

The Unusual Field Guide

Startup hiring

TL;DR

- Early hiring is the single highest-leverage activity for a founder.
- Holistic hiring = treating recruiting as a company-wide system, not a one-off act.
- The three pillars: clear headcount plan, aligned compensation philosophy, and a culture that attracts talent.

01.

Why Holistic Hiring matters

In the earliest days, every hire you make changes the company's trajectory. The right person amplifies your strengths and accelerates your path to product-market fit. The wrong one burns time, morale, and trust — all non-renewable resources.

We call our approach **Holistic Hiring**. It's a philosophy and a system. Instead of filling roles reactively, you define your long-term needs, clarify your compensation philosophy, and make hiring a shared responsibility across the team.

INSIGHT: Hiring is not a support function. It's the company-building function.

Holistic Hiring ensures consistency and alignment across your process. Everyone knows what great looks like, what values you're optimizing for, and how they contribute to your mission.

02.

The three components of Holistic Hiring

1. Define your headcount plan and compensation philosophy

- ☐ Write down what success looks like 6 and 12 months out.
- ☐ Align with co-founders on salary vs. equity balance.
- ☐ Decide what percentage of the market (50th? 75th?) your company will compensate.

2. Build your recruiting and talent process

- ☐ When you're under 10 people, you can lean on agencies, but start documenting your recruiting process now.
- ☐ From 20 people onward, use your internal recruiting muscle.
- ☐ Track sources, interview quality, and close rates.

3. Build a talent brand

- ☐ Your early story and team are your magnet.
- ☐ Candidates don't join a company. They join a mission and a founder.
- ☐ Invest in your About and Careers pages, LinkedIn presence, and Glassdoor reputation.

03.

FOUNDER STORY: Harness

When Harness began scaling, the founders treated hiring like building a product: they defined requirements, measured performance, iterated. They built a brand that reflected their engineering-first culture — and used that story to attract mission-driven talent. Within two years, Harness had hired dozens of elite engineers largely through referrals and inbound interest.

PRO TIP: Create a referral culture early. Offer referral bonuses and celebrate new hires. By Series A, 30% of your new employees should come from referrals.