



THE 14 STEPS NEEDED TO RECRUIT YOUR EARLY STARTUP TEAM

By Paul Ruderman

By far the hardest and most exasperating part of launching a successful startup is recruiting an all-star team. At first, it will seem near impossible. Part of it is simple math: There is a limited number of truly exceptional people out there. Of those people, only a small percentage will have the skills, experience, drive and character that you are looking for. And of those people, only a fraction will fit personality-wise with you and your early team.

To find your all-stars, so much has to go right. Every ounce of persistence you can muster up is essential to giving you a chance at finding your dream team. To find the people who've joined me and are now the core of UpdateZen, I went through quite a journey (and 84 interviews). At times exhilarating and inspiring, and at other times frustrating and energy-sucking, and full of more ups and downs than you can possibly imagine.

That said, I seem to have cracked the code and lived to tell. So in the interest of helping others recruit exceptional early teams, I'm going to document here how I did it. It is part art and part science, but fully replicable.

This guide below assumes you are a founder of a startup, you're bootstrapping as best you can, you don't have unlimited resources to pay 25% recruiting fees, you won't settle for B players, and you know what you're looking for. If so, read on.

1. HAVE A CLEAR VISION FOR WHAT YOUR COMPANY WILL LOOK LIKE

Know what you want your company to look like once you fill all the early positions you've earmarked as essential.

2. KNOW YOUR NON-NEGOTIABLES.

Have an unmistakable sense for what each position requires. I needed two full-stack developers (one iOS-focused and one web-focused), one designer, and eventually one marketer. I needed people near Montclair, NJ (or NYC) with unimpeachable character.

3. CLEAR YOUR DESK.

Once you've decided you're ready to hire for a position, clear your desk of everything else you think you have to take on, so that you are free to commit 90% of your waking hours to searching, networking and recruiting for that position. You cannot recruit key early positions in your "free time." First of all, you have no free time. Secondly, it will take every ounce of your being to go from here to hire!

4. WRITE A WELL-WRITTEN JOB DESCRIPTION.

Write an EXCEPTIONALLY articulate, unique, and distinguishing Job Description. Be as specific as you can

about the kind of person and talent you are looking for. The more specific you are, the more likely that you will (a) attract top candidates who feel they are a fit for your unique startup, and (b) disincentivize ill-fitting candidates from applying and thereby wasting their and your time.

5. LOOK AT LINKEDIN PROFILES.

Require candidates to send you their LinkedIn profiles, not resumes. Resumes are dry, static documents. A good LinkedIn profile contains everything a resume does, and then some, including written references from past/current colleagues, their number of LinkedIn connections, their photo in a suit or backwards baseball cap getting drunk with their buddies in a bar.



6. REQUIRE CANDIDATES TO SUBMIT PERSONALIZED COVER EMAILS

Have them explain why your startup interests them and why they are the best candidate for the job. If they don't take the time to write this personalized cover email, don't even look at their LinkedIn profile. They're not serious. And they probably can't write.

7. NETWORK ON LINKEDIN.

Search and network extensively on LinkedIn. Send well-crafted and short LinkedIn InMails to your ideal candidates regardless whether (a) you have a personal connection to them, or (b) they claim to be “looking” for new opportunities. Everyone’s available for the right opportunity.

8. USE RECRUITERS INTELLIGENTLY.

Recruiters can be your best friend, or they can suck up your time and take all the money you don’t have. Find great ones and convince them to take far less than 25% in the interest of receiving lots of new job postings as you grow. I negotiated a flat fee of \$8000 with several great recruiters.

9. FLOOD THE MARKET WITH OUTREACH.

I post job descriptions everywhere that is even remotely relevant... wherever a great candidate might go. [Angel List](#). [LinkedIn](#). [Monster](#). [Dice](#). [Hired.com](#). [Employment Crossing](#). [Craigslist](#). [Dribbble](#). [Behance](#). [Stackoverflow](#). You NEVER know where your eventual candidate might be, so plant your seeds in many places. And of course, ask your network. All you need is that ONE great candidate. I found Stefan, my brilliant web developer, on a tiny site called [Startuphire.com](#).

10. WORK QUICKLY.

Review each interested candidate’s profile instantly. The great people get snatched up quickly.

11. REFINE YOUR PITCH.

You need to SELL these great candidates. Just like you’re going to sell your early customers. If you believe in your product,

your vision, your team, and yourself, then this part should be a breeze.

12. CONDUCT YOUR INITIAL INTERVIEW VIA VIDEO.

No audio-only calls. A 30-minute video call is all you need to figure out if it’s worth setting up an in-person interview.

13. CALL REFERENCES.

This is not a formality. Conduct 2-3 reference calls. DO THIS! You can obtain phenomenal “color” on the candidate — how they optimally work, what makes them tick, what challenges they need to overcome, what they are better at than anyone else, how much did their colleagues like them, and most importantly, what kind of character and integrity does the candidate have?

14. SOMETIMES A DONE DEAL JUST AIN’T A DONE DEAL.

You may get pretty deep into the process of finding, interviewing, recruiting, selling, offering, hiring and starting a new person... and then BAM, it just doesn’t work out. It happens sometimes. Get angry and get over it. Hit the recruiting “pavement” the next morning with new energy!

And that’s it! No, hiring an early team of A players is not easy, and it ain’t for the faint of heart. But yes, it is possible and there’s even a method to the madness. The most important thing... persist! Never give up.

About the Author

Paul Ruderman is the Founder of [UpdateZen](#), a simple status reporting solution for executives, managers and business owners.