Playing Up Your Startup's Culture to Attract and Retain Talent

If you're anything like the entrepreneurs we talk to every day, one of your biggest challenges, after funding, is finding and retaining talent. After all, you're competing for employees with bigger, more established firms. They have deeper pockets and dedicated recruiters. And they usually pay more, offer better benefits and provide greater job security.

So how can you find A-list players when the odds are stacked against you? Easy. Use your differences to your advantage. Not everyone wants to be a number at a corporation. Indeed, company culture plays a huge role in today's job search, and is often touted as one of the biggest benefits a business should play up. And job seekers want a culture that offers flexibility and builds trust—two things that won't cost you a dime.

What Makes a Strong Company Culture?
According to new research released in October 2016 by The Alternative Board (TAB), 93% of business owners say that "promoting company culture boosts productivity and creativity." It can also help you attract talent. But what makes a company's culture compelling? Is it free beer? Ping-pong? Permission to bring your bearded dragon to the office? While those surveyed agreed on the importance of company culture, there was considerable discrepancy between what factors they believe create a strong culture. For example, more business owners who identify their company as having a strong company culture believe that flexible schedules (78%), telecommuting (36%)

and continuing education (82%) boost productivity than business owners who identify their company as having an average or weak culture (58%, 23%, and 77% respectively).

If you're working to create a strong company culture, it would behoove you to allow people to set their own schedules and work from home—perks that mean a great deal to employees but don't require a financial investment on your part. If you already offer these benefits, be sure to promote them in your outreach.

TAB's September 2016 Small Business Pulse Survey also found that the majority of business owners (82%) describe their workplace as casual rather than formal (18%). Employers also agree that the number-one employee motivator is trust (44%) over transparency (24%) and incentives (11%).

The vast majority of startups already offer a casual work environment, but you should make sure to build a culture of trust. The survey found that the number-one challenge business owners face when emphasizing company culture is "practicing what they preach." Indeed, a hollow corporate message will erode trust and collapse the culture you're working so hard to build, so make every effort to follow through on your promises.

Now that you know what other business owners consider important, are you wondering whether employees' responses match up? So were we, so we asked people who work at startups what they like about working in a startup environment. We were overwhelmed with responses from people all over the world! Chew on their answers, and then compare them with the perks you offer, so that the next time you have an open position, you'll be ready to tout your

advantages in your candidate outreach. Then sit back and watch the resumes roll in.

Why I Work at a Startup

I make a difference.

"Working at a startup, I see the impact I have on the business. On top of that, I am able to grow with [the company] from the ground up, which means I'm more invested in it than I would be if it were already established."

—**Kristian Rivera** is a digital marketing specialist at New York City–based Fit Small Business, a rapidly growing website for small businesses.

I love the excitement.

"I am a crazy maniac obsessed with changing the world, and I cannot sit still. I work at a startup because I enjoy the uncertainty, the unclear schedules and having to change strategies every now and then. I am a risk taker, and I love the thrill of working at a startup and being an entrepreneur. Working at MainTool has made my life exciting. I wouldn't change the adrenaline rush I get from coming to work every day for anything out there."

—**Asier Sarasua**, a wearables expert, is the chief marketing officer of Maintool, a French wearables company.

I enjoy the ability to take on many roles.

"We are a small team and therefore must acquire different [skills], from marketing to sales, accounting to HR, PR and more. I love this. I didn't study business administration to stay behind a desk in a bank doing M&As for whole days and earning big paychecks. I want to be part of the whole creating process and see great ideas come to life thanks to my help. Are there disadvantages? Sure, there is more risk, less job security, no fat paychecks. But hey, that's the fun of the whole deal: to jump out there and be part of something new and not an additional shackle in the corporate chain. And of course, the scalability of startups (if your ideas and team are good enough) make this a much more interesting alternative."

—**Michael Steinberg** is the head of business development at Beamium, a German startup that enables users to present PDF presentations, JPEGs and PNGs online.

I like the flexible hours and the positivity.

