like "What makes someone successful in this role?" or "What will the first 90 days look like?" But what you really want to do in the interview is discover the metrics the company cares most about.

Sure, a company's public brand may be all about changing the world, but we can guarantee that every night before they go to bed and every morning after they wake up, the person interviewing you is checking a dashboard with a handful of key metrics, such as cost to acquire a customer, lifetime value of a customer, net promoter score, or churn. When they leave your interview,

they'll probably check it again.

Metrics dictate performance, and in the uncertain conditions in which startups live, having insight into how well the business is doing is essential for a small team that has a lot of impact.

**When you go into your interview, don't be afraid to ask:**

- What metrics are you checking daily?
- What metrics are you checking weekly?
- What metrics are you checking monthly?
- What do you see as the biggest levers for improving those metrics?
- How are you doing against your goals?
- How can this role help you get there faster?

The answer to those questions will give you everything you need to know to position yourself as the best fit for the job. For example, if you're applying for a marketing job and learn in the interview that high product churn is keeping the founder up at night, you can follow up with an email with three ideas on how the company can immediately improve retention.

### TIP 6

#### **Pay attention to startup funding cycles.**

We spoke a lot about fundraising earlier because it really impacts everything about a startup. But understanding funding can also serve as a huge advantage for you in your job hunt. When you read that a startup raised \$15 million, it's safe to assume it isn't looking for a safe, high-yielding savings account to put it in. The company is going to put almost every cent to work

**“There is literally no time when the ground is more fertile for you to land a job than immediately after a startup raises money.”**

by increasing marketing, improving the product, and, most importantly building the team it needs to take the business to the next level. There is literally no time when the ground is more fertile for you to land a job than immediately after a startup raises money. So it's on you to stay on top of the news.

TechCrunch is an excellent resource for keeping up with fundraising news. The site will report on just about every dollar raised in the startup world. If you're interested in a particular company, set up Google Alerts so you can be the first to know whenever a new round of funding comes in. If you want to be ahead of the curve, AngelList has a directory of all startups looking to raise their first round of funding. It's also an excellent job board.

---

INTERVIEWING TIPS



## Competence

Clearly communicate why you're capable of doing the job.

## Show Passion

Be the most passionate person in the room.

## Ask

Ask the best questions.

---

---

# Wrap-Up

**“The road won’t be linear and no two journeys will be the same, but if you work hard, learn from your mistakes, and are a generally good person, you may find yourself at your dream startup faster than you expect.”**

**B**y now you should have a good foundation of where to look and what it takes to land a job at a startup. But your journey is only beginning. It’s time to put these lessons into practice. The road won’t be linear and no two journeys will be the same, but if you work hard, learn from your mistakes, and are a generally good person, you may find yourself at your dream startup faster than you expect.

#### TO RECAP:

Remember that working at a startup won’t only be about sweatpants and foosball. An incredibly challenging road lies ahead, so make sure you’re ready. Keep in mind that no two startups are alike, and there is no single way to land a job. If you can accept these warnings, then start to formulate your story, create your own experience, get out there and meet people, be the most passionate person on the block, and pay attention to those funding cycles.

There’s never been a more exciting time to make the leap into startups. To dive into the skills needed to thrive in any startup company, join us at General Assembly for full-time and part-time courses in [web development](#), [data science and analytics](#), [UX design](#), [digital marketing](#), [product management](#), and more. GA also hosts [regular events across our global campuses](#) where you can hear from industry experts and connect with others in the biz. And if you’re a startup leader looking to grow and cultivate your team, GA can help [your organization find and hire talent](#), [upskill and reskill](#) current employees, and more to close skills gaps and move your business forward. Congratulations on taking this first step, and good luck out there.

#### About the Author

Matt Cynamon has been hired to work at startups, hired dozens of people to work at startups, and helped tens of thousands of people land their first job at a startup. His experience on all sides of the table has given him a unique perspective that he loves to share in books like these and his regularly occurring How to Get a Job at a Startup talk at General Assembly.

After launching his first business while in college, Matt joined General Assembly in the fall of 2012 as one of our first employees. While at GA, Matt moved to the U.K., where he successfully launched and ran GA’s second-ever campus, in London. After a three-year stint in London, Matt moved back to the U.S. to become General Assembly’s global alumni director. In 2016, Matt left GA to join the founding team of a new startup called [Circles](#). Circles builds programs and software that make it easy for people to connect deeply and have the sorts of conversations that help them grow as people and professionals.

#### About the GA

General Assembly is a global education company on a mission to empower individuals and companies through dynamic training programs, exclusive thought-leader events, and high-impact networking opportunities. Our curricula focus on the in-demand skills every company today needs: coding, data, design, digital marketing, and product management. We boast a thriving network of instructors from some of the biggest names in tech, connected alumni who are innovating across industries, and partners from both startups and Fortune 500 companies.

## Additional Resources



The Muse is a career platform used by over 50 million people to navigate their careers, and by hundreds of companies looking to attract, hire, and retain great talent. The site offers a behind-the-scenes look at job opportunities with hundreds of businesses, from startups to mature companies. Get valuable career advice from prominent experts, and access to coaches for personalized, private career help. Learn more at [TheMuse.com](https://www.themuse.com).



Looking to break into a startup? Planted is a talent platform that connects candidates with startups and other high-growth companies for non-technical jobs including business development, marketing, sales, customer experience, operations, and more. The site sends you curated jobs matching your interests and acts as your inside referral to the company if it's a great fit. Learn more at [Planted.com](https://www.planted.com).



Y Combinator provides seed funding for startups. Since 2005, the organization has funded more than 1,500 startups with a combined valuation of over \$80 billion. Twice a year, YC invests a small amount of money (\$120K) in a large number of startups. The startups move to Silicon Valley for three months and work intensively with YC to improve their businesses and refine pitches to investors. At the end of each cycle, the startups present their companies to potential funders. If you write software and want to join an early-stage startup, complete an application at [workatastartup.com](https://workatastartup.com) so YC companies can find you and start a conversation. Learn more and apply to YC [here](https://www.ycombinator.com).

---

**ga.co**