

Interview Playbook for Infrastructure Software Engineer

Introduction

This guide is crafted to help the hiring team of Y Combinator as they seek to fill the crucial role of an Infrastructure Software Engineer. The purpose of this playbook is to ensure a values-driven evaluation process, enabling the team to identify and select a candidate whose skills and behaviors align with the company's mission, vision, and values. The infrastructure software engineer role is integral to the maintenance, improvement, and scaling of the company's web application infrastructure. Our interview process aims to assess technical and behavioral competencies that match our needs and company culture.

Interview Structure

The interview process for the Infrastructure Software Engineer position is structured to holistically evaluate a candidate's technical prowess and alignment with Y Combinator's values. The estimated duration of the interview should range between 90 minutes to 120 minutes and consists of the following sections:

1. Introduction (5-10 minutes):

- Interviewers introduce themselves and give the candidate an overview of the session.

2. Technical Skill Assessment (30-45 minutes):

- Deep dive into the candidate's technical qualifications, reviewing areas such as Cloud Platform Expertise, Web Application Development, Performance Optimization, Continuous Integration and Deployment, and Security and Reliability. Lead and probing questions will be used to understand the depth of the candidate's expertise and practical experiences in each area.

3. Behavioral Competency Evaluation (30-45 minutes):

- Exploration of the candidate's alignment with Y Combinator's values, focusing on Ethical Judgment and Integrity, Agile and Responsive Approach, Founder and User-focused Mindset, Collaboration and Teamwork, and Continuous Learning and Development. Interviewers will ask scenarios and behavioral questions to evaluate these competencies.

4. Practical Assignment and Discussion (20-30 minutes):

- Candidates may be given a real-world problem-solving activity relevant to the role, which they will need to complete prior to or during the interview.

5. Q&A and Conclusion (10-15 minutes):

- Candidates will have the opportunity to ask questions about the role, the team, and the company. The interviewers will provide closure for the session, outlining the next steps.

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Job Description

Infrastructure Software Engineer

Location

San Francisco Bay Area

Type

Full time

Department

Software

About

Y Combinator is the leading startup accelerator for entrepreneurs. Since 2005, YC has invested in over 4,000 companies, including Airbnb, Dropbox, Stripe, Reddit, Instacart, DoorDash, and Coinbase. Today, YC has built the most powerful startup community in the world alongside the products and programs to support founders for the life of their company.

Job Description

Y Combinator is seeking an Infrastructure Software Engineer who will help manage and evolve the shared infrastructure that our software runs on. We have a team of approximately 15 Product Engineers who develop YC's software products. Those products are developed in Ruby on Rails and run in AWS. Our team's job is to provide a platform so our Product Engineers don't have to think (as much) about infrastructure.

The ideal candidate will have experience debugging and developing a very broad stack. They're comfortable talking about HTTP caching, AWS security groups, Rails monkey patching, n+1 queries in Active Record, CSRF protection, and React components.

Enjoy the many perks of working for a successful company – competitive salary and excellent benefits including fully-paid health care benefits and unlimited vacation – while working on a small, fast-moving and high-impact team.

In your first month, you might:

- Migrate a Rails application from Capistrano and EC2 to Docker and ECS
- Upgrade one of our applications to a newer version of Postgres or Rails

- Move more of our AWS infrastructure into Terraform
- Simplify our use of Webpack and Javascript for both developer productivity and faster deployments
- Create shared infrastructure to help manage email subscriptions and unsubscribes across 5 different product teams
- Triage and respond to bug bounty reports
- Work with outside security auditors to run a penetration test against our applications

Key Responsibilities:

- Provide a stable modern platform for our applications to be deployed to
- Keep our applications and data secure
- Improve our developer experience and tools so the YC Software Team can ship product updates quickly
- Help debug performance issues in our web applications
- Ship Ruby on Rails and TypeScript code that is shared among multiple YC applications

Skills:

- You know how to develop and debug MVC web applications. We use Ruby on Rails, Postgres, and React, but don't worry if you haven't used those specific technologies before
- You know how to deploy and run applications with AWS and Docker
- You use Terraform to make infrastructure changes

Experience:

- You have at least 5 years of experience developing and deploying web applications
- You are deeply familiar with the AWS platform specifically ECS, RDS, IAM, and CloudWatch

Location: YC is headquartered in the SF Bay Area with employees working from home or from our offices in San Francisco and Mountain View, CA. Candidates must live in the SF Bay Area or be willing to relocate.

