

# The Breakout List, 2015

**If you join a company, my general advice is to join a company on a breakout trajectory.**  
*Sam Altman, President at Y Combinator*

The Breakout List shows great companies to join.

Who is the list for?

**The list is not for venture capitalists, or salespeople. While they use the list, the priority is for the list to be useful to ambitious engineers/other people working in tech.** Salespeople and venture capitalists — I would suggest Mattermark or Datafox or similar, both of which are great.

The goal of this list is to help you choose a company where you will be exposed to the best people and best opportunities.

## Why these companies?

Disclaimer (stolen from Marc Andreessen)

- “These posts are aimed at high-potential people who want to excel throughout their careers and make a significant impact on their fields and the world. These posts are not appropriate for people for whom work/life balance is a high priority or for whom lifestyle is particularly important – if that’s you, there are plenty of existing career planning resources for you already!”

“Optimize at all times for being in the most dynamic and exciting pond you can find. That is where the great opportunities can be found.”

**“Apply this rule when selecting which company to go to. Go to the company where all the action is happening.”**

Let’s combine this with some advice from Charlie Munger. Charlie would tell us to look for a ‘lollapalooza’ — where we have multiple factors at once.

## Relevant factors that cause a company to have a lot of ‘action happening’

- breakout revenue growth (i.e. what the breakout list currently shows)
- exceptional team (e.g. experts at front of field)
- exceptional team (“famous”/repeat successful founders)
- high energy market
- really strong recruiting brand / engineering bar perception
- something that is somehow at the centre of customers’ lives
  - side note — this is applying the small fig big pond to startup idea selection. better to go and sit at the very center, to do the hardest schlep, because then you are just in the middle of everything and it’s great

## What Are The Best Companies to Join?

*What is this optimizing for? Maximal exposure to the best people and most interesting projects, not just in this company but over the next 30-40-50 years.*

Remember, this is a very different list to last time.

### Super early

- **Socotra**

- <https://www.socotra.com/>
- San Francisco
- Strong engineering mentorship
- Full of entrepreneurial team members (~3 of Socotra's ~6 engineers have started companies)
- Extremely strong network (Joe Lonsdale et al), Dan is very active about ensuring team members are exposed to his network

- **Magic**

- <https://getmagicnow.com/>
- San Francisco
- High frequency of use
- High activity market
- Would be useful to know their customer retention numbers if you were thinking of going there
- See also: Operator, also based in SF (<https://operator.com/>)

- **Airtable**

- <https://airtable.com/>
- San Francisco
- High freq of use
- High activity market (new business collab tools)

- **Benchling**

- <https://benchling.com/>
- San Francisco
- Central in high activity market (biotech)
- Extremely strong team

- **Affinity**

- <https://affinity.co/>
- Redwood City
- Team (repeat founders)

- High energy market
- **The Artist Union**
  - <https://theartistunion.com/>
  - <http://justinkan.com/be-the-first-ios-developer-for-the-artist-union>
  - San Francisco
  - Team (repeat founders)
- **Comma.ai**
  - <http://comma.ai/>
  - <http://comma.ai/hiring.html>
  - reading: <http://www.bloomberg.com/features/2015-george-hotz-self-driving-car/>, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/05/07/machine-politics>
  - San Francisco
  - Team
  - High activity market
- **Gigster**
  - <https://www.trygigster.com/>; <https://jobs.lever.co/gigster>
  - San Francisco
  - Strong growth
  - High activity market
- **Triplebyte**
  - <https://triplebyte.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - Team (repeat founders)
  - Center of customers' lives (for companies, hiring good people is generally #1 priority)

## Early

- **Opendoor**
  - <https://www.opendoor.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - could reach massive scale with very few changes from how they currently operate, just increased scale
  - one of the strongest teams in silicon valley, almost certainly the strongest at their size (when they were 20 people, ~6 of the employees had started companies that sold for >\$10mm)
- **Angellist**
  - <https://angel.co/>