"I work for a U.S. startup based in Poland. I used to work for a world-known IoT startup, then I had a short break working for a regular company, and now I'm back in a startup. I love working for startups. Nobody expects us to come in at 9 and leave at 5. We have people starting at 7 or 8 in the morning or 10, 11, even noon. And if you have something you have to take care of during the day, no problem. Nobody is checking your hours as long as you do whatever you're hired to do. Fresh ideas are welcome, and you always hear that what you do is awesome. The positive attitude is what I was missing in a regular company. Here you can do everything, as long as you can justify its influence on the company goals. Plus you have the feeling that you're doing something important that can change the world."

—**Urszula Kierwiak** is a community evangelist for San Francisco–based ColorTV, which helps marketers connect with audiences on connected TV.

The professional challenge is rewarding.

"I am in customer relations and run beta tests of my company's products. My job is very challenging. I talk with people all around the world collecting their feedback, I engage them on social media and I provide them with interesting content. There is no time for being bored at work. There is no routine. Every day brings new challenges, and this is what is so cool about working for an innovative startup. There is maybe a little uncertainty about the future, but I guess it is the same when working for a big company."

—**Anna Czerwoniec** is a marketing manager for ZYLIA, a Polish startup that specializes in audio processing.

I am learning how to run a socially conscious business.

"Not only am I working for an entrepreneur, but I am learning from an entrepreneur. A creative mind who wants to better himself, his company and his team while giving back to our community. I am not a number like in a large company, nor am I easily replaceable. I am a team member in a team of less than 10 that is exposed to all sides of business, and I'm learning how to operate a company on a small budget."

—**Emily Barden** is a special opportunities director at Twill, a startup based in Albany, New York, that sells hats, bags and blankets. For every product sold, another is given to a local friend in need.

I see results.

"I chose to work at a startup because of how much of a family everyone becomes. [We] work with all the departments and get to understand all aspects of the business. One of the coolest things about working at a startup is being able to see your project's results and help define future business processes. One of the hardest parts is the grind. Sometimes it feels like you're swimming against the tide, but the people and experiences more than make up for it."

—**Vivian Luo** is a marketing analyst at Badger Maps, a San Francisco company that developed a field sales app that became the number-one sales app in the App Store for 2015.

I love the autonomy.

"I work at a startup for the pure freedom. I am free to experiment with different methods without getting approval from 65 managers that are all interested in their bonus check instead of long-term growth. At every startup I've been to, I've had the greatest amount of personal growth, since I am surrounded by a culture that allows me to fail. So I fail fast and I fail often. But I learn and pivot accordingly."

—**Mel Keritz** is growth strategy lead at Palo Alto–based indeni, a network knowledge company.

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The energy drives me.

"I quit my 'real job' to work for startups. I love working with Whiz Tutor because the energy level and challenges are so high. The amount of problem solving and learning you have to compress into such a short time is amazing. It's infectious as well; the whole team has such a passion to improve education with technology. It's satisfying to see students finding great tutors and improving grades through the platform our little scrappy team built."

—**John Salzarulo** is a back-end web developer for Whiz Tutor, a Los Angeles–based company whose app enables users to book a private tutor.

I enjoy the option to telecommute.

"After finishing school, I interviewed at a couple of companies, but the one that really caught my eye was seoWorks. A big reason why they stood out from the competition, aside from their portfolio of work, was the fact that they offered the opportunity to work from home as many days a week as I preferred. The idea of working from the comfort of my own home, avoiding the daily grind of traffic and saving money on transportation was too much to pass up. They purchased my home office, had it shipped to me, and even pay my monthly internet bill. Startup companies offer a lot of great perks that I've never seen at larger, corporate companies."

—**Brandon Schroth** is a digital analyst in the Sydney office seoWorks, an SEO company.

I was bored at a big company.

