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VOLUME I

EBOOK

The Unicorn Playbook

Industry insights from finance and accounting experts.

Lime Fivetran Lattice

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01 Introduction.

Reaching unicorn status — a billion-dollar valuation as a private company — requires more than a disruptive product and runaway demand. It takes a commitment to growth and a solid approach on how to scale people, processes, and systems.

While unicorn status used to be quite rare (hence the name), more and more unicorns appear every year. According to Wired, while there were around four unicorns created per year since the term was coined in 2013, more than 250 unicorns were minted in 2021 alone.

This trend is often attributed to increased access to capital from angel and VC investors. Not to be overlooked, however, is the fact that startup teams today come with more experience and knowledge about how to scale a company quickly, and that includes their finance and accounting operations.

Traditionally, finance and accounting has been viewed as a support operation — expected to scramble to keep up with the pace, or at least avoid adding too much friction to a company's growth. But modern finance and accounting teams are rewriting their role. They provide real-time financial data for decision-making and build the analytic models to evaluate opportunities. In short, they help drive businesses forward instead of just reporting on its past.

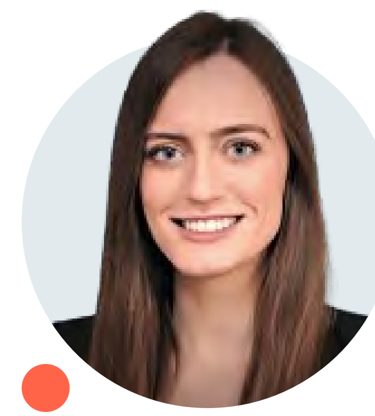
This first volume contains interviews with the following finance professionals.

We created this first volume from interviews with three controllers who have helped companies undergo the difficult journey it takes to reach unicorn status. Two are still in the role and one has moved on to become CFO at a venture capital firm focused on investing in and advising early-stage software companies. All three have seen the promise and the chaos of hypergrowth, and have steered companies through the whirlwind of it all.

What stood out for us was that their success was no accident. It grew out of a deliberate commitment to, and careful planning for, growth. Another notable theme is that a company's culture is key to driving success, including a growth mindset, operational excellence, embracing automation, and creative problem-solving.

Scott Clark,
VC Firm CFO, Investor, Advisor.

Prior to his current role as a CFO at a venture capital firm focused on investing in and advising early-stage software companies, Scott held finance roles at Lime, Zenefits, Pinterest, and Ernst & Young. He talks to Airbase about consistency in the processes and tools he uses across the variety of companies he has worked at or invested in.



Katie Slattery,
Fivetran Corporate Controller.

Katie is a successful accounting leader. In her current role as Corporate Controller at Fivetran, she is responsible for the company's global accounting and tax operations. Prior to joining Fivetran, Katie held leadership roles at both Zume and Tubi. Both a Chartered Accountant and CPA, Katie started her career at KPMG, where she worked alongside hypergrowth companies such as Stripe, Twilio, Slack, Square, and Zuora. Katie discusses how to scale companies successfully while staying focused on, and carving out, your personal career.

Jason Lopez,
Lattice Controller.

Jason has held accounting roles at several startups, including Lattice, Applitools, BlazeMeter, and Upwork. Before that, he was an auditor at PricewaterhouseCoopers, working on the financial statements of a Fortune 500 company. Jason discusses the value of automation, company culture, the importance of onboarding, and more in our interview with him.

02 Scott Clark,

VC Firm CFO, Investor, Advisor.

Former Controller at

Lime

About Lime.

Lime connects riders to the people and places that matter most, bringing cities together and empowering better urban living.

Timeline:

JAN 2017	MAR 2017	OCT 2017	JUL 2018	FEB 2019
		SERIES B	SERIES C	SERIES D
Company founded.	Seed funding round.	Funding round raises $50M.		Funding round raises $310M at $2.4B valuation.

Investors:

Lime's investors include Uber, Apple, UBS O'Connor, Bain Capital Ventures, Fidelity Investments, GV, and IVP.

Q

You've seen a lot of hypergrowth companies first hand. Tell us about how you prioritize your efforts to support the growth of the companies you've worked for.

A

I think four of the seven startups that I previously worked at hit unicorn status while I was there. This was when it was more difficult to get to unicorn status. There was more of a grind to get to a billion-dollar valuation.

