

RESEARCH REPORT

# The Growing Pains of OKRs

What changes in how companies run OKRs between fifteen people and a hundred and fifty.

200+ startups vs 420 companies of 50–200 people

# OKRs Don't Stay the Same as You Grow

Advice about OKRs is written as if every company runs them the same way. Two studies, two company sizes, show that they don't.

Last year we studied how 200+ startups set and ran OKRs. This year we ran a parallel study of 420 companies of 50–200 people — the stage where OKRs stop being a founder's whiteboard habit and become a system more than one person depends on.

Placed side by side, the two tell a story the usual advice misses. Some habits are universal: they hold at every size. Others invert once a company adds people, teams, and layers. A tactic that works at fifteen people can quietly stop working at a hundred and fifty.

This report maps both — so a scaling ops lead can stop borrowing startup advice that no longer fits, and a founder can see which instincts still serve them at triple the headcount.

## SUMMARY

# Eight Things That Change

Eight measures, read in both studies and sorted by which direction they move as a company grows. Every figure is the **share of companies** doing each thing — startups, then companies of 50–200. The pattern is the point: nearly everything improves with size. One thing gets worse.

|                                 | STARTUP | 50–200 | WHAT IT MEANS                               |
|---------------------------------|---------|--------|---------------------------------------------|
| ● IMPROVES AS YOU GROW          |         |        |                                             |
| OKRs linked to company goals    | 35%     | → 76%  | Scale forces the alignment startups skip    |
| Use dedicated OKR software      | 22%     | → 59%  | The spreadsheet era ends as teams multiply  |
| Run retrospectives consistently | 31%     | → 57%  | Ritual gets formalised with size            |
| Feel confident in the process   | 24%     | → 40%  | More cycles completed, more trust earned    |
| ● STAYS THE SAME                |         |        |                                             |
| Spend 30+ min/week on OKRs      | 61%     | → 61%  | Overhead is a fixed cost, not a tax on size |
| Founder leads the rollout       | 31%     | → 25%  | Barely moves — the baton passes slowly      |
| ● GETS WORSE                    |         |        |                                             |
| Run 3+ OKRs at once             | 35%     | → 52%  | Focus thins as more teams add more goals    |
| Have abandoned OKRs on a team   | 28%     | → 50%  | More teams mean more places to drift        |

Growing up mostly makes OKRs **better** — more aligned, better tooled, more trusted. The danger isn't scale itself. It's the two habits that quietly slip while everything else improves.

## PART ONE What Stays the Same

Three things look the same at fifteen people and a hundred and fifty. Because they hold at every size, they are the closest thing OKRs have to universal laws.

### 1 • Time Spent Doesn't Change

The share of teams spending 30 or more minutes a week on OKRs is identical across both studies — 61% then, 61% now. Of everything measured, this moved the least.

OKR overhead is a fixed cost of doing them properly, not a tax that grows with headcount. A team running them in well under half an hour and expecting that to scale will find the time comes due eventually — the strong teams simply pay it from the start.

#### Teams spending 30+ minutes per week on OKRs



### 2 • Fast Rollout Still Wins

Teams that stand their OKRs up quickly outperform the ones that let the rollout drag, in both studies. A long rollout bleeds urgency and lets priorities drift before the first cycle starts. A fast one turns a plan into a working rhythm while the energy is still there.

# 2×

Teams that roll out OKRs in **under a week** hit their goals very consistently at more than **double** the rate of the slowest rollouts — at every size.

### 3 · Ownership Still Decides — and Matters More

One habit separates the teams that hit goals from the teams that miss, in both studies: a single clear owner on every objective and key result. The gap doesn't shrink with scale — it widens. In the larger-company data, teams where every OKR has an owner hit goals very consistently at nearly four times the rate of those where only some do.

#### Companies hitting goals very consistently, by ownership

Every OKR owned

65%

Only some owned

17%

Among companies of 50–200. A 48-point gap — the widest in the study.

# What Changes With Size

Four things shift as a company grows. Each marks a point where the startup playbook stops applying.

## 4 • Who Runs It: Founder to Operator

At startup size, OKRs are a founder's project. By 50–200 people the founder has stepped back and the Head of Ops or Growth has taken the lead. The baton passes from founder energy to operator muscle, right around the headcount this report studies.

