



# FUSE

Executive Hiring Excellence

VP of  
Technology  
(Engineering)/CTO



# STEP 1 :

## Understand the role you are hiring for + build a framework

Before you set out to hire the VP of Technology / CTO it is important to:

1. Understand the requirements + responsibilities of a modern technical leader
2. Identify the company's current needs + stage of growth
3. Attract and go after an individual that is stage appropriate

**\*\* Note: The following proposed framework is for an early-stage VP of Technology/CTO. You may need to adjust your framework based on your company's maturity. \*\***

### Overview – Requirements of a modern technical leader

**Modern engineering environment** = leveraging modern services + fast iteration

In prior decades, most companies built all product components in-house. That story has changed. In today's environment there are multitudes of preexisting services and tools that development teams can leverage to build robust products and ship quickly. As such, a VP of Technology/CTO today needs to be able to leverage all components externally available (i.e., services, platforms, cloud, open-source, etc.). **Note to CEO:** It is now a red flag if a candidate has only built things in-house. They must also have deep experience leveraging external architecture/services.

Speed is another important component in the modern development era. The role of a startup VP of Technology/CTO (at first) is associated more with rapid growth rather than long-term planning. As such, a VP of Technology/CTO needs experience shipping product features and enhancements quickly (i.e., modular design, scrum/agile, etc.) **Note to CEO:** When screening for candidates, it is important to understand the cadence of development and delivery that a potential candidate has been around - i.e., mostly quick sprints and iteration? Or larger, more time intensive lifts?

In summary, a VP of Technology/CTO needs to find the best, cheapest, and fastest way to solve the customer problem. This leader must also set up the product and product team in such a way that changes can be made more easily in the future.

## **Defining the Role:**

Of all contributors in the organization, the VP of Technology/CTO<sup>5</sup> and the Engineering team are the core of the company – as they are the key individuals executing the product build. However, product development requires other key players as well, namely the Product organization.

Let's use a physical building project as an analogy for understanding the key roles in the Product and Engineering organizations.

### **Constructing a building is analogous to a technology startup's product:**

**CTO = General Contractor;** this individual can work with both the architects (product team) and the builders (engineering team) to set the vision and support the execution from a high level. They will also bring in the practical constraints. Key nuances:

- The GC (CTO) may not be as skilled as the specialist artisan (i.e., software engineer) in a particular craft such as woodwork (i.e., software development - front end, back end, full stack, etc.) - but they can recruit the talent, recognize strong work product, know how much the work will cost, and know how long it should roughly take to complete.
- The GC (CTO) understands what needs to get done (i.e., product roadmap) and what materials (i.e., tools/services) to use. They are also aware of broader market conditions, modern building materials (i.e., tools/services), new techniques to implement, etc.

Key take away: As a "GC" of the product org, the CTO acts as both a visionary and a key orchestrator of people.

It is unlike any other role in that this leader needs to keep their contributing team happy – especially when the teams' preferred method / strategy / approach is not selected. Strong leaders in this role will align everyone on their team, inspire them to commit to a decision, and compel them to continue building.

**DISCLAIMER:** Similar to the reflection required for defining your VP of Product/CPO needs, you will also need to do similar reflection for the VP of Technology/CTO role. At the early stage, a VP of Technology/CTO may act as both the head of technology/engineering AND the head of product.

As such, ask yourself: Are you looking for a leader who is a brilliant internal & external evangelizer? Or are you looking for someone who can build and lead the team? OR do you need someone that can do both? Once you understand the ideal persona for the role, the next step is to think about how to integrate the role into your current founding team's structure + skill sets.

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<sup>5</sup> **CTO vs. VP of Technology/ Engineering\*** = In an ideal world, the CTO is the technology visionary AND responsible for leading the engineering team. However, in some cases duties may be split. I.e. there may be scenarios where a VP of Technology/Engineering leads the team and understands the product execution – and a CTO is the visionary. This is an ok scenario as well. (\*Note: The term "VP of Technology" can be used interchangeably with "VP of Engineering". There are many ways to name the role. However, there can often be distinction between a VP and CTO role.)

# STEP 2 :

## Understand the key attributes of a technical leader

**(1) Master optimizer and master estimator** – A VP of Technology/CTO's role often starts with a defined business objective. Next, they work closely with the business and product teams to define the product objectives. From there they are responsible for the technology execution. As such, this requires strong business acumen; the VP of Technology/CTO is responsible for defining the product plan and constraints in tandem with the product team – and needs to be aware of goals on the product + GTM side. They also need to build the product and run their team in a capital efficient, cost-conscious way. The VP of Technology/CTO must also be apt in translating priorities back to engineers.

In summary, this requires the VP of Technology/CTO to be skilled in leadership, but on a practical basis also requires them to be highly skilled in **estimation + optimization**:

**Master estimator** = The VP of Technology/CTO must be astute in determining what is possible and practical to execute with the product. This includes resource allocation, timeline, and any services needed. They must have a detailed understanding of the unit costs and know these costs better than the CEO. The VP of Technology/CTO also must understand the types of resources needed for a given project (i.e., software stack, services, talent to bring in-house, and/ or if talent can be outsourced).