The hardest part, initially, is to determine your first, second, and third type of hire on the team. So, very early on, it's those initial teams and then determining if you have the right systems in place. Once you identify the resources you need, the question is, "Do I outsource those people or do I hire them internally?"

> **"Getting the right folks and the right vendors lined up for the right tools is where I start."**

Q

At the very beginning, what kind of things are you thinking about when walking into a company that's just been started?

A

One of the first things that I did at every startup is to rip and replace QuickBooks. That means changing everything that QuickBooks touches, which is your entire environment. Selecting an ERP isn't selecting Oracle versus NetSuite versus Workday versus whatever, it's assessing several things: How are you processing revenue? How are you processing AP? How are you doing payroll journal entries? How are you recording every transaction that touches your books? You're rethinking through your entire process. Then you prioritize which are the most important things to do first.

At Lime, for example, AP was a huge issue because we were operating in 40 countries and, therefore, 40 different subsidiaries within NetSuite. Just getting everything paid, in the right entity, and streamlining that process was clearly a more important task for us than, say, revenue recognition, or different projects that we would have had at another startup. I think you need to know your business, and even though I selected the same tools for many of those startups, oftentimes the priority areas to attack first are different.

At Lime, we couldn't even get access to credit cards in each country, which left us with a ton of expense reports. I was focused on how much time our operations team was spending on expense reports rather than doing their own job, which was because of something specific to our business.

> **"The pain points will vary from company to company and each is a little bit different in terms of where you start, but, for me, it was always about people and the systems first."**

Q Tell us about how you hired people for the finance function.

A I always prefer to hire people in-house — but it's also a matter of when it makes sense to do so. You need to have at least enough volume and complexity to justify a new hire. Oftentimes, I would disengage an outsourced accounting firm and do the work myself at first — get it cleaned up and organized. That way, at least I knew we were setting up everything correctly.

When thinking about whether to hire a staff accountant versus an FP&A person versus an accounting manager, it depended on the business that I was in. I've made different decisions over time. So, sometimes my first hire was a Strategic Finance Manager to help think through the pricing model or other models that needed developing. At Lime, we had such a big team doing AP, revenue, and GL accounting because we had so much volume in so many different locations.

> **"Every company was a little bit different in terms of where we attacked. Systems play a huge part of that."**

When I was at Pinterest, in my early days, the systems weren't great, so we needed way more people than is necessary today to do very simple tasks. Leveraging tools means you don't have to actually hire for some of the more entry-level roles, or maybe you'll just need one person instead of three or four.

> **"Most importantly, you can hire a more strategic kind of thinker who can help move the business forward rather than just getting transactions done and recorded. So these tools allow you to uplevel your hiring."**

Q How did you develop your automation mindset?

A I've lived in Silicon Valley my whole life. Every company that I worked at is software engineering based, yet there was never the "Office of the CFO," because everyone just thought the ERP system defined the whole need. Accountants bought one piece of software back in the day. It really took a while for the venture capital world to invest, and for entrepreneurs to start companies that were really innovating for the office of the CFO.

> **"The big change was that the CFO became less of an accountant, and more of a strategic finance function."**

You didn't see controllers getting promoted to CFO, you saw people coming from private equity, venture capital, and from strategic finance, to become CFOs. They're data-driven individuals that want instant access to everything to analyze, so the systems around the CFO needed to be improved.

Q

You worked in a renowned accounting firm before catapulting into the world of startups. Do you have any observations when you compare those experiences?

A

In my early career I worked at Ernst & Young, and almost everything we did at that time was manual, which meant really long hours. I was auditing clients like Facebook, Google, and Apple. I saw these huge tech giants innovating like crazy, but my professional services firm didn't innovate at all. I got really excited about what startup life would be like. I went to my first startup and never looked back. I love the disruption and what people are doing to improve the way things are done. I was always interested in investing in the newest cool tool. I didn't want to use the same stack that everyone used 10 years ago, I was always trying to figure out a way to do it better, faster, quicker, or more effectively.

Now you've got people investing in the systems around the CFO to make more real-time data available. Not just accounting information, but all your metrics.

> **"The finance team needs the data coming from your product, your finance stack, your banking information, all of your vendors, every one of your customers, everything that touches any part of your company, to make better business decisions quicker."**

Q

How do you choose your tech stack?

A

There are definitely preferences. I could tell you my preference in each category, but that doesn't actually mean it always fits. International payments, for instance, are not important to some companies because they're US only and they have no plans to grow internationally. Then there are other companies that have a tremendous amount of pain in the international space. If you can check the box, and everything fits, then you probably go with your preferred one.

