careerhackers

The Career Hacker's Guide To

Startup Careers

Imagine getting a job at Apple or Nike or Google or Airbnb before everybody knew about them and wanted to get a job there. Those companies were tiny startups before they were huge and famous.

The world of tech spans far and wide, generally synonymous with terms like "startups" and

For the purposes of this guide, we'll overlap "tech" with other forms of modern, venture scale entrepreneurship that are not necessarily tech-focused, but still create enormous value in the world.

In this guide

🤷

Understanding what a startup actually is

Just to make sure we're all talking about the same things, here.

Paul Graham is the founder of Y Combinator and arguably the godfather of startups, and this is what he says:

> **A startup is a company designed to grow fast.**

That's it.

Don't think of a shady, self-proclaimed entrepreneur who wants you to work on his unproven idea for free in exchange for "equity." Don't think of your local "mom and pop" stores, either—though of course these are legitimate businesses. But they don't intend to grow quickly.

Let's start with a distinction that should be obvious but is often overlooked: not every newly founded company is a startup. Millions of companies are started every year in the US. Only a tiny fraction are startups. Most are service businesses — restaurants, barbershops, plumbers, and so on. These are not startups, except in a few unusual cases. A barbershop isn't designed to grow fast. Whereas a search engine, for example, is.

Startups are small teams, most often between five and 100 people. They're backed by intelligent investors and led by visionary founders. They're innovating, experimenting, growing, and most importantly for you—they're hiring. (ALL the time—often even if they don't post job listings.)

Here are a few examples of famous companies that were once startups:

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And here are a few examples of startups in the same industries (rentals, search engine, music) that you've likely never heard of:

It's anybody's guess whether these companies become the next decade's Airbnb, Google, Spotify, and more!

Every industry has incumbents and underdogs. Leading brands, and undiscovered teams innovating. Whatever general subjects you're interested in, there are startups working on it. Guaranteed.

Fundamentally, a startup is an approach to building and growing a company. Startups start small but go after a really big market that could result in massive success. This is where you want to be: in an up-and-coming area, not an old-and-dying one.

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Why startups are a great career environment

Most job seekers are interested in the idea of working at a startup. Here's why they're such valuable places to launch your career
—or advance it.

An entry-level startup job is better than a fancier job at a more traditional business. Praxis COO Mitchell Earl calls it a cheat code for accelerating your career:

Jérémy Chevallier @rarelyJeremy · Jun 22, 2020

What are the best reasons to work in a startup?

Finishing up an article for @CareerCrash. Ours:

🏳️‍🌈 Progressive workplace culture
🤲 Tons of hands-on experience
🏁 Break into an industry + the startup world
🚀 As the company grows, so do you

What else?

Mitchell Earl
@Mitchell_Earl

It's like a cheat code for accelerating your career. You can come in entry level and leave a few years later as director or exec or fully equipped to launch your own thing.

It's the single highest-leverage entry point into your future I can think of (for an employee).

1:24 AM · Jun 23, 2020

♡ 5   See Mitchell Earl's other Tweets

Would you rather have been making coffee and running errands at Spotify when it had ten employees, or working as one of thousands of tellers at Bank of America? Thinking about your career in terms of jobs and titles is dangerous. Thinking in terms of skills and trends is powerful.

Startups need all kinds of employees, not just programmers

A common misconception is that startups just need developers to build their tech. Of course, engineering is HUGE in the tech startup world. But there are many other departments outside of Code Land.

Most startup jobs fall into these categories:

and more depending on the specifics of the company. But, regardless of the job description, what startups really need are problem solvers; hustlers; creative thinkers; go-getters.

Startups are very progressive workplaces

Building an enduring, inviting culture is almost always one of a startup's top priorities. Since COVID-19, startups hire remotely more than ever before. And they pay equity, in many cases.

Equity

A piece of ownership in the company itself, often offered as stock options

In early-stage startups, equity isn't worth much until the company exits—meaning sells to a bigger company, or goes public. That's when the real upside kicks in: At a $10 million exit, 0.25% equity converts to $25,000. At a $1 billion exit, 0.25% equity converts to $2.5 million.

