

How to retain your culture as a fast-growth startup

Most startups are laser focused on one thing: growth. But rapid growth can come with its own set of challenges. When your team expands quickly it can change the ethos and dynamic of an organisation, meaning it can become harder to retain your ethics, cultural values and sense of control as a founder.

Temps de lecture : minute

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With 77% of job seekers considering a company's culture before applying, it's important that founders take time to ensure rapid growth doesn't come at the cost of cultural integrity.

My startup - Virti - grew nearly 1000% last year. Here are some of the lessons I learnt:

Be upfront about your growth strategies

Your team will perform best when they know in advance what changes to expect. As a founder, it's essential that you're transparent with new and existing hires about what you're planning and how your growth aspirations might impact their experience at work. They'll then have the freedom to choose whether they want to be part of the next phase of your startup's journey.

The reality is that fast growth changes everything about a business. Some people may prefer a smaller team environment, and not wish to work in a hyper-growth startup of fifty or more employees. For others, their role may be evolving or expanding into something they didn't originally sign

up for. Your people deserve to know when and how their work life is about to change. Failing to be upfront could lead to resentment and the loss of valuable talent.

Tighten up your hiring and onboarding processes

Your cultural values need to be bought into and upheld by everyone in your organisation. The best way to ensure everybody understands what these values are and why they're important is to build scalable, reliable hiring and onboarding pathways, which support new hires to build a deep understanding of your culture and work ethic.

Spend time building out a hiring process which goes beyond "hiring for culture" and analyses prospective hires through a data-driven process that pulls out key characteristics that align with your company values. These could include things such as coachability, adaptability and an aptitude for fast-paced environments.

You could also break down your cultural values into digestible bullets for new hires to study, alongside case studies that showcase how they've been reflected in your work - so they can get a sense of how your culture operates practically. You should also make it clear how these values translate into what you expect from employees. To support this process, codify company knowledge and best practice in such a way that makes it easy for everyone to communicate and access. This way, your team can easily remind themselves and others of the most salient points.

Securing cultural buy-in from new hires as soon as they're through the door will help to maintain a strong ethos throughout the entire team. It's important that your vision is shared and nurtured by every employee at every level and culture is celebrated at daily stand-ups, weekly meetings and quarterly awards to help get everyone excited and aligned to the

company culture.



Read also

[How to scale a startup to 50 employees without losing its culture](#)

Prioritise building community and rapport across teams

Building a strong company culture is all about fostering great relationships between people. But over the last year, with the advent of remote work and digital nomadism, it has grown increasingly difficult to build a cohesive culture when your team is apart.

For teams (like Virti's) that operate internationally, connecting across cultures, continents and time zones can present an additional challenge.

I've found the key to building community between a remote team is to give people opportunities to connect and collaborate outside of a work

context. When you're not meeting up in an office and having water cooler conversations, you need to find other ways to bring teams together.

At Virti we've introduced quarterly 'Game Jams', where we encourage our team to work in groups to pursue a passion project not related to the work we do. We encourage people to work on anything that interests them - tech-related or otherwise - giving them a fun opportunity to learn and work with others. The idea is that everyone gets to flex their creative muscles and apply their skills to a new scenario, whilst getting to know colleagues in the process. The initiative has played a key role in helping us build rapport and a sense of community across our teams in the UK and the States throughout the pandemic.

We have also used our own tech to help everyone connect despite the challenges of different time zones and remote work. Asynchronous video posting of work-updates, impromptu Slack and video coffee meetings and different teams adding their own flavour to running company-wide meetings all help to build rapport and community digitally.

Ensure employees at every level understand their worth

It sounds obvious, but when you're scaling quickly it can be easy to sideline things like ensuring every employee understands their value and feels accountable. Everyone must know how their role furthers the company goals and helps to solve the problems faced by customers. When you're working remotely, this sense of accountability and self-worth will keep your team motivated and your culture strong.

Ensuring everybody in the team knows (and is reminded of) their worth will help build a trusting and supportive culture, and will likely improve peoples' performance, too. Regular check-ins and honest feedback on employee mood is really helpful at ensuring that work remains fun and

enjoyable. We decided to go beyond simple alignment tools like OKRs and created our own tool called the Virti Operating System or VOS2. This tool tasks employees to align their value, strategy and goals to their team's quarterly focus, as well as to the overall mission of the company. This helps people to focus, prioritise and understand that what they are doing is hugely beneficial to the overall company vision.

Don't set aside your moral compass in the name of growth

When growing at pace, ethics and integrity can be harder to hold onto. Rather than rushing ahead all guns blazing, startups must plan for this and put processes in place to protect culture and retain a moral compass as they scale.

The success of your business will ultimately be defined by your human capital. So while cutting corners and working people hard in the name of scale might serve you in the short-term, failing to prioritise your people, ethics and culture will ultimately have long-term implications for your business. As soon as your people start to lose faith in the vision they signed up for - or reach burnout points - morale and that sense of community you've worked so hard to build can start to slip, with noticeable consequences. At Virti we use our own employee feedback tools to measure everything from engagement to mood and well-being.

When you reflect back on the journey it is the people you were on the journey with and their growth and development which is in my opinion the most rewarding aspect over any end-goals.

Dr Alex Young is CEO and founder of Virti