At Lime, for instance, we upgraded immediately from QuickBooks to NetSuite. Then, even by the time I left, we were thinking about switching to SAP because of its support for inventory. The problem is, NetSuite doesn't really do physical inventory very well compared to some of the older tools like SAP, whose modules are a bit more robust. In retrospect, I probably pulled the trigger too quickly on NetSuite. At Lime, even though I thought we needed something to replace QuickBooks quickly because we're 40 subsidiaries, I should have looked to do a full RFP — that's a big system. Little things like credit cards or AP processing — they're easier systems to put in. You want to spend a little bit more time on a huge ERP decision than a smaller, transactional type of software.

Q

What information was most important to communicate across the company?

A

Most early-stage companies only care about payroll costs because that's 90% of their cash flow. They want really robust headcount reporting, which is not generally in the accounting system at all. Most analysis is just around your headcount. Then you graduate because marketing spend will explode next, and you'll want optics into that.

> **"For me in finance, the issue is to ensure visibility to various data sources."**

You've got customer data that might sit in Salesforce, you've got vendor data that might sit outside of your ERP, you've got credit card transactions that usually aren't coded at all by a vendor but coded instead by the accounts team or the department that they're associated with, you've got banking transactions that are ACH debits. You look at the sources of everything and extract that into both a full picture and also segmented by vendor, by customer, or by P&L. There are cool tools that are doing this today — the Mosaics of the world for FP&A, and Airbase for all non-payroll spend. Reporting is only as good as what goes into the ERP.

> **"I keep telling the heads of these companies, since the output is really what you need, that you need to focus on the input."**

Q

What allows someone to be successful in a hypergrowth environment?

A

When you join a company at the early stages, you have a lot more influence over the tech stack. You also have less red tape to go through. If I went to Google today, in whatever role, I would not change the systems — they're so embedded within everything they do. There are probably very few things that I could do to influence their tech stack. Whereas in a 50-person startup, you have a lot more leeway to say, "Hey, CEO, here's my recommendation, this is how much it would cost and how much we would save in money, time, and effort."

Having that ability to get in early and have that foresight wasn't as apparent to me at Pinterest as it was at later startups. After I'd seen it multiple times before, I knew where we needed to go and that we had to get there fast. If we didn't, I knew the pain we would be facing.

> **"When you grow beyond your capacity to do the transactional pieces, you can't get any of the information that you need. You're probably manual and you're probably not enjoying your job."**

Q What does it feel like to build a career in the chaotic, fast-paced startup environment?

A If your company is doing well, it's exhilarating — I think that's why you live for the high-risk, high-reward startup life. When your company is not doing well, it feels like a grind and it's frustrating. It's always important to take a step back and ask, "How could I spend more time doing things that are going to help make the business better?" I left Pinterest too early and I always regretted that decision. I was doing too much work below my level, because we didn't have the types of tools that are available today. I was manually moving data from system to system. Freeing up that time means doing a lot more things at, or above, your level.

> **"Today, careers are really made by leveraging the right tools to further your learning and contribute insights and analysis, rather than doing low-value manual tasks."**

Q As an investor now, how do you translate your past experiences into the startups you support?

A We actually incubate startups that we've founded ourselves. Even though I run the venture capital side of our business, I actually run eight startups as well. I'm not necessarily using every tool that I would prefer. Given the size or the cash position of some of these earlier-stage companies, we may default to a tool that's free — start off scrappy then eventually upgrade to what we really want. There are core things that I've got systematized, like payroll and QuickBooks.

> **"We're trying to get to a point where we put in the same tech stack for every company."**

Q So even as an investor, do you plan to continue to play an operational role?

A Of course! I'm always gonna roll my sleeves up and be involved in running these companies. I love it.

03 Katie Slattery,
Fivetran Corporate Controller.

Fivetran

About Fivetran.

A leader in automated data integration, Fivetran delivers ready-to-use connectors that automatically adapt as schemas and APIs change, ensuring consistent, reliable access to data. The company automates the process of integrating data from various sources, like NetSuite or Salesforce, into cloud-based data warehouses, like Snowflake, Amazon Redshift, Microsoft Azure, and Google BigQuery.

Timeline:

2012 — Company founded.

NOV 2017 — Seed funding round raises $3.4M.

SEP 2019 — SERIES B — Funding round raises $44M.