Startups give you a wide variety of hands-on experience

In a startup, you've got easy access to every department. This means you gain exposure to the world of business while building your skills alongside teams that are dedicated to solving problems with innovative solutions. You learn about the industry, products, competitors, and customers.

Because startup life is scrappy, priorities change, and you have the chance to learn new skills simply by working in those areas.

For example, you might start in a sales position, but have the opportunity to cover live chat customer support sometimes. Or schedule social media content. Or redesign a landing page. It all depends on your interests, your attitude, and your desire to make yourself more valuable.

Startups help you "break in" and build your professional network

When you work at one startup, you're immersed in the world of other startups, employees, founders, and investors. You discover competing startups as well as startups that are working on something different yet complementary to yours.

You build relationships with other talented, ambitious people in your company—not to mention the founders & leadership team—and you get to network with anyone else you find interesting in the startup world.

As a startup grows, you grow

The great thing about growth-focused companies is that they have no choice but to demand growth from team members. Each new phase of the company is different, and you'll be exposed to different challenges, tasks, and types of work.

You can't spend a few years at a startup without leveling up yourself!

Startups put you at the bleeding edge of innovation

By definition, startups innovate. When you join one, you get to experience the future of an entire industry. You're exposed to how the industry is evolving, and get a peek into what it could look like in 5-10 years. You are literally building the future.

Startups are risky, but so is every company

It's about the type of risk you want to take.

When some people think startup, they think "Eek. I need something more stable." Let me dispel the risky myth a little bit:

Early-stage startups (pre product-market fit) typically raise venture capital (investment money) for 18-24 months of runway. That means, from the time the fundraising round closes, they've got 18 months to hit their goals.

Runway

> A startup's total available resources needed to maintain an operational company, usually measured in months.

You're allowed to ask about runway when you're interviewing for startup jobs. In fact, you should do your own research using tools like Crunchbase.

Note:

- when the startup last raised a round

- how much they raised

- how many employees they have (check their company about/ careers page + LinkedIn)

With that information, you can get a rough idea of their finances.

Regardless of runway, most startups fail. It's true. But company failure is not the same as personal failure! Spending two years at a startup that goes bust will advance your career more than two years at a big stable company. Why?

Because, when you're at a startup, you get immersed in the world of other startups. You build a network of other employees, founders, and investors. You learn about the industry, products, competitors, and customers. You learn why the company failed!

In startup land, failure isn't frowned upon, and you can take the experience and build on it in your next role. Transitioning from one failed startup to another startup is far easier than job-hopping in the non-startup world.

The far greater risk to your career is becoming stagnant in a job and relying on management to decide when and how you move up the corporate ladder. The risk of staying stuck in one place, and missing out on growth opportunities, is far worse than the risk of being on the job hunt again in a couple years.
Always remember that.

Where to find active startups

Hint: They're not in the typical places you look for jobs.

We're constantly adding to our directory of companies that we've identified as great places to work: they're innovating, investing in their workplace culture, and eager to recruit ambitious new team members... like you!

Go to careerhackers.com/find-cool-jobs and let your curiosity drive!

When you see a company you're excited about, send 'em a pitch. Make sure to follow the Career Hacker's Guide to Pitching Jobs along the way:

Beyond that, there isn't currently a single job board dedicated to specifically entry-level startup jobs. There, are, however some niche job boards that are worth checking out depending on what you're looking for:

Entry level jobs

EntryLevelJobs.me
CollegeGrad.com
OneDayOneJob.com

Startup jobs

Angel.co/jobs
Startup.jobs
Epicjobs.co
EntryLevelJobs.me/yc-students
Builtin.com

Remote jobs

RemoteOK.io
Remotive.io
FlexJobs.com
NoDesk.co
WeWorkRemotely.com

All jobs

Jooble.org

But you won't find that many startups on these job boards—only the ones that have the resources to create job listings & pay to advertise them. If you don't dive deeper, you could be missing out on really cool companies that would be lucky to have you!