The risk isn't the handoff — it's an unplanned one, where the founder gets pulled into fundraising or sales and OKRs lose their champion before anyone names a replacement. Companies that scale OKRs cleanly decide who owns the process on purpose.

### Who leads the OKR rollout at 50–200 people

Head of Ops / Growth

36%

Founder / CEO

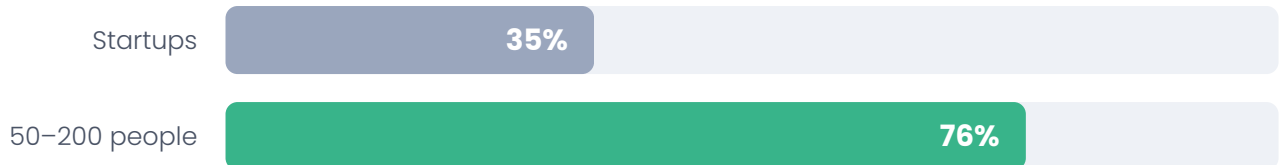
25%

In startups the founder leads 31%. By 50–200 it's 25%, and Ops has taken over.

## 5 • Alignment: The Largest Change

This is the biggest shift in the study. At startup size, only a third of teams link their OKRs to company goals. At 50–200, three-quarters do. Scale forces the hierarchy startups are happy to skip, because when work spans many teams, goals that don't connect to the top become visible drag fast.

### Companies whose OKRs clearly link to company goals



A 41-point jump — alignment is the single largest change between the two.

## 6 • Confidence Climbs

Trust in the process grows with size. More cycles completed, more structure in place, more evidence the thing works. Confidence is earned on the far side of consistency, not the near side.

24% → 40%

Share of companies rating themselves at the **top of the confidence scale** — from a quarter of startups to four in ten larger companies.

## 7 • The Spreadsheet Era Ends

Startups mostly wing it: most run OKRs in docs, sheets, and the occasional project tool. By 50–200, the majority have moved to purpose-built software. The switch almost always happens reactively — manual tracking works fine until there are more teams than one person can chase, and then compiling the picture before every leadership meeting becomes someone's second job.

### Companies using dedicated OKR software



## 8 • Discipline Rises: Retros Nearly Double

The cliché says big companies get sloppy while startups stay lean and sharp. For OKRs the data says the reverse. Consistent end-of-cycle retrospectives nearly double as companies enter the 50–200 band, because the informal "we all know how it went" of a small team stops working once there are more teams than one person can read.

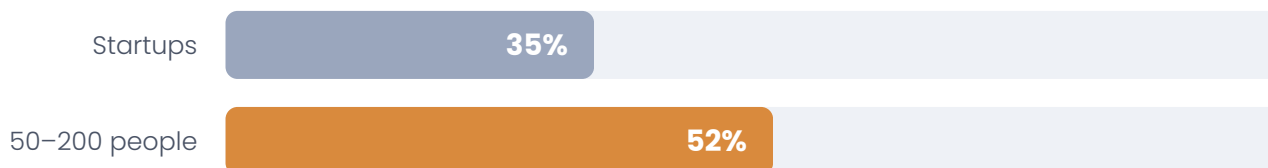
### Companies running retrospectives consistently



## 9 · The One That Moves the Wrong Way

Every other change in this report is scale making OKRs better — this is the exception. The share of teams setting three or more OKRs per quarter climbs as companies grow. More teams, more stakeholders, more "can we just add one more" — and focus thins exactly as coordination gets harder. Survivable at fifteen people; at a hundred and fifty, it's how a quarter ends with everything half-done.

### Companies setting 3+ OKRs per quarter



The discipline that has to grow fastest as you scale is the discipline of saying no.

## PART THREE The One That Reverses

One finding doesn't just shift with size — it completely flips direction.

### 10 • Time Flips From Enemy to Ally

The one lever that fully reverses. In the startup study, spending *less* time won — under thirty minutes a week beat pouring hours in, because at startup speed the enemy was process for its own sake. This year it reverses: among larger companies, the teams spending the *most* time hit their goals most consistently, because OKRs are now a way to coordinate across many teams, and coordination takes real time.