JUN 2020 — SERIES C

SEP 2021 — SERIES D — Funding round raises $565M at $5.6B valuation.

Investors:

Fivetran's investors include Andreessen Horowitz, Catalyst, CEAS Investments, Matrix Partners, ICONIQ Capital, D1 Capital Partners, and YC Continuity.

Q You joined Fivetran this year. Was that like jumping into a rushing river?

A I'd have it no other way — multiple active projects, a lean team, outstanding technical assessments, and more. At the stage I joined Fivetran (Series C), a good foundation had already been laid, so it was my responsibility to take things to the next level — to bring operational excellence and scalability to the global accounting and tax operations, so that the accounting organization could support anything that was thrown its way. This past year, Fivetran has grown exponentially across revenue, operations, and headcount. It's imperative that the infrastructure we build now can support the company as it continues to multiply in size.

"Over the course of several months, our valuation jumped over 5 fold, from $1.2B to $5.6B. The pace at which we operate is extremely fast, but this forces efficiency and high performance across all areas, leading to a more engaging and rewarding environment at the company."

Q In that type of explosive environment, how do you prioritize?

A **"I can't overstate how important it is to prioritize and effectively manage your time. This is the difference between sinking or swimming in this role."**

You can't avoid juggling multiple tasks and projects — it just comes with the role. This means that effective prioritization is key to execution. Mentally plot tasks on an X and Y axis of urgency and importance. Those that are both get your time, those that are neither don't, and those that fall in between need further assessment or more information before taking up space on your calendar.

Our accounting organization's goal is to achieve operational excellence. Creating and sticking to a roadmap that prioritizes critical infrastructure — processes, systems, people — is how we're going to achieve it. Otherwise, we risk falling into firefighting mode, which gets in the way of achieving any substantial growth.

Q

With this deliberate mindset of operational excellence, where did you focus your energy and efforts when you first came in?

A

Processes, people, systems. First, assess the current processes. By understanding the who, what, why, when, and how, your hiring needs will quickly become very apparent. I'm a firm believer in the power of documenting processes, even if it's only a few short bullet points. This makes dissecting and identifying gaps a lot easier.

> **"Hiring and cultivating a high-performing team is no easy feat. You can make very little progress alone, so it's important to acknowledge that you're only as strong as the team that supports you."**

Since joining Fivetran, I've invested a substantial amount of time in growing the team, and it's one of the most rewarding aspects of the job. The current job market has made the search for top talent particularly challenging but it's worth taking your time to find the right hires and, meanwhile, focusing on the strengths of your existing team so you can encourage them to be better versions of themselves.

Startups need to focus on getting the right systems in place early, and automating processes wherever possible. We started with building simple systematic solutions to process high-voume transactions — e.g., vendor bills, employee expenses, and customer invoices. Next, we switched our attention to automating our financial reporting by better leveraging our ERP and data analysis tools. We're consistently updating our processes to support Fivetran's growth, so how we rely on our systems is also always changing.

Q

Can you share an example of how you funnel down the higher-level company goals to make these applicable to your team?

A

I think it's really important to bridge the connection between Fivetran's higher-level company goals and the team-level goals of the accounting organization. Without this bridge, your team risks missing the bigger picture and seeing how their day-to-day wins have a positive impact on the company's ability to move forward.

A large part of my role is information gathering — to be able to understand and communicate priorities to the team. I must understand the business and the direction it wants to go — new products, M&A, etc., maintain strong relationships and communicate frequently with other team leaders across the company, and ask the difficult questions (and sometimes the obvious ones, as more often than not nobody else has asked them!). Ultimately, it's important to not operate in a silo.

Q

Once priorities are set, how do you go about tackling them?

A

You start your day with a to-do list that generally goes out the window by about 9:30 am. Something that I learned with experience is to accept the dynamic environment — it's going to change, and that's okay. The key is to reprioritize frequently and remain flexible to the unpredictable issues that come your way. That said, it's important to learn how to say "no" to things that you don't see as being critical or important — otherwise you risk getting overloaded and ultimately getting nothing done.

> **"You just need to know that being flexible is essential to surviving and, in fluid situations, I think it's important to over-communicate."**

Q

Can you tell us a little bit about how that communication takes place?

A

We communicate with regular meetings, both one-on-one and standups, that serve as a round table of what everyone is working on. We all agree that this is a priority, and then we level set for the week, and we check in constantly during that time. There are good tools to use for this challenge of prioritizing.

