

Sequoia Capital has internal crash courses for its founders — here's how they work — TechCrunch

Connie Loizos @cookie / 2:44 pm PDT • August 14, 2020

5-6 minutes

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No matter what you think of Sequoia Capital, the firm doesn't rest on its laurels. Though it's now managing ungodly amounts of money and has for decades been considered among the top venture firms in the world, it routinely finds new ways to stay relevant and to ensure that it gets a first look at the most promising founders.

It was the first firm to employ scouts, for example. Recently, to create more room between itself and its ever-growing number of competitors, the firm has also begun fine-tuning a curriculum for the founders of both the pre-seed and seed-stage startups it has funded, as well as its Series A and B-stage founders.

According to Roelof Botha — the U.S. head of the venture firm since 2017 — and Jess Lee, a partner at Sequoia for nearly four years, the idea is to arm the individuals it backs with Sequoia's vast "tribal knowledge" so they can not only compete with their rivals but, hopefully, outperform them. "We were already delivering this on an on-demand basis," says Botha, "so we figured why not [institutionalize it]?"

How do the curricula work? Much as you might imagine. The pre-seed and seed-stage program is shorter but more intensive than the later-stage program. Think three weeks of between three to six hours of programming a day, versus up to 10 weeks of more occasional programming for founders whose companies are more mature and who maybe can't drop in for quite as much hands-on education.

The content differs meaningfully, too. The seed-stage modules are about creating a foundation that won't crumble under pressure, whereas the later-stage sessions center more around metrics, building out a sales organization, and other aspects of more mature company building.

Both programs are entirely opt-in, and so far, over the last three years, 80 founders have participated, with another 20 engaged in a seed-stage program that kicked off virtually this week. Both are highly interactive and involve enough workshopping that founders are "walking out with deliverables," says Lee. "Everyone does show-and-tell demos. You see sausage-making that you wouldn't typically get to see."

Lee happens to lead programming around storytelling with Sequoia's in-house design partner, James Buckhouse. (They presented one small part of that module at our recent Extra Crunch event, which you can watch below.) But many of the firm's partners are involved in the program.

Longtime partner Alfred Lin, who was formerly the COO and chairman of Zappos, teaches a module on culture, for example. Partner Bryan Schreier, long ago a senior director at Google, talks with founders about category creation and how to sell their products. Carl Eschenbach, the former president and COO of VMware (who, notably, persuaded Sequoia to invest nearly [\\$100 million](#) in Zoom in early 2017), separately coaches founders on their go-to-market strategies.

As a result, founders are exposed to many of the firm's partners beyond the one who may have a seat on their board. They're also exposed to founders like Julia Hartz and Tony Xu who've been backed by Sequoia over time and who drop in to help mentor their peers. Combined, the two prongs go a long way toward fostering community, says Lee.

In fact, "Community is really *the* core element" of the programs, she says, adding that each "cohort really bonds with each other."

Of course, the programming — first launched in 2018 — was happening in-person until earlier this year. Now and for the foreseeable future, it will be happening online, suggests Botha, who says he "emceeds the entire Series A-stage program," while Lee plays master of ceremonies to its earlier-stage founders.

They insist that transition to a virtual setting isn't slowing anyone down and that on the contrary, it has enabled the growing number of Sequoia-backed founders elsewhere in the world to participate. (According to Lee, some actually used to fly in to join these sessions.)

In fact, a bigger change that Botha can foresee right now is layering in more education around "how to deal with a culture with a remote workforce."

As he says, in a future where people may be working in smaller hubs, taking turns at the office, or working remotely entirely, "it will be interesting to see what it means for young founders who are first-time managers and who have to manage a distributed team."

It will most certainly be "more taxing on [their] people skills," he notes.

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