Compensation: \$130,000 to \$270,000 + bonus (depending on skills and experience).

Benefits: Our full benefits package includes medical, vision, and dental plans, infertility benefit, STD/LTD, life insurance, commuter benefits, flexible spending account, health savings account, 401(k) + 4% matching, generous parental leave, paid holidays and flexible paid time off policy.

Work Authorization: This position does not support work authorization/visa sponsorship.

Y Combinator considers qualified applicants with criminal histories, consistent with applicable federal, state, and local law including San Francisco's Fair Chance Ordinance. Y Combinator is committed to protecting the privacy of the personal information of job applicants and complying with the California Consumer Privacy Act. The privacy policy of Ashby, Inc., the hiring platform used by Y Combinator, governs the collection of such data and can be found [here](#).

Evaluation Criteria

The following scorecard is designed to objectively assess the key competencies of candidates for the role of Infrastructure Software Engineer at Y Combinator. Each candidate should be evaluated based on the technical and behavioral competencies aligned with the company's overarching values.

Competency	Assessment (1-5)	Comments
MVC Web Application Development		
AWS and Docker Deployment		
Ruby on Rails and TypeScript Development		
Performance Optimization		
Security and Penetration Testing		
Problem-Solving Ability		
Collaboration and Teamwork		
Continuous Learning and Adaptability		
Developer Experience Enhancement		
Communication and Influencing		
Practical Assignment		
Team Interaction		

Rating Guide

1. Far Below Expectations: The candidate fails to meet the competency criteria and does not demonstrate the necessary skills or knowledge.
2. Below Expectations: The candidate meets some aspects of the competency criteria but is inconsistent and requires additional development.
3. Meets Expectations: The candidate sufficiently meets the competency criteria and demonstrates an acceptable level of skill and understanding.
4. Exceeds Expectations: The candidate exceeds the competency criteria by demonstrating a high level of skill, knowledge, and initiative.
5. Far Exceeds Expectations: The candidate excels in the competency area, providing exceptional skill, advanced knowledge, and innovation.

Technical Assessment

The technical assessment for the Infrastructure Software Engineer must encompass thorough evaluation of the candidate's technical competencies. The competencies selected revolve around the understanding and practical application of cloud platforms, specifically AWS, which is critical for maintaining and scaling Y Combinator's web application infrastructure.

Technical Competence 1: Cloud Platform Expertise

Understanding and management of cloud-based infrastructure, particularly with Amazon Web Services (AWS), are essential for the role. Mastery over various AWS services ensures efficient deployment and operation.

Lead Question

Describe a scenario where you had to design a fault-tolerant and scalable infrastructure on AWS. What services did you use and why did you choose them? Consider the cost, performance, and potential trade-offs in your response. Tip: Look for a reasoned balance between technical robustness, cost-efficiency, and scalability

Probing Questions

- How do you ensure security and appropriate access controls when managing AWS services? What is your methodology for IAM roles and policies? Tip: Candidate should demonstrate a firm grasp on AWS IAM best practices and their practical applications.
- Can you outline a time when you had to utilize Terraform to automate the creation of AWS resources? What approach did you take? Tip: Assess their comfort level with infrastructure as code tools and the complexity of the infrastructures they've handled.
- Explain how containerization has played a role in your previous projects, particularly using Docker with Amazon ECS. Tip: Insights into their hands-on experience with container technologies and their benefits to cloud infrastructure will be crucial.
- Describe how you have implemented and managed application and data security within the AWS cloud. Tip: Look for details that indicate a comprehensive understanding of cloud security measures.

Scenario

Imagine you are tasked with migrating an existing on-premise web application to AWS Cloud. The application has to be highly available and with a scalable infrastructure that can handle varying loads. Walk me through the steps you would take from initial assessment to the final migration, including the selection of AWS services. Tip: Evaluate the candidate's ability to analyze, plan, and execute a complex cloud migration, while optimizing for cost and performance.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Technical Competence 2: AWS and Docker Deployment

Competency in deploying and managing applications using AWS services and Docker containers is essential for modern infrastructure management, ensuring scalable, secure, and efficient production environments that align with Y Combinator's value of accountability and responsive innovation.

