

On a mission to end attrition follows the story of Upswing, the brainchild of Melvin Hines. The idea of “serving underserved students” is an idea very close to Melvin’s heart, inspired by his own experiences with inadequate educational resources. He grew up in Albany, Georgia and experienced inequality in his own childhood, seeing the lack of educational resources bright minds, like his best friend, fail to go to college just because they did not have the resources that other schools around the country did. Melvin himself was fortunate to have a family that pushed him and prioritized education, which allowed him to overcome this initial barrier and pursue further education at the University of Georgia and then at Duke.

Melvin recognized he was a special case. A lot of very bright students never made it to college, he was only able to because he had a lot of personal support. As this was an issue that was very important to him and an issue that he understood very well, Melvin sought to try to solve it. Melvin comes across as extremely hard-working, very passionate about the problem he wants to solve, as well as being very capable in his dealings with other people and organizations. However, like any other person, he had areas he was not an expert in - crucially he was not an expert with technology or with product management.

The need for expertise in these fields alongside the high workload that comes with building a startup from the ground up naturally leads to needing a co-founder. With a co-founder, Melvin will be able to cover the gaps in his own knowledge with complementary skills. Furthermore, investors will have much more confidence investing in a startup with multiple people who are all experts in their own niches rather than having to trust Melvin is capable of doing everything to create a startup himself. Furthermore, having multiple people who are passionate about Upswing’s mission would help in making major decisions, and the often less emphasized aspect of having moral support when the business might be going through a rough patch is very important.

Melvin initially had two metrics that he checked to identify talent for his startup. He would focus on individuals who not only possess the necessary skills but also share the company's mission to improve educational outcomes for underserved communities. He particularly focussed on the latter for co-founders, believing that skills can be picked up but passion for bringing equitable education is not something that one can simply pick up. For co-founders, Melvin also looks for an entrepreneurial spirit, and resilience, individuals who are ready to navigate the ups and downs of startup life. This includes a willingness to take on risks, a strong commitment to the company's long-term vision, and the capability to make critical decisions under uncertainty. These qualities are essential for co-founders who will work closely with Melvin to shape the direction, culture, and success of Upswing, distinguishing them from employees who might focus more on executing within their specific roles.

Melvin’s considerations for hiring employees changed over time, especially after grappling with the social issues that Jennifer was having, from which Melvin learnt an important lesson. He realized that the characteristics of an employee were as, if not more important than being highly effective at the job in just numerical terms. He found that Jennifer was making the workplace miserable enough to cause other key employees to leave, and this was not sustainable in the

long term even if the work she had done was key to the company's short-term success. So, to deal with not making the same mistake twice Melvin implemented the 30/60/90 rule (which is a framework designed to help new employees or teams set goals and expectations for their first 30, 60, and 90 days on a job or project). Furthermore, Melvin wanted to truly understand his employees, so implemented exit interviews as an attempt to uncover why employees were unhappy, which ultimately led to his understanding of the situation with Charles leaving, and how to deal with Jennifer so that it never happened again.

Adding on to the employee hiring process, Melvin values diversity a lot and ensures that no biases are present when hiring by implementing structured interviews, utilizing diverse hiring panels, and emphasizing skills-based assessments. This approach helps build a team that reflects a broad range of experiences and backgrounds, which is crucial for fostering innovation and understanding the diverse needs of Upswing's target communities. This diversity plays a major role in Upswing's ability to attract and retain employees, ensuring that everyone who joins the company does not feel isolated or excluded because of their background. However, the main method of retention was the belief in the employees' and co-founders' dedication to the mission. This was seen quite clearly when Morgan decided to leave Upswing and Melvin then started to doubt whether his other co-founders, especially Chris, would remain. (he learnt that they care more about the cause, and therefore will stay and realize how important that characteristic is for employees for the company).

Although initially, it was difficult to generate enough money to keep the business going, I believe Upswing never suffered from finding customers, but instead, they struggled with developing a better technical solution to their problem. Their solution to this problem was to work with Morgan and Chris who had developed a similar technically immaculate program, yet struggled to gain customers. After this merger, their business steadily grew, but not fast enough to ensure the longevity of the business. The acquisition of AskOnline was a very good strategic move for Upswing. AskOnline had the customer base, Upswing had the better solution, and by buying AskOnline (and so all the technologies that made AskOnline successful), Upswing became not only a better platform but also now a platform with access to all of the customers that otherwise would have taken many years to build connections with. I believe this acquisition was the pivotal step in turning their venture from potentially viable to demonstrating their financial viability, as they could tap into their supposed user base and generate \$1.1 million very quickly.

If I were Melvin, to ensure the success of the venture, I would continue to emphasize the company's mission in all aspects of business operations, as the morale and motivation of the employees are key to Upswing's success. Furthermore, building a vast network at higher and higher levels of education will provide Upswing with the resource it lacks the most - initial access to potential customers. In the future, being able to branch out to more locations within the US with similar issues would increase the customer base a lot, but Melvin would be wise not to rush and stretch resources before the company was ready. Melvin's strength has mostly come from his ability to learn from mistakes and his passion for the mission of the company, and keeping a clear goal and target in mind will be essential in keeping the company growing and keeping the customer base onboard.