

pilot



Annual Planning **checklist**

In 8 steps



The annual planning checklist

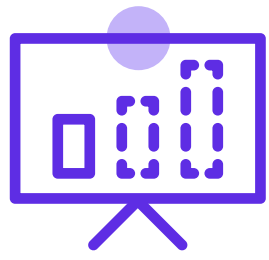


Welcome to a process that works for 1000s of companies

Every fall, our Pilot CFO Services team walks founders through this same checklist. The idea is simple: Start planning in Sept-Nov, lock things down before year-end, and you'll kick off strong in January. These questions help you see the big picture and turn that vision into clear goals for the year ahead. It's a straightforward way to plan, and it works no matter what stage your startup is in.

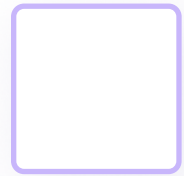


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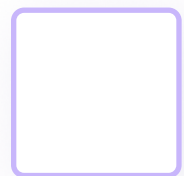


STEP 1

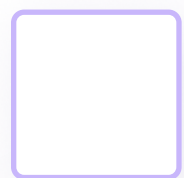
Define the big picture



What's the long-term outcome we're aiming for? Our North Star? (E.g. Acquisition, category leadership, \$xx revenue by 20xx, IPO.)



Where do we want to be in 3-5 years? (E.g. revenue milestones, market share, product maturity, geographic expansion.)

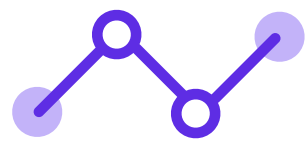


How does this roll up into a multi-year financial and operating plan, showing annual targets and forecasts for the next 3-5 years?



The annual planning checklist

STEP 2



Translate your vision into the upcoming year

(Create an initial budget)

☐

What do we need to accomplish in the next 12 months to stay on track toward our long-range plan?

☐

What are 3-5 company-wide priorities or themes for this year? (E.g. accelerate product adoption, expand into a new vertical, grow ARR 3x, improve retention, prepare for fundraising, build a leadership team, launch second product line.)

☐

How does this tie into an initial company-wide budget for the year?

TIP FROM A CFO

“The annual plan is the bridge between the long-range vision and the short-term budget. The goal is to create a financial plan that leadership is fully aligned on, so everyone starts the year moving in the same direction.”

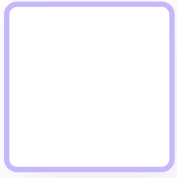
—Julian Ng, Pilot CFO





STEP 3

Identify Key Stakeholders



Who should be involved in the planning process?

- Small startup: founder/CEO
- Larger org: department leaders across Sales, Marketing, Product, Finance, People Ops, etc.

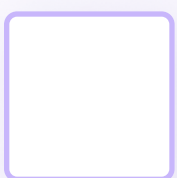
“Everyone needs to be aligned and given a heads up early enough so they can dedicate the attention needed to pressure test the plan. Stakeholders make sure budgets are viable, and they are ultimately responsible for owning and executing against their functional budgets.”

–**Julian Ng**, Pilot CFO



STEP 4

Set Guardrails



What financial and operational boundaries must leaders work within as they build their budgets?

“Guardrails ensure leaders can’t ‘solve’ to their budget in ways that undermine the business. For example, you can’t meet targets by cutting critical staff, or create savings just by pushing out hiring. The goal is to set clear parameters so budgets are both achievable and aligned with company strategy.”

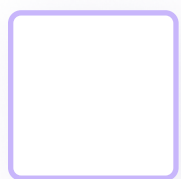


Julian Ng, Pilot CFO

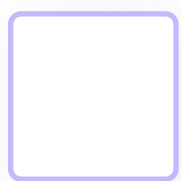


STEP 5

Issue the initial budget and department planning

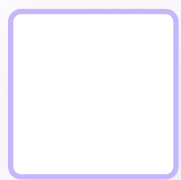


How will we share the initial budget with department leaders? (Individual meetings vs. group discussion.)

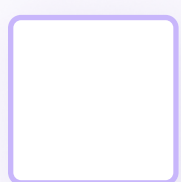


What does each function need to achieve this year to support company goals?

- Marketing: generate XX MQLs
- Sales: hit \$X in bookings
- Product: Ship XYZ features by 1H26
- CS: reduce churn from X% to Y%
- Finance: extend runway to X months
- People Ops: hire X roles and improve retention to Y%



How does each team translate company-wide priorities into their own plan? (Roadmap milestones, pipeline goals, retention targets.)



What are the financial implications of achieving this department plan, and how do they align (or not) with the budget issued?

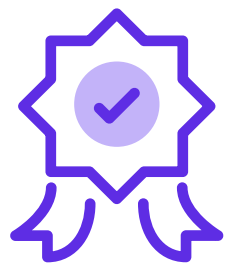
“Department plans cannot just be a list of goals, they need to be tied back to numbers. This is where we sanity check the initial budget from Step 2 with a bottoms-up view. Department heads should quantify what it will take to deliver their plans, and finance partners can help translate those needs into dollars, especially for leaders less familiar with the financial side.”



Julian Ng, Pilot CFO



The annual planning checklist



STEP 6

Review and align

☐

Where do plans overlap or conflict?

☐

What trade-offs or choices do we need to make? (e.g. prioritize speed vs. profitability, brand vs. product investment)

☐

If a department needs more budget than allocated, how will leaders work with their finance partner to surface asks and provide justification?

TIP FROM A CFO

“Alignment across leadership is the single most important outcome of annual planning. This is a recursive process, so work collaboratively to move from the initial budget to a refined version.”

–Julian Ng, Pilot CFO





The annual planning checklist



STEP 7

Finalize the plan

☐

Do we have a clear company-wide plan with goals, budget, and ownership?

☐

Is the plan realistic but ambitious? (I.e. stretches the team, but doesn't break it.)

☐

Are all stakeholders aligned and bought in on the budget?

TIP FROM A CFO

“The core goal of annual planning is company-wide alignment on a single financial plan. That alignment only gets harder as more departments and staff are added, which makes it critical to lock in alignment at this stage.”

–Julian Ng, Pilot CFO



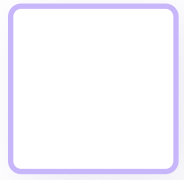


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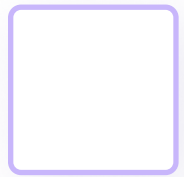


STEP 8

Stay accountable



How often will we check progress?
(Monthly budget vs. actuals, quarterly reviews.)



Through what forum will reviews happen?
(Standing leadership meetings, dedicated financial reviews with department leaders.)

TIP FROM A CFO

“Accountability does not stop once the plan is finalized. The best companies build regular forums, such as leadership meetings and financial reviews, to track progress on the plan and make small adjustments before issues become big.”

—Julian Ng, Pilot CFO





The **Pilot CFO team** can help guide this process, align your leadership, and keep your team accountable from vision through execution.

Learn more at **Pilot.com**