Lead Question

Can you describe an experience where you had to architect a scalable application deployment on AWS, and how did you incorporate Docker into this strategy? Tip: Look for a detailed explanation that includes specific AWS services used, the rationale behind choosing them, and how Docker was integrated within the deployment process.

Probing Questions

AWS Services Proficiency - When selecting an AWS service for a given application, what factors influence your decision and how do you evaluate its long-term scalability? Tip: Assess the candidate's ability to discern the most appropriate AWS services for different scenarios and their foresight on potential scalability issues.

Docker Containerization - What challenges have you faced when containerizing applications with Docker and how did you overcome them? Tip: Evaluate the candidate's problem-solving skills and their practical knowledge of Docker's intricacies.

Infrastructure Automation - Can you explain a scenario where you automated infrastructure deployment? What tools did you use, and what benefits did you observe post-automation? Tip: Seek out examples of the candidate's hands-on experience with infrastructure as code practices and their ability to measure the impact of their automation efforts.

Security and Compliance - Discuss how you implemented security best practices during the AWS deployment process in your previous projects. Tip: Confirmation of the candidate's understanding of AWS security practices is critical, particularly as it ties back to Y Combinator's value of integrity.

Scenario

Imagine you are tasked with deploying a new microservices architecture for a web application that needs to scale based on user demand. The setup should be on AWS, utilizing Docker containers for each service. How would you design this deployment with a focus on scalability, reliability, and security, while also considering cost efficiency? Tip: Encourage candidates to articulate a thorough deployment plan, touching upon service discovery, load balancing, security, and cost management. Gauge their strategic planning and understanding of AWS and Docker's synergy.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Technical Competence 3: Performance Optimization

Identifying and mitigating performance bottlenecks is a necessity for providing an optimal user experience in web applications. The Infrastructure Software Engineer must be proficient in enhancing performance at both the code and infrastructure levels.

Lead Question

Tell me about a time when you were tasked with optimizing the performance of a web application. What was the issue, and what steps did you take to diagnose and resolve it? Tip: Look for systematic troubleshooting and a step-by-step account of performance tuning.

Probing Questions

- How do you go about identifying and fixing n+1 query problems in an ORM like Active Record? Can you provide an example? Tip: The candidate should exhibit a strong understanding of ORMs and their common pitfalls.
- What strategies do you utilize to implement effective caching in a high-traffic web application? Tip: Look for knowledge of various caching mechanisms and their appropriate use cases.
- Describe a time when you had to optimize backend code for better performance. What tools or strategies did you use? Tip: Candidate should demonstrate their experience in profiling and optimizing code.
- Can you explain how you would plan and execute a load testing strategy for a critical update to a production system? Tip: Look for strategic thinking in testing and readiness for high-load situations.

Scenario

Imagine that users of the web application you manage are experiencing slow load times during peak hours. How would you approach this issue to diagnose and resolve performance bottlenecks? Detail the steps you would take, the tools you would use, and the outcome you aim to achieve. Tip: Evaluate the candidate's capacity for methodical problem-solving and understanding of the full stack performance issues.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Technical Competence 4: Continuous Integration and Deployment

Experience with continuous integration and delivery is crucial for ensuring quick and reliable software updates and rollouts. The candidate's knowledge of CI/CD principles is important for maintaining a steady flow of new features and fixes in Y Combinator-supported startups.

Lead Question

Describe your experience setting up a continuous integration and deployment pipeline. What tools did you use and why? How did you ensure the reliability of the release process? Tip: Candidates should articulate the selection of tools and their approach to safeguarding the deployment process.

Probing Questions

- Explain how you've used deployment automation tools, like Capistrano or others, in past projects to streamline software releases. Tip: Candidate should demonstrate an understanding of deployment automation tools and their benefits.
- Discuss your experience with managing build processes and any tools you've found particularly effective, like Webpack or others. Tip: Look for familiarity with modern build tools and how they improve build efficiency.
- How do you manage a code repository with multiple developers making concurrent contributions? What is your branching and merging strategy? Tip: Seek insight into their version control management skills and collaborative approaches.
- Can you talk about a time when managing the release of a new version was particularly challenging? How did you handle that? Tip: Look for problem-solving skills and their ability to manage and coordinate releases under pressure.