- San Francisco, NYC
- high activity in SV ecosystem
- repeat founders
- solid revenue growth
- extreme culture of self-management, you'll either like this or you won't!
- **Diane Greene & Mendel Rosenblum NewCo**
  - San Francisco and Los Altos, 2 days/week at each office.
  - 36 people
  - extremely strong network
  - repeat founders
  - edit: since time of writing has been acquired by Google
- **Quip**
  - <https://quip.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - central to customers' lives
  - repeat founders
  - extremely strong network
  - extremely high engineering bar
- **Soylent**
  - <https://www.soylent.com/>
  - Los Angeles
  - central to customers' lives
  - strong revenue growth
  - if you like soylent, strongly worth considering...
- **Color Genomics**
  - <https://getcolor.com/>
  - Burlingame (mid-peninsula)
  - extremely strong founder network (Elad Gil)
  - high activity market
  - exceptional team

## Mid-size

- **Blend Labs**
  - <https://blendlabs.com/>
  - San Francisco

- exceptional founders
- **Checkr**
  - <https://checkr.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - strong revenue
  - high energy market
- **Wealthfront**
  - <https://www.wealthfront.com/>
  - Palo Alto
  - strong revenue growth
  - exceptional team
- **Affirm**
  - <https://www.affirm.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - exceptional team
- **Docker**
  - <https://www.docker.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - central to customers' lives
  - high activity market
- **Wish**
  - <https://www.wish.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - extremely unique founders
  - strong revenue growth
- **DoorDash**
  - <https://www.doordash.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - central to customers' lives
  - high activity market
- **Meteor**
  - <https://www.meteor.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - exceptional team
  - high activity market
- **Medium**

- <https://medium.com/>
- San Francisco
- frequency of use
- exceptional founder/team
- **Clever**
  - <https://clever.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - central to lives
  - high energy market
- **Reddit**
  - <https://www.reddit.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - central to lives
- **Asana**
  - <https://asana.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - strong revenue growth
  - central to lives
  - exceptional founders/team
- **Oscar Health**
  - <https://www.hioscar.com/>
  - NYC
  - strong revenue growth (though also very strong growth in losses, like many companies)
  - high energy market
- **Quora**
  - <https://www.quora.com/>
  - Mountain View
  - strong talent brand
  - central to some customers' lives
- **Zenefits**
  - <https://www.zenefits.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - strong revenue growth
- **Gusto (formerly ZenPayroll)**
  - <https://gusto.com/>

- San Francisco
- strong revenue growth
- **BuzzFeed**
  - <http://www.buzzfeed.com/>
  - NYC
  - strong revenue growth
  - central to lives
- **Magic Leap**
  - <http://www.magicleap.com/#/home>
  - Mountain View
  - high energy market
- **Teespring**
  - <http://teespring.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - strong revenue growth
  - high energy market
  - product central to customers' lives (sellers, not buyers)
- **Intercom**
  - <https://www.intercom.io/>
  - Dublin, Ireland (!) and San Francisco
  - high energy market
  - strong revenue growth
- **Stripe**
  - <https://stripe.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - strong team
  - strong talent brand
- **Slack**
  - <https://slack.com/>
  - San Francisco
  - strong team/founders
  - high energy market
  - super high frequency of use/centrality to customers lives
  - strong revenue growth
- **Lyft**
  - <https://www.lyft.com/>

- San Francisco
- high energy market
- strong revenue growth
- Yes, Uber exists. Watch this space though. Uber is getting slaughtered in China (~10% mkt share), and it looks like the influential Chinese may push for Lyft to win over Uber.

