

Building Your First Team

A structured hiring process for the first ten employees: role definition, sourcing, work-sample evaluation, offers, ESOP and the first 30 days.

Overview

The first ten hires set the standard for every hire after them. At this size there is no management layer to absorb a bad decision, so the process has to be deliberate even when it feels slow.

Before you open a role

- Do the job yourself for at least a month so you can evaluate the work.
- Write the outcome the role owns in one sentence, with a measurable target at 90 days.
- Confirm the role is a bottleneck today, not a bottleneck you expect in six months.
- Set the salary band and ESOP range before the first conversation, not after.

Sourcing at pre-seed

- Your first five hires almost always come from your own network or your investors'.
- Write the role publicly with real detail — stage, salary band, equity, and what is hard about it.
- Prioritise people who have worked at your stage before over brand-name pedigree.
- Referral bonuses work; expensive recruiters at ten people usually do not.

The evaluation process

- Screen (30 min) — motivation, stage fit, compensation alignment.
- Work sample (2–4 hours, paid) — a real, scoped piece of your actual work.
- Deep dive (60 min) — walk through their last two years decision by decision.
- Founder conversation — values, ambiguity tolerance, how they handle being wrong.
- Two backchannel references you source yourself, not from their list.
- Score every candidate against the same written criteria before discussing them as a group.

Offers, salary and ESOP

- Pay below market on cash and above market on equity — and say so plainly.

- Typical early ranges: first engineer 0.5–2%, senior functional lead 0.5–1.5%, early generalist 0.1–0.5%.
- 4-year vesting, 1-year cliff, and a written explanation of strike price, exercise window and dilution.
- Put the offer in writing within 24 hours of the decision, with a response deadline.

The first 30 days

- Ship something real in week one, however small.
- Assign an owner for onboarding — the founder, at this size.
- Write down the 90-day target on day one and review it weekly.
- Run an honest 30-day check-in and act on it. A mis-hire caught at 30 days costs a month; caught at nine months it costs the team.

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