Scenario

You're responsible for implementing a new CI/CD pipeline for a project transitioning from a semi-annual release schedule to a more agile, on-demand release cycle. Which CI/CD tools would you select, and how would you configure the pipeline to ensure that the transition is smooth and that risks are minimized? Tip: Assess the candidate's strategic planning abilities regarding CI/CD implementation and risk management.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Technical Competence 5: Security and Reliability

The Infrastructure Software Engineer must ensure the security and reliability of the application platform, addressing potential vulnerabilities and adhering to best practices in security.

Lead Question

How do you approach the creation of a new web application with security and reliability as top priorities? Please describe the steps you would take from the initial design to the ongoing maintenance. Tip: Evaluate the candidate's ability to integrate security into the software development lifecycle.

Probing Questions

- Discuss your experience with responding to bug bounty reports. How do you evaluate them, and how have you handled resolution and communication? Tip: Look for systematic handling of security reports and a clear methodology for addressing issues.
- Describe a situation where you worked with an external party on a security audit. How did you prepare, and what was the outcome? Tip: Seek insights into their experience with security audits and their approach to remediation.
- How do you ensure data protection and compliance in your projects, particularly relating to sensitive customer information? Tip: Expect a strong grasp of data security best practices and compliance requirements.
- Can you talk about a time when you had to manage a security incident? What steps did you take to resolve the issue and prevent future occurrences? Tip: Assess competency in crisis management and proactive risk mitigation.

Scenario

Suppose you discover a significant security vulnerability in one of the applications you oversee. The vulnerability is being actively exploited, and user data is at risk. Outline the immediate actions you would take to address the issue and discuss how you would work to strengthen the application's security posture moving forward. Tip: The candidate's answer should emphasize quick action, clear communication, and strategic long-term enhancements.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Behavioral Assessment

Behavioral competencies are key indicators of how well a candidate might integrate with Y Combinator's culture and values, such as integrity, responsiveness, and a focus on founders' interests.

Behavioral Competence 1: Ethical Judgment and Integrity

Reflecting Y Combinator's imperative for trustworthiness and ethical behavior in their community, candidates must exhibit a strong moral compass in their professional conduct.

Lead Question

Can you share a difficult decision you had to make that tested your integrity? What was at stake and how did you arrive at your decision? Tip: Look for examples that demonstrate the candidate's ethical judgment and personal accountability.

Probing Questions

- Tell me about a time when you made a mistake at work. How did you handle it and what was the outcome? Tip: Judge the candidate's readiness to take responsibility and learn from errors.
- Describe a scenario where you had to balance transparency with confidentiality. How did you navigate this situation? Tip: Assess the candidate's ability to maintain integrity while handling sensitive information.
- How have you ensured that ethical considerations are factored into your technology projects or decisions? Tip: Look for a demonstration of ethical considerations beyond mere legal compliance.
- Give an example of a time when you went above and beyond to do what you thought was right, even if it wasn't the easiest option. Tip: Identify actions that show commitment to personal and organizational values even when it's challenging.

Scenario

Imagine you are aware of a data breach in the company that has not yet been made public. As an Infrastructure Software Engineer, how would you address this issue internally, and what steps would you take to ensure the situation is handled ethically and responsibly? Tip: The candidate's response should reflect a serious approach to ethical dilemmas and a proactive stance on problem resolution.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Behavioral Competence 2: Agile and Responsive Approach

The ability to adapt to changing markets and user needs quickly is in line with Y Combinator's value of testing ideas rapidly. This competency evaluates how effectively the candidate can pivot and respond to emerging demands.

Lead Question

Describe a time when a project or task required you to quickly adjust your approach due to changing requirements. How did you manage the situation and what was the result? Tip: Seek evidence of flexibility, quick thinking, and a results-oriented mindset.

