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Software Engineering

What does it really take to scale a tech team?

August 16, 2017



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As your startup grows, it's likely that you'll have at least one period of high growth. And when that time comes, you'll likely to need add a lot of employees in a short amount of time to keep up with demand and workload.

This comes with some unique challenges — like retaining your company culture and getting new hires up to speed quickly. Today, we'll explore what it takes to successfully scale up.

Don't neglect onboarding

It's easy to let employee onboarding fall by the wayside — almost [a quarter of companies surveyed by HBR](#) said they don't have a formal employee onboarding process at all. If you're a startup and you're tight on resources, it's easy to entirely skip this step and just let new recruits figure it out as they go.

However, that could prove to be a mistake, as this stage [has a long-lasting impact on engagement and retention](#), as well as employee performance.

Even though you might feel like you don't have enough time to implement and sustain onboarding systems during periods of growth, those periods are actually when you need these processes the most.

They'll help you get all of your new team members up to speed (and maximum productivity) with the smallest amount of time and resources possible. A pleasant side effect is that this tends to create happier employees, which means they're less likely to say “sure, give me a call” when approached by a recruiter about exciting new opportunities.

So, what exactly goes into this?

Get prepared

Designing a great first-day experience starts well before the new employee arrives in the office (or signs into the company communication tool, **in the case of remote hires**). Carly Guthrie, an HR manager with 15 years of experience, **lays it out**:

“Create an experience where someone walks in on their first day and everyone is already expecting them. Everyone already knows their name and what they’re there to do. Everyone is super welcoming and understanding of the fact that being one new hire meeting so many new people is overwhelming.”

What *not* to do? “Don’t make them wonder where and how they’ll eat lunch.”

In general, your goal should be to remove all of those small obstacles that cause first-day nerves. Going the extra mile on this front shows a level of thoughtfulness that many companies (especially startups) unfortunately lack, and gives your new hire a strong positive impression. In this way, employee onboarding is no different from product onboarding — you want to remove as much friction as possible.

Another step to removing the friction is knowing what needs to be covered and having some kind of a general checklist. You don’t necessarily need to map out every single thing, or make a long checklist. It’s likely that this will evolve and become streamlined over time, and having *something* is better than nothing.

A few things you might want to cover include:

- Password policies
- The tools your team uses, and how/why you use them (for example, “Slack for immediate questions, Clubhouse for questions related to a specific open ticket, Google Docs for documenting company operating procedures”)
- Voice and style guidelines for social media use/brand representation online/marketing purposes
- Workload expectations and reporting hierarchy

- Any communication guidelines not covered by the above guidelines on company tools
- Current company goals and milestones

If you want to get inspiration for writing a new employee handbook, check out [Hanno's playbooks](#) or the [Valve Software handbook](#). You can also use apps like [Cake HR](#) or [Yoi](#) to streamline the steps in a more automated way, if you want.

Create (and teach) a workflow

Aside from the administrative work of showing new employees the ropes, you also have to make sure they understand how your team works. And to be able to explain that, it's best that your team has some kind of written, codified workflow.

Again, this doesn't need to be complicated. Creating a process document goes hand-in-hand with making some of the documentation mentioned above. One way to get started is to have your team members keep track of what they do during their day-to-day work and take notes on that. Those notes about what everyone is doing on the team (and why), and how that work relates to the current company goals and projects, can easily be turned into structured guidelines.

[Molly Wolfberg](#), Product Manager at [Wistia](#), uses a similar method to make it easy to get new team members up to speed:

"We have a detailed document of the process, types of meetings, and other essential information about the way our team works. We share that with the team, and any new members, so they can get used to the language around process and meetings, as well as what the weekly breakdown looks like."

Molly also has someone who shares the role of the new hire explain how they (as opposed to another member of the team) use the different tools the team uses, like Clubhouse.

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This is also where it's important to make sure that you're using the best tool for the job. Kelly Wu, Engineering Manager at [PolicyGenius](#), found that their old project management tool wasn't a perfect fit, and was in fact causing problems with new employees. It didn't have customizable stages for each task, so they were trying to stay within the existing framework, and it just wasn't working.

“Having to translate the inconsistencies between our process and the old project management tool when onboarding someone was one extra thing to do, on top of all the other work. This wasn't something we felt like should be part of the process. We needed a better tool.”

After switching to Clubhouse, they could create custom states that perfectly synced up with their team's workflow, and made it much easier to get new employees up and running.

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While your project management tool might be working for you, there may be something else that your team is using in a less-than-optimal way. Reviewing your employee onboarding checklist well ahead of any actual onboarding is the perfect way to assess where/whether you might be using tools that no longer fit the bill.

Continue to get feedback

Make a point of asking for (and accepting) feedback and questions from your new hire. Carly, the aforementioned HR professional, [recommends](#) telling your new hire to keep a list of questions that can be addressed during a regular weekly 1:1, but to also be available to answer anything urgent.

Similarly, [Megan Berry](#), VP of Product at [Octane AI](#), actively fosters an open culture of communication on her team, and makes sure that this aspect of their culture is covered on all meetings with new employees. She also makes a point to schedule 1:1 meetings with new hires to share their candid thoughts on the work environment and how they're adjusting.

How do you onboard new employees and scale your teams more effectively? We'd love to hear your tips [on Twitter](#).

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