

How to Find a Co-founder for Your Startup Checklist

Stage 1: Self-Assessment & Needs Definition

- ☐ **Map Core Skills:** List key SaaS functions (e.g., Engineering, Product, Sales, Marketing, Design, Ops, Finance) relevant to your startup.
- ☐ **Assess Proficiency:** Honestly rate your own skill level (e.g., Expert, Competent, Novice) in each area.
- ☐ **Identify Skill Gaps:** Clearly define the critical skills your co-founder must possess.
- ☐ **Define Ideal Profile:** Outline necessary experience (e.g., startup background, industry specific), desired personality traits (e.g., resilient, communicative), and core values.
- ☐ **Document Vision:** Write down your answers regarding:
 - Startup mission and core problem.
 - Intended business model and scale (e.g., Lifestyle vs. High-Growth).
 - Funding strategy (Bootstrapped, Angel, VC) & risk tolerance.
 - Preferred work structure (Remote, In-person, Hybrid).
- ☐ **Clarify Personal Commitment:** Define your time availability (full-time, part-time transition plan) and personal financial runway/investment capacity.

Stage 2: Network Exploration

- ☐ **List Network Potentials:** Brainstorm individuals in your existing network (colleagues, former colleagues, friends, classmates, advisors) who might fit the profile.
- ☐ **Prioritize Trusted Contacts:** Focus first on people you know well, respect professionally, and ideally, have worked with before.

- ☐ **Draft Outreach Message:** Create a concise, professional message (email/LinkedIn) explaining your venture and the type of partner you seek.
- ☐ **Initiate Contact & Schedule Calls:** Reach out to your primary list and schedule brief introductory calls with those interested.
- ☐ **Request Targeted Introductions:** If a direct contact isn't suitable, ask them specifically: "Who are the top 2-3 people you know with X skill/experience who might be interested in a startup?"
- ☐ **Track Outreach:** Use a spreadsheet or simple CRM to log who you've contacted, their response, and next steps.

Stage 3: Broader Search (If Network Exploration is Insufficient)

- ☐ **Select Channels Strategically:** Based on your needs (urgency, location, target profile), choose the most relevant external channels (see guide's comparison).
- ☐ **Identify Platforms:** Target specific platforms (e.g., YC Matching, CoFoundersLab, MicroConf Connect).
- ☐ **Identify Communities:** Pinpoint relevant online groups (e.g., Indie Hackers, Reddit subs like r/cofounder or r/SaaS, niche Slack/Discord servers).
- ☐ **Identify Events:** Find relevant conferences, meetups, or workshops (virtual or in-person).
- ☐ **Craft Profiles/Posts:** Create clear, compelling profiles or posts tailored to each channel, outlining your venture and ideal partner.
- ☐ **Engage Actively:** Participate authentically in communities, attend events prepared to network, and respond promptly.
- ☐ **Follow Up:** Systematically follow up with promising leads generated from these external channels.

Stage 4: Initial Screening & Alignment

- ☐ **Prepare Screening Questions:** Finalize your list of key initial questions covering motivations, roles, equity ideas, finances, commitment, work style, etc.
- ☐ **Schedule Screening Calls:** Set up 30-45 minute video calls with candidates who pass the initial paper screen.
- ☐ **Assess Core Alignment:** During the call, actively listen and evaluate alignment on fundamental values, company vision, risk tolerance, and work ethic.
- ☐ **Confirm Deal-Breakers:** Gently probe or confirm any non-negotiable requirements identified in Stage 1.
- ☐ **Evaluate Initial Rapport:** Gauge communication style and basic personal compatibility – could you work intensely with this person?

Stage 5: The Trial Project (Build Sprint)

- ☐ **Propose & Define Project:** Agree on a specific, measurable, relevant, time-bound (2-4 weeks) project with promising candidates.
- ☐ **Set Expectations:** Clearly define goals, deliverables, communication methods (tools, frequency), and individual responsibilities for the sprint.
- ☐ **Collaborate & Observe:** Work together on the project, paying close attention to work style, problem-solving, feedback handling, reliability, and communication under pressure.
- ☐ **Conduct Post-Sprint Debrief:** Discuss the project outcome, what went well, what challenges arose, and how the collaboration felt for both parties.
- ☐ **Evaluate Fit Based on Action:** Make a preliminary assessment of long-term compatibility based on this practical experience.

Stage 6: Deep Dive Discussions & Verification

- ☐ **Prepare Deeper Questions:** Use frameworks (e.g., YC/First Round lists) to prepare for conversations on sensitive topics like handling stress, conflict resolution, long-term goals, finances, etc.
- ☐ **Schedule Deep Dive Calls:** Have dedicated conversations to address these deeper topics candidly.
- ☐ **Request Professional References:** Ask the candidate for 2-3 relevant professional references.
- ☐ **Prepare Reference Check Questions:** Draft specific, behavioral questions to ask references about the candidate's skills, work ethic, and collaboration style.
- ☐ **Conduct Reference Calls:** Speak directly with the references.
- ☐ **Perform Back-Channel Checks:** If possible, discreetly speak with mutual connections for informal feedback.

Stage 7: Legal Formalization

- ☐ **Final Partnership Decision:** Confirm mutual commitment to move forward.
- ☐ **Engage Startup Legal Counsel:** Retain a lawyer experienced with early-stage tech companies.
- ☐ **Negotiate & Agree on Key Terms:** Finalize equity split, roles/titles (incl. CEO), IP assignment, and other core terms with your co-founder, involving counsel as needed.
- ☐ **Confirm Vesting Schedule:** Ensure a standard equity vesting schedule (e.g., 4-year term, 1-year cliff) is agreed upon and included.
- ☐ **Review Legal Documents:** Carefully review the draft Founder Agreement, Articles of Incorporation, IP Assignment, etc., prepared by counsel.
- ☐ **Execute Agreements:** Sign the finalized legal documents to formally establish the partnership and company structure.