Added December 19 2015: For more companies at this stage that hit the 'revenue growth' metric (some may hit other metrics and therefore have multiple factors going for them, too), see: <https://blog.wealthfront.com/2016-career-launching-companies-list/>

*Thank you to the individual who suggested adding this link.*

## Later stage

- **Uber**

- <https://www.uber.com/>
- Yes, Uber is later stage, but...
- Still massive revenue growth
- Great company brand
- Operating at the center of customers' lives (high use frequency in many cases)
- So much action happening at Uber. If you go there now, there's probably 1000 engineers, in a few years there'll be thousands more. Oh, and the company will IPO soon and create a ton of millionaires who will go off and do new things, and start angel investing, etc.
- Even more true at: **Uber Advanced Technologies Center (Pittsburgh)**
  - <http://www.uberatc.com/hiring/>

- **Pinterest**

- <https://www.pinterest.com/>
- San Francisco
- strong revenue growth

- **Airbnb**

- <https://www.airbnb.com/>
- San Francisco
- If you like the mission but think Airbnb is too late, reconsider. They are still growing revenue at impressive rates.

## Weird companies

*i.e. ones you probably didn't consider, but if you examine there is a ton of action going on at these companies*



For all of these, this specifically means the investment arms, *not* one of the investments themselves.

- **Expa**
  - <http://expa.com/>
  - San Francisco, NYC
- **Andreessen Horowitz**
  - <http://a16z.com/>
  - Menlo Park
- **Y Combinator**
  - <http://www.ycombinator.com/>
  - SF
  - Edit: Since the time of writing, YC is now explicitly hiring engineers.
  - <https://blog.ycombinator.com/y-combinator-is-hiring-hackers>
- **Betaworks**
  - <https://betaworks.com/products/>
  - NYC

## Teams/Large Companies

- **Facebook AI Lab** (as one example within Facebook, there are definitely others too)
- **DeepMind** within Google
- **Tesla**, on self driving/driver assistance teams
  - Edit: since writing this, Elon notes
  - @elonmusk: Ramping up the Autopilot software team at Tesla to achieve generalized full autonomy. If interested, contact [autopilot@teslamotors.com](mailto:autopilot@teslamotors.com).
  - @elonmusk: We are looking for hardcore software engineers. No prior experience with cars required. Please include code sample or link to your work.
  - @elonmusk: Should mention that I will be interviewing people personally and Autopilot reports directly to me. This is a super high priority.
  - <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/667516705116065792>
- **Google Self Driving Car** team, or any of the projects that were in X recently
- **Google APM** (network, high bar)

## Other

- Many investing firms also fit the “high action” requirement, though in these cases role is more important. The high action part in VC firms is the investment team. For VC, say that this includes the tier one and “high tier two” firms, i.e. Roughly
  - Sequoia
  - Benchmark
    - note: also since writing this, Bill Gurley tweeted
    - Opportunity to work inside walls of @benchmark. Looking for curious/intelligent LinkedIn Ninja. To apply: [linkedinninja@benchmark.com](mailto:linkedinninja@benchmark.com)
    - <https://twitter.com/bgurley/status/672535054271168512>
  - Andreessen Horowitz
  - Greylock
    - note: since writing this Greylock posted <https://medium.com/@greylockvc/greylock-is-hiring-for-our-investment-team-c6f33a1a51bf>
  - KPCB
  - Accel
  - Founder’s Fund
  - Eight Ventures (Lonsdale new firm)
  - Social Capital
  - Khosla Ventures
  - General Catalyst
  - Spark Capital
  - LSVP
- Companies operating in important areas like energy ([Helion](#), [UPower](#), [Bright](#))
- Companies working on high action areas like self driving cars, things related to smart-phones in emerging markets, CRISPR (e.g. Editas and Stemcentrx). *Thanks to Ashwin for suggestion re: CRISPR, Dec 21 2015.*
- Many other companies on the Q2 list, for example Radius, Adatao, Illumio

Don’t go and apply to all of these fucking companies!!!


Look at the offer checklists, and do the life purpose questions.