> **"As companies grow and become more solid in their operations, priority setting can be easier, but, for now, it's something we review every single day."**

We have a full running list of everything that we need to get done, which is not just close related, but also the things that go beyond closing the books, which I call the value-add stuff. We rate the priorities as high, medium, and low, we assign to individuals, we come up with a proposed due date or deadline, and have everyone participate in this. Then we track everything. I've used tools for that purpose in the past, but we always default back to a simple spreadsheet or workbook.

Q

What systems were in place when you joined? Was the tech stack what you wanted, or did you need to make changes?

A

I was fortunate enough to have NetSuite already in place. It was not only implemented, but there was a good foundation laid within it, meaning an organized chart of accounts. The key to a chart of accounts is not only the numbering and making sure it's logical and in compliance with GAAP, but also to keep it small — you should have rules and a strategy around your GL quantity. Only create new ones where you have materiality and volume. My boss, who set that foundation, learned the hard way over the years. So, fortunately, I came into a very good foundation, which was important given the amount of work we needed to do.

Q

Were there other systems in place, or ones that you set up?

A

We were using some external systems. However, some of these were too limited in features for our stage of growth, so I've made some changes in recent months. Our goal with systems is to keep the stack short, and centralize processes under a small umbrella of tools.

> **"When I think about growth, it's all about being able to pull the data that we need from our systems. The more sophisticated ones come with a lot of pre-made reports that are very useful."**

Q

New softwares and automated functions are becoming integral to hypergrowth companies. Do you think it's possible to have too many, or do you automate as much as you can?

A

> **"I think that the ideal game here, certainly for me, is to not be spread across multiple systems, to avoid syncing issues, and to consolidate functions under one roof to the greatest extent possible."**

The ERPs have traditionally been quite poor in terms of the additional modules outside of basic core accounting. So, for things like procurement, or payroll, for example, we usually go to external vendors. They generally offer an easy plug-in, flexibility, and definitely a better UI, so the whole experience is just a lot better for us.

I've consolidated our procurement into one system with Airbase, which handles both domestic and international payments. We're working on an FP&A tool for forecasting and budgeting, and our CRM, Salesforce, is also plugged into NetSuite. Now we've outgrown our payroll system, so we're actually negotiating with a new company with possible implementation later this year. That will be a very large project. It will take a lot of targeted efforts between People Ops and Accounting, but it needs to happen.

Q

You mentioned that getting the right people is essential to your success. Can you tell me about your team and how much of your time is devoted to building it.

A

I probably spend about 30% of my time on hiring new people. My team just grew by quite a large amount — we're currently up to 12 as the result of a recent acquisition. We have plans to grow even further, mainly due to the recent jump in our valuation.

> **"One of the more fun parts of the role is when we start to bring on the key players to take on leadership roles, and then I can step away and step up to focus on more strategic issues, as well as my own career growth."**

However, especially in the COVID era, hiring is particularly challenging. There are fewer people willing to make a move. I don't know what it is, but people don't seem to have their eyes and ears open to upcoming startups as much as they did in the past. I feel that's not really happening right now. I think people are maybe just less inclined to jump ship.

Q

What would you say is a key learning for you from your experience in this hypergrowth environment?

A

When I started out, it was asking for help. As things are so dynamic and changing every single day, you can't be expected to know it all.

> **"I certainly put pressure on myself and viewed asking for help as a sign of weakness. Actually it couldn't be further from the truth."**

So, now one question I ask each person on my team is, "How can I help you?" I'm trying to get them into that mindset, especially at a startup where you don't have the support of extensive internal resources. Whether hiring or solving other problems, it's putting in the work — doing your own sourcing, tapping into your network, finding others with expertise, really investing the time.

Q

Any career advice to others looking to play a controller's role in a hypergrowth company?

A

Broadly speaking, to anyone in my position or wanting to be, it is making sure that you steer your own career and chart your own path. Make sure that you know that you have the reins and use whatever it is that makes you tick as your driver.

"For me, that's problem-solving — I just love problem-solving. The startup environment is just a massive problem to solve."

Q

Any final advice to surviving and even thriving in this environment?

A

"You need to know the importance of setting goals and planning. It's very easy to get caught up in the day-to-day and, as I've said, the firefighting, which kind of forces you to look backward instead of forward. Accountants are not naturally educated to look forward — that's normally thought of as an FP&A function. As a controller, it's absolutely vital and essential."