Instead, scrappy startups rely on their own personal networks to fill new positions: the founders & team members will reach out to their friends, family, and professional connections to source the best candidates they can find.

For you, this means you need to break into their networks and discover the companies that no job board is mentioning. How?

There are a few more quick ways to learn about companies that may not be on this list:

Using Twitter

Twitter is hugely powerful in breaking into tech, because everyone's so active there. Startup founders, employees, investors, and other movers-and-shakers all use Twitter more than any other social media platform.

Here are a couple Twitter lists that you can subscribe to in order to engage with the most active people in this industry!
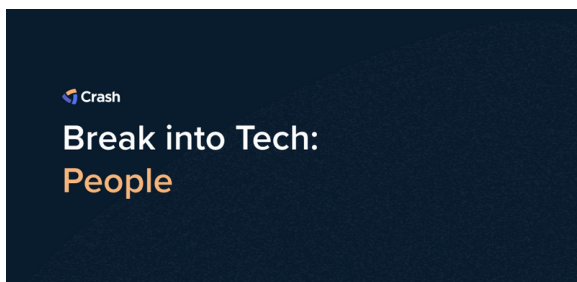
Use these lists to your advantage. Follow each lists to see its members' tweets in your Twitter feed, and engage intelligently with content you find interesting.

Make sure to fill out your Twitter profile to describe what you're actively learning, that you're seeking opportunities in {design} or {marketing} or whatever, and link to a pitch or personal website!

Subscribe to newsletters

One easy way to start discovering interesting companies is to subscribe to good newsletters like Rocketship Jobs, OneJob, and Remotists. We've reviewed these newsletters and find that they feature high-quality companies that mostly fall into the "startup" bucket.

You can also subscribe to alerts on any of the job boards above! But newsletters are curated by the newsletter writer, and can be a better source of relevant jobs for you.

Research an industry that interests you

Are you really passionate about helping people get access to clean food & water? Or, are you fascinated by fashion and sustainability?

Whatever your interests, you can use some clever Google-fu to find companies doing interesting things in a particular industry, and potentially even hiring.

You can also sign up for a free Crunchbase Pro account to run

advanced searches of active, funded startups in a specific country, industry, and more. Learn how to use Crunchbase on your job hunt.

Browse accelerator directories

Every startup accelerator has a running list of startups. This is a great way to quickly find companies that might be really interesting to you! Check them out:

Y Combinator companies

500 Startups companies

TechStars companies

LAUNCH companies

How to get hired at a startup

When you understand what matters most to startups, you'll pitch yourself more effectively and get hired faster.

Most startups don't care about degrees or certifications. Most startups don't want to see your resume. See for yourself what hiring leaders tell us about their pains during the hiring process:

> "We would have spent endless hours, days, weeks sorting through terrible Indeed resumes…"

> "It's habitual for me to just give up searching for candidates when I use AngelList and other job posting sites. [Pitches are] a breath of fresh air, it's phenomenal to see the person behind the resume and what they're truly passionate about."

So what does every startup need? People who can get stuff done. People who can take responsibility and take action. You don't need to know a lot, or have job experience, to work at a startup. You just need:

- the ability to create value for the company

- the ability to prove you can create that value

And, ideally, you share the company's mission. Someone who isn't quite there skill-wise, but who is deeply driven by the mission, is far more valuable to a startup than someone who's highly skilled but not passionate about the problem space.

So, how can you show your stuff to startups? Here's your answer:

> **"We started down the normal hiring cow path – Indeed and LinkedIn – with less than thrilling results. Only a handful of the 60+ applicants showed any work, specific interest in our company, or even personality that could have easily differentiated them. There was one that stood out, mostly because she had a "pitch video" and a website showing real results."**

You stop trying to sell yourself with a resume.

You turn off autopilot.

You become your own credential.