Probing Questions

- Can you provide an example of how you have anticipated a potential problem in your work and proactively addressed it? Tip: Determine the candidate's ability to foresee challenges and take initiative to mitigate them.
- Tell me about a product or feature you rolled out quickly in response to an immediate market need. What was the feedback, and how did you integrate it into future iterations? Tip: Look for an understanding of the importance of user feedback and iterative development.
- How do you stay informed about the latest industry trends and technologies? Give an example of how this knowledge has influenced your work. Tip: Confirm that the candidate values ongoing learning and its practical application.
- Share an instance where you had to learn a new technology or framework in a short period to meet project deadlines. How did you approach this challenge? Tip: Assess the candidate's adaptability and commitment to professional growth under pressure.

Scenario

You are part of a team that has developed a well-received product feature. Suddenly, a new competitor emerges with a similar but slightly more advanced feature. How would you lead your team to respond to this competitive threat? Tip: Look for a strategic approach that incorporates agility, market comprehension, and the ability to motivate and direct a team.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Behavioral Competence 3: Founder and User-focused Mindset

Embracing the priority of founders' and users' needs is vital, reflecting Y Combinator's commitment to place them at the forefront. The candidate should exhibit an understanding and appreciation for the user experience.

Lead Question

Tell me about a time when you had to advocate for a feature or product change that was clearly in the users' interest but not immediately beneficial for the company. What was the situation and the outcome? Tip: Look for a balance between user advocacy and business awareness.

Probing Questions

- How do you gather and incorporate user feedback into your development process? Please provide a specific example. Tip: Evaluate how the candidate integrates user feedback to improve product offerings.
- Describe a situation where you had to make tough decisions about product features. How did you prioritize the users' needs in that scenario? Tip: Look for decision-making processes that are aligned with a strong concern for user experience.
- Can you share an experience where you went out of your way to understand a customer's point of view? What was the impact on your work? Tip: Identify the degree to which the candidate engages with and values the perspective of the end user.
- What strategies do you use to remain focused on user needs when faced with technical challenges or constraints? Tip: Assess the candidate's ability to maintain user-centric development despite potential obstacles.

Scenario

Imagine that during the testing phase of a new product, you receive consistent feedback indicating that a current feature is causing confusion among users. How would you approach resolving this issue, and what steps would you take to ensure improved user satisfaction? Tip: Candidate's approach should demonstrate sensitivity to user experience and a methodical approach to problem solving.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Behavioral Competence 4: Collaboration and Teamwork

Ability to contribute effectively as a team member, facilitating a cooperative work environment, reflects Y Combinator's belief in the power of collaborative effort to achieve shared goals.

Lead Question

Provide an example of a project where you worked as part of a team. What was your role, and how did you contribute towards achieving the team's objectives? Tip: Look for the ability to work harmoniously with others, focus on shared goals, and contribute positively.

Probing Questions

- How do you handle situations where you have a differing opinion from a team member on a work-related issue? Tip: Assess the candidate's conflict resolution skills and ability to maintain team cohesion.
- Can you tell me about a time when you had to explain a complex technical problem to a colleague who was not a technical expert? How did you ensure understanding? Tip: Evaluate the candidate's communication skills and ability to make complex ideas accessible.
- Share an experience where the team's success depended on your direct contribution. How did you ensure you met expectations? Tip: Determine the candidate's reliability and commitment to team responsibilities.
- Describe a moment when you celebrated a team achievement. What was your contribution and how did the team acknowledge it? Tip: Identify the candidate's approach to team appreciation and their ability to share in team successes.

Scenario

You and your team are assigned to a critical project with a tight deadline. During the project, you notice that a colleague is struggling with their workload, which could potentially delay the project's completion. How would you approach this situation to ensure the project stays on track, maintaining team unity and productivity? Tip: The response should reveal the candidate's capacity for supportive teamwork and productivity under pressure.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Behavioral Competence 5: Continuous Learning and Development

A vested interest in self-improvement and skill development is crucial, supporting Y Combinator's ethos of efficiency and growth in the tech industry.

Lead Question

Discuss a professional skill you have recently worked to improve. What motivated you to enhance this skill, and how did you go about it? Tip: Seek dedication to continuous learning and evidence of taking steps to improve professionally.