So, I listen to the business, and I develop our key goals for my department. From there, I develop day-to-day tasks, while always having a reference point to go back to. It's important to know why you're doing what you're doing, otherwise it's too easy to just get lost in the mix. Then you don't achieve your goals. You don't want to look back and ask, "What the hell happened over the last three months? What did I actually achieve?"

04 Jason Lopez,
Lattice Controller.

Lattice

About Lattice.

Lattice works with People teams across the globe to turn employees into high performers, managers into leaders, and companies into the best places to work.

Timeline:

OCT 2015		Company founded.
MAR 2016		Seed funding round raises $2.8M.
APR 2019	SERIES B	Funding round raises $15M.
OCT 2019	SERIES C	
JUL 2020	SERIES D	
MAR 2021	SERIES E	Funding round raises $60M at $1B valuation.

Investors:

Lattice's investors include Tiger Global, Shasta Ventures, Thrive Capital, Y Combinator, and Alexis Ohanian (co-founder and Executive Chairman of Reddit).

Q It's been a meteoric rise since you joined Lattice. Can you tell us a little bit about what that's been like?

A I've never been at a startup this early that has scaled this fast. I joined after what I would describe as Lattice having already blasted off from the launch pad. Now we've exited the atmosphere and it's amazing. I've worked at other startups, joining as the first accounting person and bringing that function in-house. It's fun to see that things are working — things planned last year now bearing fruit. It's gratifying, and kind of amazing, that it's working so well.

Q And, when you came in, how did you prioritize what needed to be done?

A Luckily, Lattice already had some well-established processes when I joined. A third-party accounting service was working to automate many of the bookkeeping functions. It meant we had pretty good records, and the books were fairly clean. I've been in other situations where it's just a mess, and you have to do a lot of cleanup.

Q With Lattice already automating certain accounting functions, did you find you had time to focus on other areas? What were they?

A The organization at Lattice meant I could immediately start thinking about how we should scale, how I could build the processes around it, and how I could automate as much as possible. I prefer to build with automation rather than hire too many people. Of course, if we scale to some multiple, then we can add someone, but it will be just one or two people, not four or five, and then we just let the wonderful technology that exists today do the work for us.

Q When you talk about scale, are you looking at headcount, revenue, or both? Do you have a plan for each?

A For accounting, at Lattice, it's revenue. We tend to operate based on lower dollar amount, higher volume invoicing. It's a lot of transactions to handle. That's going to cause the biggest issues for us — as the number of invoices we're covering more than triples, we need automated invoicing and collection systems. All of these considerations are tied to revenue, so, typically, that is going to come first before the headcount expansion.

Q

Does that mean you focus on AR automation?

A

Yes and no. We have a lot of expense reports that slow us down. So we're looking at the individual functions that roll up into accounting, and then asking, "How do I automate in a way that anticipates our plans for growth?"

> **"Over my career, I've learned that I can't just build something that works for now, it also needs to work in a year or two years' time, even if that makes it a little more difficult to build."**

Q

What are your main criteria for choosing a tech stack?

A

When I joined Lattice, we had already planned to migrate to NetSuite from QuickBooks, so any software I was choosing had to integrate with NetSuite. I've joined other companies where NetSuite was two or three years away and the integration issue wasn't as important.

> **"Beyond integration to the GL, it's about how much time the software will save me."**

How painless is the implementation? How easy is it to use? If it's facing the employees in the rest of the company, how easy is it for them to use? How flexible is it? Does it meet our business needs? Obviously, the price gets mixed in there as well. But really, if a task is taking me 10 hours a month to do and this software cuts it down to two hours, that frees up a full extra day during the month!

> **"The primary thing I'm looking at is how much time I can save and then how scalable it is."**

Q Can you explain your automation mindset?

A It comes from thinking that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. So, even though you're in the weeds, buried in details, you have to have the ability to step back and be critical.

> **"It's very easy to get into the habit of thinking this is just how we do it. It gets done and then I don't worry about it for a month. But, six months or a year down the road, you're just gonna collapse, because that approach isn't going to scale with the company."**

Even if you don't double in size you should prepare for it anyway. I still want to automate as much as I can.

Constant evaluation can add some time, it helps to see where the pain points are. I started my career at PricewaterhouseCoopers and I was used to doing long hours on tasks that really should have been automated. Now that I'm in a position to automate them, I do. You can't work 100 hour weeks over the long haul.