### Have multiple offers and can’t choose?


- Check the offer checklists below
- Consider going wherever you respect and admire the people the most (especially your manager and the CEO)
- Email [editor@breakoutlist.com](mailto:editor@breakoutlist.com) if you’d like an opinion, or to contribute your choice and rationale (we’d love to hear it)

## What is *not* on this list:

- A random startup that isn't growing revenue absurdly fast (if they expect to go from \$1mm to \$20mm revenue this year, then ignore my other advice and go there, and then tell me what company it is), or doesn't have some of the other factors described above
- Google, Facebook, Palantir — *unless* you are working on some insanely action packed area within the company. e.g. Facebook AI lab
- I'll say it again — avoid random startups! In the words of Sam Altman, “unless you are getting multiple percent of equity, **it's usually a bad deal to join an early-stage startup that hasn't yet found product-market fit** and the resulting growth (there is a big exception here for hard tech startups that will take a long time to produce a product but be incredibly valuable if they're able to).”



	Small (0-40)	Medium (40-800)	Large (800+)
Your role	Many roles	Generalist	Specialist
What you'll learn	0 -> 1	Scaling	Best Practices
Autonomy	Do what needs to be done	High level mandate	Clear direction
Product influence	Eng/pm hybrids	Involved in planning	Receive plans
Agency	Choose (or start) your team	Choose among some teams	Assigned a team
Access to information	Everything is discussed openly	Lots of information available	Information carefully controlled
Mentorship	Ad-hoc	Mentors, buddies, bootcamps	"XYZ University"
Financial return	Low salary + very high potential upside	Reasonable salary + high potential upside	Very high salary + low potential upside



Source: *Dustin Moskovitz*.

## How to approach job search at small/unstructured/weird companies?

*E.g. venture firms that don't do a lot of hiring, many small startups, etc.*

The below is assuming that:

- a) The firm doesn't have a regular hiring process for the sort of role you want
- b) You don't know someone reasonably well who can give you a *good* introduction (has to be a strong introduction, I think that a weak introduction is worse than a cold email in many cases)

1. Go through whichever of the purpose exercise questions seem relevant
2. Build a list of all the possible companies, assuming some amazing ideal world where anything is possible. Don't limit your options artificially.
3. Go through each of those companies, and look at all the people you would be working with
  - a. Make a massive list
  - b. Do a ton of research on all the people

- c. Look for people who are most likely to be biased in your favor. What does this mean in practice? Often they are similar to you (similar background, involved in similar things at your age, etc), interested in similar things (do you read a lot of the same books?)
4. Reach out to the people who are most likely to be biased in your favor, and make it about something small, where it's not really asking for any favors from them. A question you had related to a book you have both read. Or something that they wrote about.
  - a. Make it something that they would enjoy answering
  - b. And something that they can answer quickly
  - c. Write the email as if it was to a friend of a friend, perhaps. If you'd be informal in language to a friend of a friend, be informal (exceptions apply, of course).
  - d. Make it really short, ideally <4 sentences or so
5. Follow the same approach when you meet them. Try and think about how you can be valuable to them. Perhaps they are someone who loves giving back — in that case, showing them how eager you are to learn may be key. Perhaps they love learning about interesting arcane things from history — talk about some of them!
6. Some time in the future, follow up more formally about some kind of working relationship.
  - a. When you do this, the general advice is to view the situation from their perspective
  - b. Why would they be interested in hiring you?
  - c. Why wouldn't they?
  - d. What are their 1-2 priorities that they wished they could work on but never make the time for?
  - e. What do you think are their 1-3 core priorities that they actually spend time on?
  - f. How can you demonstrate (ideally through action, not words) that you can add value to the above?
  - g. For example
    - i. At a venture firm that doesn't hire many people, they would be interested in hiring you if they think you are excellent, won't need much management/oversight, that you'd likely be able to do this stuff on your own, but you'd benefit from being inside their firm
      1. One man came to Mozart and asked him how to write a symphony. Mozart replied, "You are too young to write a symphony." The man said, "You were writing symphonies when you were 10 years of age, and I am 21." Mozart said, "Yes, but I didn't run around asking people how to do it." - h/t to Charlie Munger, then Tren Griffin, then Chris Dixon
    - ii. They wouldn't want to hire you if they think you won't be a good investment of their time (i.e. that you won't add more long term value to them/the firm), i.e. that you aren't likely to either found a 'great' company or source great deals, or similar. They wouldn't want to hire you if they think they'd have to bring you up to speed on too many of the basics. They (often) wouldn't want to hire you if they think you haven't thought through why you want to work in VC (many VCs, for

reasonable reasons, like discouraging people who haven't already sold companies for hundreds of millions of dollars away from working in venture).

