

## Start-Ups (Creating One--or Working At One)

The start-up industry is becoming an increasingly large part of the job market. A [recent study](#) indicated that firm startups accounted for about 20% of U.S. gross job creation, with much of this job creation occurring in startups under five years old.

For job seekers interested in the startup industry, the challenges are to, first, identify some of the critical skills needed for success at a startup, and also to uncover sources of job opportunities at startup companies.

### Critical Skills

While some candidate skills are universally valued across different jobs and industries, there are several traits that are of particular importance in the startup industry:

*Adaptability:* Depending upon where a startup is situated in terms of staffing and funding, the ability to adjust to changing circumstances is essential. Work assignments might suddenly be modified, teams might be reconfigured, product shipping deadlines might be shortened—life at a startup means acceptance of change as a normal part of the work week.

*Multitasking:* For companies who are in chronic need of more staff members (a fairly common situation in the startup industry), a high value is placed on employees who are both willing and able to do whatever is needed to be done at the time—even taking on roles and responsibilities that are outside of their job description. In some cases, these additional tasks are only for a short time... in other cases, the timeframe might be longer. Regardless, everyone on staff is expected to chip in and contribute when needed.

*Teamwork:* Every organization values teamwork; for startups, however, it is absolutely imperative that a high level of collaboration, cooperation, and harmony exists throughout the company. Given the limited physical space available at most startups, most if not all employees are working in close proximity to each other. And given the need for constant communication and exchange of ideas in order to successfully complete projects, a positive synergy between all team members is essential if the startup is to succeed.

*Ability to Work in a Flat Hierarchy:* Startups are almost always organized in a loose organizational structure, with minimal reporting levels. While this is one of the factors that make startups an attractive workplace for some, it can also present some challenges. In many cases, a flat hierarchy means that there aren't clear rules regarding who makes decisions and to whom one should report. It might also mean that there aren't formal procedures in place for training new employees, or for resolving internal issues. Success in working within these types of environments depends on the ability to recognize the informal work rules that might exist in the company, to take the initiative to learn new and needed skills, and to identify those individuals that should be kept informed of your accomplishments and any problems that you need to have resolved.

*Passion for the Product:* All companies start with an idea—a service or a product—that the founders believe will be successful. At a startup, this idea is still new and evolving, and it is essential that all employees believe in and are committed to making the idea work. In many ways, this commitment is reflected in the critical skills outlines above—willingness to go above and beyond to help the company to succeed, adjusting to changing circumstances, etc. The bottom line is that, in most cases, a start-up job is not just 9-to-5... it's also a dedication to a team effort.

So how can you demonstrate these skills to a potential employer in the startup industry? Here are some ideas:

*Class Projects:* Most course-based projects are based on teams—these projects provide a great way to demonstrate your experience and successes in working with a group of other students. When writing description of the project for your resume (or when you're talking about the project in an interview), be sure to describe both your individual contributions as well as the group's achievements as a whole.

*Activities:* In addition to teamwork and leadership, extracurricular activities often involve planning and organization, as well as dealing with last-minute changes and other unexpected events. Whether or not the student club or organization is related to the job or internship you are seeking, activities can provide evidence of using some of the critical skills mentioned above.

*Self-Taught Skills:* As mentioned earlier, working at a startup often involves picking up new skills while on the job. In your communications with startups, highlight past and current examples of learning outside of the classroom—again, these newly learned skills need not be related to the type of role that you are interested in playing at the startup.

*Startup Experience:* CMU provides a great opportunity to work with other students in a startup environment throughout the academic year—check out Project Olympus (URL provided below)

### **Some Sources of Startup Employment Opportunities**

SPARK Job Fair: A CMU startup/small company job fair held every October. Check the [CPDC website](#) for more details

AngelList: <https://angel.co/> Great source of startup opportunities across a variety of industries

CrunchBoard: <https://www.crunchboard.com/> Primarily technical opportunities

Startup.ly Jobs: <http://jobs.startup.ly/> Allows you to do searches for types of opportunities (e.g. marketing)

StartUpHire: <http://www.startuphire.com/> Search by keyword and location for startup opportunities in the U.S.

CMU Swartz Center Job Board: <http://www.cmu.edu/swartz-center-for-entrepreneurship/get-involved/job-board.html> Lists opportunities at CMU-related startups

Venture Capital Firms: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/242702>

In addition to funding, venture capital firms often provide their client companies with candidates to help these companies fill critical hiring needs. The URL above provides a list of the largest VC firms—visit their websites and search for job openings.

### **Interested in creating your own startup?**

Here's some CMU resources that can help you get started:

Project Olympus: <http://www.cmu.edu/swartz-center-for-entrepreneurship/project-olympus/>

Swartz Center for Entrepreneurship: <http://www.cmu.edu/swartz-center-for-entrepreneurship/index.html>