I try to get to the point of having a continuous close — where you're constantly syncing your bank, your cash transactions, your AP transactions, your billing. That way, when you get to the end of the month, it's not a huge loop of stuff you have to do. We've been updating throughout the whole month.

Q You're a team of three. Do you think you could have managed the volumes with such a small team five years ago?

A I don't think so. Especially because now software solutions can increasingly talk to each other. I don't think that was the understanding five years ago. Back then, the system didn't connect with anything. If it did connect, it was a horrible, manual process, or setting up an API. The growth of software, the available options, and the SaaS model itself have made that scalability possible within this kind of lean startup methodology.

Q How has your company's culture facilitated growth?

A

> "Startups are always building the plane while in flight. The company culture is essential to help steer it through this type of rapid change."

At Lattice, we have a culture focused around onboarding — we're not just going to dump all this stuff on you. We're going to give you the space and the time you need to actually be successful, get your arms around everything, and to have a proper transition plan — not just throw you to the wolves.

Having that mindset of growth and planning for growth at Lattice, and knowing where we want to get to, is also pretty key. It doesn't happen spontaneously — it's an actual plan. I don't think it's an accident that we've grown as fast as we have.

We're also a pretty egoless culture. There's not a lot of politics. The focus is on the company, not the individual. That culture facilitates collaboration and mutual support. If you make a mistake, the attitude is that we'll work it out.

Thankfully, we have a company that really works well together. I won't say it's a well-oiled machine, but all the parts are working like they should and plans are working like they should. It's because of planning that was done a year ago, two years ago, three years ago. It wasn't reactionary, it was planning ahead.

> "The culture is to think about where we want to be and build that way. As you do that, you're avoiding a lot of firefighting."

Q

What types of risks were most important for you to get control over?

A

Most startups have a kind of “Wild West” feel to them. This is particularly noticeable around expenses — you don’t really have advanced visibility into what people are spending, you’re just tracking it. There’s not the same rigor, processes, policies, and standards found in a later-stage company. There are several risks that you need to set up controls for in the early stages. For example, how do we build a procurement policy and processes that manage procurement risks, like vendor security for software purchases? And then there’s risks around invoicing. How do I ensure that invoices are being set up properly and feeding correctly into the system for revenue recognition?

Q

What tech stack did you inherit?

A

We use Stripe for subscription management, invoicing, and collections. I’ve never used Stripe at this scale, or this volume, and it’s definitely creaking. We’re getting to a point where we’ll probably transition from them to a real SaaS billing software. We already had an employee expense reimbursement system, we already had an AP system, we had the ERP. Our AP wasn’t really connected to the ERP — so I thought, that’s low-hanging fruit to fix.

One of the biggest issues for our close was credit card spend, because it was booked entirely manually — there was no automation there. We were a company of 120 people spending a lot of money. It would take a day and a half to get card transactions booked in. I had worked with Airbase and knew I could cut that time by approximately 80% to 90%, and do so in a way that’s much more scalable.

Q What was the smartest thing you did when you look back?

A Hiring when we did and the way we did it — it was the perfect timing. I was inclined to hire a person I'd previously worked with and I knew they could do the job. Instead, we did a full interview process with a panel from across the company. The panel gave constructive feedback, and directed us to a different candidate. We moved faster on the hire than I might have, but not waiting until I was bogged down to hire gave me time to plan and collaborate with the rest of the company on other efforts.

> **"A new person can give you a new perspective, especially if they ask why you are doing something a certain way, or by suggesting a better way to do it."**

Just having that second set of eyes can be a huge gain.

Q What was the biggest mistake you feel like you made?

A We didn't do a good enough job looking at software alternatives for a problem we were solving. We basically took a person's word for it. Then we realized it was a really heavy lift for us to master an overly complex system really fast. I really wish I had followed a true procurement process, looked at all the alternatives, and thought about what was really best for us at that point.

Perhaps we bought this too early, we could have waited two or three years for this solution, we could have found an intermediate one, and then gone into this solution. We're still grappling with it — we're not going to switch because, eventually, we'll need all of the functionality.

> **"It's important to anticipate your future requirements but still understand today's needs and capacities — be thoughtful about it and really plan it out."**

Q What's your best piece of advice for fast-growing companies?

A

> **"Take time to enjoy the ride. Don't get lost in the weeds too early, build for your future self. Because if it's painful for you now, it's gonna be super painful in a year."**