- iii. Their 1-2 priorities that they wished they spent more time on might be around giving back to the ecosystem that helped them, or certain philanthropic causes.
- iv. Their 1-3 (4 listed) core priorities that they actually spent time on would likely be a) boosting their presence to generate more inbound/referral deal flow, b) helping their existing companies, c) seeing deals (although be aware that the top firms tend to pretty much see everything, so unless you have a very specific/unique dealflow source, like perhaps you worked in a very specific lab or something like this, it can be hard to be additive initially) d) making the right decisions on companies / avoiding regrets / winning deals.

## What questions should I ask my interviewers?

See the 'Offer Checklists' below.

At the end of your interview process, you *need* to know the answers to the following questions:

- Are there people in this group that I want to be working with in 20 years? (Before asking this question, make sure you give people a chance to show their interestingness, either by looking up their profiles/websites online, or asking them many questions when you meet them)
- Do I respect and admire the people I'd be working with/for? (Charlie Munger)
  - Added December 20 2015: As an example, a large factor of this for me would be assessing how much and how quickly the person is learning. One simple instantiation of this is to ask both the CEO and your future manager what books they've read in the past 6 months, and who they receive advice/mentorship from.
- Does the world/people want this, and will they continue to want it over the next 10+ years? (Big difference between what is valuable and what people want. i.e. perhaps reading for two hours a day is more valuable than spending two hours on Facebook, but looking at the numbers would indicate most people 'want' the latter more)
- etc.

Practically, that means looking up the bios of the people who are interviewing you, and seeing what you might admire about them. Then, give them a chance to talk about these things by asking about them!

This is especially true for the CEO in early stage, pre-product market fit companies. If you're bold enough, ask the CEO to see their calendar for the past week. Perhaps even ask to talk to one of their investors, and then use the following guide to evaluate the person: <http://blog.eladgil.com/2013/03/reference-check-candidates.html> (e.g. How would you rank Sarah relative to other people you have worked with in terms of raw productivity? What percentile would she fall under? → How would you rank CEO relative to the other CEOs you've worked with in terms of XYZ? What percentile would they fall under?)

Is this awkward? Yes.

Will it help you make a better decision on how you spend ~50% of your waking hours over the next X years? Yes.

### **Something to avoid: Not getting enough information**

Let's say that you know your #1 factor on how you are going to make your decision. It's "which company has the people that I want to be working with for the next 20 years."

For each of your company options, don't stop asking/researching until you have the data! Either 1) they don't convince you, so you shouldn't join or 2) they do convince you, so it remains an option. Avoid outcome 3) you don't ask, and you don't know!

In fact, if you think your hiring manager/contact is nice and rational and doesn't mind questions, you can consider telling them what you are trying to optimize for, directly!

A bad outcome is one where you get 4 offers, but none of the companies knew that you weren't thinking of doing something else, so they didn't help you realize why they were your best option, and so you make the wrong choice.

### **More advice:**

Marc Andreessen Career Guide

[http://pmarchive.com/guide\\_to\\_career\\_planning\\_part0.html](http://pmarchive.com/guide_to_career_planning_part0.html)

What should I do with my life?

How should I think about my career?