"I moved from Paris to San Francisco to join a startup. I was bored working for a bigger company, even though I was part of the board. What is great with established businesses is that you have money and people to grow the business and start new projects. Money helps you with communication, marketing and more, and the more people you have, the more ideas are coming. You can dream bigger! But, when companies reach [a certain size], it's also more complicated to start new projects. And internal politics occur. A lot of processes are created. Everything makes the company run slower. You feel too comfortable and you don't take risks anymore. I left the company to join a startup because I want a real challenge: to run a company from zero, outside my comfort zone, doing a lot of different things. I wanted to put myself in danger in a small company that is trying to disrupt the education market, where everything is really conservative."

—**Julian Cyr** is chief engineer at San Franciso–based Holberton School, a project-based alternative to college for software engineers.

I wanted to escape corporate politics.

"I spent half a decade at what was then the largest media conglomerate in the world, News Corp (Fox brands here in the United States). What I learned at that time were some of the perverse incentives and structures that rewarded political capital within the organization far more than actual business contribution. Since then, I've made a career of working with startups where each contribution I make goes directly to the bottom line and growth of the organization. I'm pleased to have grown each of the businesses I've been a part of and have avoided much of the political infighting I've seen elsewhere."

—**Eric Quanstrom** is the chief marketing officer of KiteDesk, a lead-gen platform company in San Francisco.

I have a direct, measurable impact on the company.

"Our industry can be hard to understand at best, and deceptive and unethical at worst. I love having the opportunity to help people sort through that and make

decisions that work for them. I chose to work here after spending several years working for established companies. I wanted to have the opportunity to really influence the direction of the company, to have a direct and measurable impact on the day to day."

—**Ellen Cunningham** is a marketing manager at CardFellow, a Middletown, Connecticut–based company that helps businesses understand credit card processing.

I have a voice.

"When I moved from Chicago to Austin in 2015, I was 23 years old and fresh out of my post-college South American backpacking adventure. I had no idea what I wanted to do. When I got a job offer at Everfest, saying no wasn't an option. Working for a startup offers me the opportunity to wear many hats and to pave my own path to success. It gives me the chance to build a meaningful product with my own hands and not through the bureaucracy of middle management. At a young age (and at my first job), I have stock options in a company whose mission I believe in and that is set to do big things."

—**Maddie Rish** is part of the founding team at Everfest, an Austin tech startup whose website is a global festival discovery engine.

I can have a big impact.

"I was considering another offer from a more established company. The offer came with a higher salary, and was with a very similar tech company. On paper, it was the right choice, but I turned it down in favor of [the startup], because I believe I will make a bigger impact here. [With the bigger company offer], I got the distinct impression I would be stepping into a role that had already been well defined by the person who was leaving, whereas at App Press I've very much been able to define the role."

—**Tyler Moore** is the marketing director at App Press, an Indiana-based company that makes creating mobile apps easy.

I believe in the mission.

"I chose to leave a high-paying job at a successful firm to work for a four-person startup because I believed in the product. I believed in the power of using technology for good, and saw that our simple tool had huge potential to change and improve the publishing industry as a whole,

and seriously disrupt the education, health and manufacturing sectors. The chance to be a part of that was really enticing. I took a significant pay cut, but I knew that the hands-on experience that I would acquire by working for a startup was worth the slashed salary. [And] there was a lot of upside. I was given a significant number of share options when I signed, and that number increases every year. I hold a master's degree from IE Business School in Madrid, and although that program was world-class and I learned so much while there, what I got out of that program doesn't even come close to the skills and experience I've received here. For an A-type person like me, it has been difficult at times to adapt to operating in an environment that's in a constant state of flux. But I think that's exactly what keeps me here: the chance to throw myself into the roughest, choppiest waters just to see if I'll sink or swim."

—**Alexa McConnell** is the manager of sales and operations for Guides, an Ottawa-based publishing and hosting platform.

Ideas are pushed through faster.

"I worked for large enterprises such as Nokia and Microsoft before finding my current job at a startup, which marks the fourth startup I've worked for. I've come to expect a certain level of rigidness and certain structural limitations when working for a large company, meaning that I'd have ideas that would be stalled for months waiting on the proper channels to push the idea through. At every startup I've worked for, it has been possible to talk to the responsible people directly and within hours to

start implementing the new designs or functions I'd dreamt up."