Probing Questions

- Describe a time when you utilized feedback to improve your performance. What changes did you make as a result? Tip: Look for a constructive acceptance of feedback and the ability to translate it into action.
- How do you stay updated with the latest trends and technologies in your field, and how has this impacted your work? Tip: Gauge the candidate's commitment to ongoing industry education and its practical application.
- Share an experience where you taught a skill or concept to your colleagues. What was the outcome? Tip: Assess the candidate's aptitude for knowledge sharing and contributing to the team's competence.
- Tell me about a situation where learning a new technology or method posed a significant challenge. How did you handle it? Tip: Identify perseverance in overcoming learning obstacles and the candidate's approach to mastering new skills.

Scenario

Suppose you are tasked with leading your team in adopting a new technology that is crucial for the company's next strategic move. The technology is complex, and your team has limited knowledge about it. How would you ensure that you and your team are up to speed with the required knowledge and skills in a timely manner? Tip: Look for a strategic plan that includes self-development, as well as facilitating the learning process for others.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Practical Assignment

The practical assignment is an opportunity to evaluate the candidate's hands-on technical abilities and problem-solving approach. The assignment will reflect real-world scenarios relevant to the role of an Infrastructure Software Engineer at Y Combinator.

The objective of this assignment is to assess the candidate's proficiency in designing and implementing a scalable and secure cloud-based infrastructure. The candidate will be given a set of requirements and asked to architect a solution that demonstrates their understanding of AWS services, deployment strategies, and security best practices.

Evaluation criteria will include: - The effectiveness of the proposed architecture in meeting scalability and reliability needs. - The cost-effectiveness and practicality of the solution. - The security measures incorporated into the infrastructure design. - The ability to articulate and justify design choices.

Interviewers should assess the candidate's approach to the assignment, noting how they break down the problem, prioritize features, and address potential trade-offs. The solution presented by the candidate should be evaluated for its technical merits as well as alignment with Y Combinator's principles of efficiency and responsiveness to market demands.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Team Fit

The Team Fit section of the interview process is designed to evaluate the candidate's ability to collaborate and integrate with the existing team. Team involvement provides insight into the candidate's interpersonal skills and how they may contribute to the team dynamic.

During this phase, it is essential to facilitate activities and discussions that give both the team and the candidate a sense of potential working relationships. Consider the following:

- Collaborative problem-solving exercises to gauge how the candidate interacts with team members and approaches collective challenges.
- Technical discussions related to ongoing or past projects that allow the candidate to demonstrate their knowledge and expertise.
- Team lunch or coffee meetings to provide a more relaxed setting for candid conversations about work culture, team norms, and mutual interests.
- Brief presentations by the candidate on a relevant technical topic to observe their ability to communicate complex ideas effectively.

These interactions are invaluable for assessing aspects of the candidate's personality, communication style, and problem-solving approach that are not easily discernible in a formal one-on-one interview setting.

Notes

Rating (1-5):

Candidate Q&A

This section prepares the interviewers for potential questions that a candidate might ask. It's important to provide comprehensive responses to ensure the candidate has a clear understanding of the role and company culture.

"What is the typical project cycle for an Infrastructure Software Engineer at Y Combinator?"

- Our project cycles are typically agile, with a focus on iterative development and fast feedback loops. We aim to be responsive to founder needs and adapt to changing requirements swiftly.

"Can you describe the team I would be working with and how it fits within the company?"

- You'll be joining a cross-functional team focused on developing and maintaining our web application infrastructure. The team collaborates closely with other departments, contributing directly to the success of the startups we support.

"How does Y Combinator support professional growth and development for its employees?"

- We encourage continuous learning, offer access to learning resources, and provide opportunities for attending technical conferences and workshops. Regular feedback and one-on-ones with leadership help guide personal development plans.

"What are the opportunities for advancement within the company?"

- As Y Combinator continues to grow and support more startups, opportunities for advancement arise both within technical roles and in leadership positions. Performance and contributions to company objectives greatly influence advancement potentials.

"How does Y Combinator ensure that the technology solutions align with its values, particularly regarding founder and user interests?"

- Product decisions are driven by user feedback and founder needs, ensuring our technology solutions align with our core values. We also conduct regular reviews to assess how well our services meet these interests.

"What kinds of technologies are you looking to integrate into future projects, and how do you decide on them?"

- Our technology choices are forward-looking and aimed at supporting our scalable infrastructure needs. Decisions are made collaboratively, balancing innovation with practicality and the principle of founder-friendly tools.