AT STARTUP SPEED

**< 30 min**

Light-touch wins. Process for its own sake is the enemy.



AT 50–200 PEOPLE

**68%**

Teams investing 2+ hrs/week hit goals very consistently. Under-investment is the enemy.

## WHAT TO DO

# Reading This By Size

The same findings, read two ways, depending which side of the transition you're on.

**UNDER 50 PEOPLE****Keep your speed, fix one thing early**

- Stay light and move fast — your speed is an advantage, not a gap
- Don't over-tool before you need to
- Start laddering goals earlier than your peers — the habit startups most regret skipping
- Name one clear owner per OKR from day one

**50–200 PEOPLE****Invest, tool up, and cap the goals**

- Invest the time — OKRs are now coordination, and coordination isn't free
- Move to real tooling before manual chasing becomes a second job
- Formalise retros — the informal version stops scaling
- Cap OKRs per team before focus thins
- Plan the founder-to-operator handoff on purpose

Almost everything in the right-hand column is cheaper and easier to do **before** it's needed — which is what the next page is about.

## ACTION PLAN

# Preparing Before You Scale

Each of these is far easier to do while the team is still small than to retrofit once it's grown.

## 1 Ladder Your Goals Early

Only a third of startups link OKRs to company goals, against three-quarters of larger companies. Build the hierarchy while it's still trivial — not after misalignment has cost a quarter.

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## 2 Get Off the Spreadsheet Before It Breaks

Only 22% of startups use dedicated software against 59% at scale. Move while few enough teams make the switch painless, not after manual chasing has become a second job.

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## 3 Make Retros a Habit Now

The retro rate nearly doubles at scale, but the habit is far harder to introduce to 150 people than to 15. Lock the ritual while the team is small.

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## 4 Plan the Founder Handoff

Name the operator who will own OKRs before the founder gets pulled into fundraising or sales — so the handoff is a decision, not an accident.

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## 5 Cap the Goals

Teams running 3+ OKRs jump from 35% to 52% as they grow. Set a hard limit now, before more teams multiply the goals and thin out focus.

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# About This Research

Two independent studies, compared openly by company size.

|                            |                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Startup study              | 200+ early- to growth-stage startups across SaaS, services, and consumer tech. All confirmed active OKR implementation.                                     |
| Growth-stage study         | 420 companies of 50–200 employees, technology sector. All confirmed active OKR use. Fielded via Pollfish.                                                   |
| Comparison type            | A comparison by company size — startups against growth-stage companies — <b>not</b> a change over time. Differences reflect size, not a trend across years. |
| Mixed metrics              | Where the two studies measured an outcome differently, findings are reported directionally, never as a fabricated head-to-head figure.                      |
| No customers               | No OKRs Tool customers were included in either sample. Findings reflect what practitioners experience, not what a vendor would hope they'd say.             |
| Association, not causation | All figures are self-reported and cross-sectional. No control group. Results describe what moves together with size, not what causes what.                  |

## ABOUT

# OKRs Tool

The simplest way to run OKRs across a growing team — without it becoming one person's full-time job.

The tool chases updates for you, gives leadership one clear view of who's working on what and what's at risk, and keeps goals measurable instead of letting them drift into tasks. Set it up in an afternoon — no consultants, no training — and roll it out to the whole company on one flat price, never per user. For the person accountable for making OKRs stick, it's the system that makes sure they do.

|                                 |                                                                                                        |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Updates chase themselves</b> | Automated nudges collect progress for you, so no one reconstructs the picture before a review.         |
| <b>One view for leadership</b>  | Who's working on what, and what's at risk, in a single live view — not a slide built the night before. |
| <b>Goals stay measurable</b>    | Key results stay outcomes, not tasks, instead of drifting into a to-do list.                           |
| <b>One flat price</b>           | Roll out to the whole company for a flat fee — never charged per user.                                 |
| <b>Live in an afternoon</b>     | Guided onboarding gets your first cycle running fast. No consultants, no training.                     |

**Make OKRs stick — before they become a full-time job.**

Start free. Your first cycle can be live this afternoon.

[Start Free](#)