—**Mark Pedersen** is a writer at London-based Nodes Agency. He is based in Copenhagen.

I enjoy more autonomy and fewer meetings.

"It's refreshing (and a little scary) when you realize you are now in charge of a whole business function. It's down to you to do the analysis, work out where to invest effort and money, and bear the responsibility for how that goes. You can't hide behind anyone, but neither will you be stuck doing a task you secretly believe to be pointless. Too, larger companies, despite their protests otherwise, always end up creating meetings that don't need to happen, or for which half the people in the room don't need to be there. Time feels more precious at a startup, so you'd better have a good reason to call everyone together!"

—**James Rice** is head of digital marketing at UK-based WikiJob, where people go to find out about graduate jobs in finance.

I'm learning from the best.

"Founders of startups are some of the best people to learn from. They are entrepreneurs who have seen a problem and come up with a solution. To be part of this culture and have this rub off on me was a significant pull in working for a startup."

—**Tom Brown** is a marketing assistant at Shiply, a UK-based courier services company.

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I can influence the company's future.

"My task is to launch our startup on the international market, which is very challenging. I don't want to work for bigger companies. I did and it was boring and my colleagues worked only for money. In a startup you can dream, learn and improve yourself much faster because there is no one else who can do the job or help if you miss something. It requires you to get out of your comfort zone. In addition, you can influence the whole company's future! That is truly exciting! Last but not least, [here] you can share from the option pool. So you are always motivated from the salary POV, which is something that makes me proud and makes my life very exciting. Who knows when will I become rich? Or poor?"

—**Viktor Egri** is the chief marketing officer at Automizy, a marketing automation company based in Budapest.

I wanted to experiment.

"After working as a software developer for a global, multibillion-dollar corporation, it took an offer to travel to France for a client visit to change my mind about my future in the company. In the case of the multinational corporation, there is a great brand name attached to the company, and everyone looks up to you for being a part of that network. It only hits you later that you don't have the playground to experiment and learn, as much as they claim to offer that. The strict hierarchy occasionally rears its ugly head when you have interesting suggestions, while other times, ideas are taken and aren't yours anymore. I joined a hyper-growth-stage startup. The biggest advantage is I get to work alongside the founders, hierarchy is just on paper, and I am given a level playground to experiment with new ideas. Having moved into a workforce that is 0.04% of my original company, I know that my work is noticed, and I also know that it is valued. More important, there is a positive and constructive work environment, one where ideas are not simply taken at face value, but critically evaluated by the team."

—**Divya Ganesan** is a marketer at Chargebee, a Walnut, California–based B2B SaaS product that automates subscription billing.

"Working at a startup is like going through a condensed but comprehensive course on most of the functions of any business. A startup is a high-risk, high-rewards setup. It requires you to be flexible in almost all aspects of your work life, always ready to adapt to new processes and

platforms, quickly learn new skills, and be responsible and accountable for your actions. The impact of your actions can be seen directly. You get to work in a close interactive and collaborative environment, where you must wear multiple hats. On one day I am taking charge of customer testing, while on another day I am taking photographs in NYC to write another blog for the website."

—**Pranjal Gupta** is the head of operations at Vertoe, a luggage-storing company based in New York City.

My successes are recognized.

"Working for a startup is really exciting and hard; it's definitely not for the faint hearted. Your successes are much more visible, as are your failures. At a bigger company you would have a very specific job description. In the startup world, there is a lot to get done in a short amount of time and with a smaller amount of people, so you get the opportunity to move from one set of duties to another as the company works through any pivots or growth periods. I have the ability to have an impact on how things are done, which gives a sense of ownership and pride when we are successful."

—**Jessica West** is a software engineer at Denver-based Parkifi, which helps people find parking spots in Denver.

connecticut **innovations**

What's next starts here.