You send something personalized, valuable, and hard to ignore.
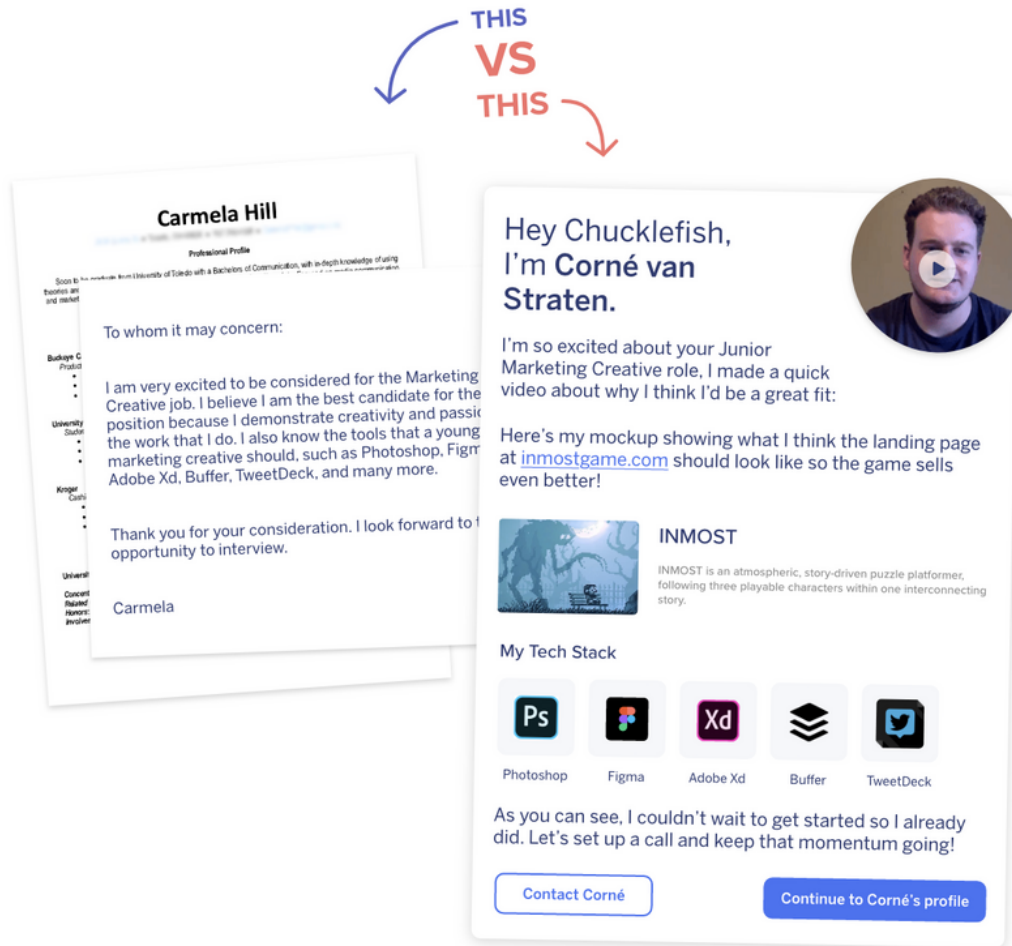
When you find job postings, resist the urge to 1-click apply with your resume. Instead, research the company, and if it's something you're excited about, create a targeted video pitch just for them.

Send it to the hiring manager for that role directly. Nothing speaks louder than "hey, instead of a resume full of bullet points, here's a spreadsheet I put together with ideas for what I'd do in my first 30 days."

That stands out by a landslide. If you're hungry and willing to do this, you'll be launching your career at a great startup in no time.

> "I tried spray and pray for 2 months — 10 apps per week. Started sending pitches and out of 7 pitches, I got 4 interviews and one job offer. Huge difference."

> Maxine Cox

Final resources

Congrats on making it this far!

Subscribe to the Daily Job Hunt newsletter. Join 200,000+ readers and get a kick in the inbox every morning.

Read the Career Hackers Manifesto: The core principles of discovering and doing what makes you come alive.

And check out the other career-hacking guides in this series: