

# How to stay agile as you scale: A founder's guide to growth and flexibility



Agility is a core component of most startups. In the early days, while your team is relatively small and your product is in the vision stage, a culture of experimentation and rapid iteration comes naturally. This agility is key to helping you weather fast-changing market conditions, pivot quickly when necessary, and make big decisions efficiently as a team.

Get it right and you'll end up on the path to success. Next stop: growth. When you reach this critical juncture in your startup journey and begin to scale, your team and business will rapidly change shape. As you grow your customer base and unlock fresh capital through investment, your team will necessarily expand – often fast. Blink and you'll have gone from a small, tight-knit team to a hundreds-strong enterprise, seemingly overnight.

At this point, staying agile is no longer a given. It requires a conscious, consistent effort to translate the innate flexibility and dynamism of your early startup team to your fast-growing scale-up. As founders, the bulk of responsibility for this rests on our shoulders. From my own experience leading Patchwork Health, as we've grown from a team of just 3 to 100 in the past few years, I've found a number of areas essential to effectively navigating this challenge. I hope that by sharing them below, I can help support other founders taking the critical next step into the scale phase.

### **Be selective with structure**

When your team members begin to multiply, the need to introduce a more defined structure becomes inevitable. But if you're not careful, this can quickly snowball into overwrought rigidity and needless hierarchy that stifles innovation and plants roadblocks in the way of necessary decision-making.

There's a balance to strike. The goal when scaling is to create enough structure to maintain company-wide cohesion while enabling individual teams to retain independence and flexibility.

This is something we learned first-hand at Patchwork. At times, we felt the pendulum swinging too far one way; operating systems risked becoming overly complex, and additional, often unnecessary, processes began to creep in. Conscious of losing the agility that had been a key driver behind our success to date, we changed gears and actively transitioned to a flatter structure and simpler processes. Keeping hierarchies to an essential minimum and encouraging a more collaborative approach has helped

provide enough structure to keep the machine running while giving our team the freedom to continue innovating effectively.

For example, we moved away from a pyramid structure when it comes to our engineering talent. It was creating too many layers in the middle and slowing down progress. Instead, we transitioned colleagues into smaller, more agile 'squads' and brought key talent from product and design into them to create better day-to-day cohesion and collaboration.

### **Cultivate effective cross-team communication**

Maintaining a flatter team structure rests heavily on having a strong foundation of open, consistent communication. Each part of the team – from product development to customer success and implementation – needs the freedom to work autonomously and be adaptable to remain agile. But to keep the team as a whole moving forward, they have to be able to effectively speak to and work in harmony with each other.

As founders and leaders, we have to ensure our teams have the tools to enable this cross-functional collaboration. This can be as simple as ensuring you have an effective communication platform in place, where different teams can remotely check-in, easily share progress and feedback, and collaborate on projects on a daily basis.

To ensure this collaboration is truly effective, your company culture needs to foster both candour and psychological safety. This empowers people to speak up, share views, and seek feedback. When you're a small team that knows each other well, this can be an easy culture to foster. Everyone has ready access to the founders or leadership, leading to shorter feedback loops and transparent communication. It's harder to maintain that as you scale. It's vital that you don't let that spirit of candour and psychological safety decline by failing to prioritise the tools and strategies needed for cross-team communication and collaboration.

Bringing the whole team together regularly is also important. While we have a hybrid working structure at Patchwork, we still schedule set days throughout the year for everyone to gather together in one place. This provides a dedicated space for us to touch base, stay aligned on overarching company vision and goals, celebrate the wins, and pool our collective resources to help tackle any emerging challenges in an agile way.

## **Keep one foot on the frontline**

Your role as a founder naturally evolves as your company and team both grow. You have to learn to pass on some of the hats you've been wearing and delegate to others on your team. But to stay agile, it's important not to step back too far. You need to keep one foot on the frontline at all times.

This means staying plugged into the day-to-day strategy and challenges across the team. Having been there from day one, you have an unparalleled understanding of the company's historic decisions and previous lessons learnt to help tackle today's challenges and opportunities. You can provide invaluable insight and guidance to help direct product vision and growth and ensure the team has the context they need to achieve this.

Similarly, it's essential to remain as close as possible to your customer base. Having a clear understanding of the changing needs of your end-users will enable you to support your team to effectively respond and iterate in line with changing demand. I regularly spend time talking to the clinicians who use our platform; their feedback is invaluable and often sparks ideas for improvements. I also join sales calls and partnership reviews to ensure I'm across all the details of what our customers and prospective customers are most concerned or excited about.

Staying agile as you scale is key to supporting long-term success for your company. As founders, it's something we have to consciously nurture and adapt along the way. It's all about keeping sight of what made your early team a success and finding ways to replicate and reframe these ways of working to support you at each new stage of growth.