Should I join a startup?

etc → <http://www.breakoutcareers.com/>

## **Purpose Exercise**

View on Quip here: [Purpose Exercise, Q3](#)

Or download an editable PDF (fill it in either by printing it out, or using markup tools in Preview.app or similar):

<https://breakoutlist.com/assets/purpose-exercise-15.pdf>

## **Offer Checklists**

*This is meant to be used/written on.*

View separately on Quip here: [Offer Checklist, Q3](#)

Download a PDF of the offer checklist here:

<https://breakoutlist.com/assets/offer-checklists-15.pdf>

### **Company #0**

Company Name: \_\_\_\_\_

- Are there people in this group that I want to be working with in 20 years? (Before asking this question, make sure you give people a chance to show their interestingness, either by looking up their profiles/websites online, or asking them many questions when you meet them)
- Would I buy the product if I was the customer? (Charlie Munger, Vice Chairman of Berkshire Hathaway along with Warren Buffet, in my opinion one of the best investors in history)
- Do I respect and admire the people I'd be working with/for? (Charlie Munger)
- Do I enjoy hanging out with the people? (Charlie Munger)
- Is my future manager stellar? (Keith Rabois, added December 20 2015)
- Is the CEO a learning machine? (Numerous sources, added December 20 2015)
- Is this valuable (to the world), and going to remain valuable over the next 10+ years? (Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal, Palantir, Clarium Capital, Founders Fund, Mithril Capital)
- Does the world/people want this, and will they continue to want it over the next 10+ years? (Big difference between what is valuable and what people want. i.e. perhaps reading for two hours a day is more valuable than spending two hours on Facebook, but looking at the numbers would indicate most people 'want' the latter more)
- Am I going to be able to perform the job (well), and maintain/improve my ability to perform over the coming years? (Peter Thiel)
- Are other people not doing this, and not going to start in the next few years? Note, this question is less relevant for a mid or later stage company. (Peter Thiel)
- Is this something that I feel I am slightly unqualified to do? Note that this does not apply to an impressive role at an unimpressive company. (Marissa Mayer)
- Would it be fun to work on this and with this group? (Paul Bucheit, employee #23 at Google, creator of Gmail, YC partner)

**Assuming you have not worked (full time) at a mid-stage high growth (defined as >\$5mm gross profit, growing at >100% year over year) company:**

- Is this either a mid-stage high growth company, or an early stage company with an extraordinarily strong team and network? Obviously, if it's something that just seems really fun and interesting to you, that's great too. (Joe Lonsdale, Marc Andreessen, Andy Rachleff, etc)

**Are some of the following true: (Elad Gil, co-founder of Color Genomics, very early investor in many breakout companies, like Airbnb series A, Optimizely seed round)**

- strong network (i.e. maybe the founder was previously the COO of another really great company, or the founder was the advisor to the CEO of a big company, something like this)
- hot market (e.g. genomics, big data, saas) and/or high growth rate (>\$5mm net revenue, 100% yearly growth)
- high optionality (does it build new career capital/skills for you, or is it more of the same)
- strong brand (more important if you don't already have 1-2 strong brands like MIT CS or Google Engineer on your resume)?

- Are you less focused on both role and compensation (because even in a less important role where you earn less, if the company ends up being a far more important company you will have far more future opportunities)? (Elad Gil)
- If they have impressed you with revenue numbers, are you aware of how they are reporting revenue and the differences between for example GMV and net revenue, or revenue and bookings? (<http://a16z.com/2015/08/21/16-metrics/>)
- Have you read some/all of the pages on understanding offer letters? If not, re-read the earlier sections on 'Understanding options and equity' (<http://www.breakoutcareers.com>)
- If this is a pre-breakout company, have you read some/all of the pages on thinking like a VC? If not, check out the section 'Think like a VC.'
- Is this a 'tribe' you want to be a part of? (John Lilly, Partner at Greylock)

**“There are three types of start-ups: (Doug Leone, Sequoia Capital.)**

- 1) Ones that are so young that it's difficult to tell if the dogs are going to eat the dog food.
- 2) Ones where there's clear evidence of market pull.
- 3) Ones that are unfortunately stuck in a push market or have a very difficult product to sell. The trick is to say away from #3. You only go to #1 if you are a domain expert and you have an informed opinion on a product/market, but this is a rare trait. The real trick is to end-up in #2.”
- Does this either fit #1 with you being a domain expert, or #2?

Main notes/takeaway: \_\_\_\_\_