**Master optimizer** = The VP of Technology/CTO is responsible for determining which product iterations truly matter and how they should be achieved. There are usually a multitude of ways complete a project, however a VP of Technology/CTO must ultimately make the call and align all respective parties (i.e., from product and business-operations sides of business). Moreover, the VP of Technology/CTO must be demanding in how a project is built and magnify the teams' efforts to achieve an outcome (aka find ways to achieve greater scale with existing resources).

### When screening for this area in interviews:

- How have they worked with the product team or business side of the organization in the past to define product objectives? (**Note to CEO**: acumen + experience here will separate the CTO-type versus the VP of Technology/Engineering type.)
- How do they prioritize product features that the company needs versus how much it will cost and how long it will take to ship?
- Ask: "In prior roles, how did you drive consensus building across your engineering team once a decision was made?"
- Ask: "Can you give examples where you convinced the team to use third party solutions / services and/or open source when the team preferred to build in-house?" **Note to CEO**: you want to ensure that the candidate understands the latest trends in platform technology and has astuteness for leveraging other stacks (versus the traditional method of building in-house and from scratch).
- Ask: "How do you vet suggestions that come through (i.e. for a fad, or new technology that perhaps is not appropriate to use, etc.)?"
- Ask: "How do you evaluate and prioritize new technologies that are not widely used, and unproven – but have high potential?"

**(2) High quality, rapid innovation, and cost efficient** – Modern VP of Technology/CTOs push their teams to build faster, find cost efficiencies, and continue to deliver high quality product – AND aim to do all three of these things at once. At the end of the day, quality matters most (there is a minimum baseline of quality a company must hit – i.e., product must be stable / usable). However, finding a leader who has experience tethering all three components is ideal. In the modern marketplace, companies that rapidly innovate and deliver – while keeping costs low and maintaining quality – are the ones who win.

**When screening for this area in interviews:**

- Ask about the cadence of development that the candidate has been around (i.e. quick sprints /iteration or larger lifts?)
- Ask about instances where a tradeoff was made between cost, speed, and quality – and how they prioritized (usually it is impossible to do all three at once). What were key learnings from the decision? How would they have done it differently?
- How did the candidate previously find ways to create economies of scale within their existing teams to move more quickly?

**(3) Strong leader, builder and amazing collaborator** – Every company encounters difficulty along the product building journey. However, early software companies that see long-term success are built on leaders that find ways to amplify efforts and inspire their teams. A strong VP of Technology/CTO not only builds and fosters talented engineering teams (and have crisp understanding for the talent they need to bring in), but they also need a solid technical understanding /aptitude so that they contribute directly as needed.

The role also requires **strong interpersonal and conflict management skills** as the VP of Technology/CTO works cross-functionally with the business operations-side of the business to solve problems. This leader needs to juggle multiple priorities at once and make decisions across differing points of view. They ultimately must also inspire the engineering team to align with those decisions (even if some team members still have dissenting opinions).

A strong VP of Technology/CTO must also be aware of any conflict within the company and mitigate / advocate on behalf of the engineering team. This includes carving out space for the engineering team to have creative agency in solving problems / addressing opportunities (aka, the VP of Technology/CTO must create healthy boundaries between Product & Engineering). This will increase employee satisfaction, retention, and output.

**When screening for this area in interviews:**

- Ask: “What is your style for collaborating with others in the business?” (**Note to CEO:** if their style is “top-down”, it will not work.)
- Ask: “How have you managed conflicting views between brilliant product managers and engineers? How do you influence and align both parties?”
- Ask: “How many team members in your current (or previous) company came over from prior roles with you?” (**Note to CEO:** this will elucidate if the candidate is a strong “GC” and has a bench of talent that follow them. For a CTO, this often includes a VP of Engineering candidate as well.)
- Ask about challenges the candidate had in prior companies and how they solved for them. (Another way to pose the question is to share examples of challenges in your business. Ask the candidate how they would approach these challenges from a process and team perspective.)

- Uncover if they are true builders: ask the candidate, “what are you tinkering with on the side? Any other side projects?” (**Note to CEO:** Really strong product people always work on things - even outside of their current company role. If the candidate is a true builder, this curiosity is in their DNA. If they say they do not have time, then they are not a good delegator!)

# STEP 3 :

## Build a framework for stage

**Directions:** Now that you understand the key deliverables of a strong technology leader, use this framework to understand (1) what type of leader you need based on your company's current stage; and (2) how your technology leader(s) should evolve over time.

**The main variable across each of these stages is scale.** It will be important to reassess how your technology leader handles increased growth and demands at each stage.

### Stage framework:

**Pre-monetization, Pre-PMF – You need an Engineering leader right away.**

This person will lead the builders (engineers) and the visionaries (product team) to build out the initial MVP. This leader is either the company's technical Co-Founder, OR you (The Founder/CEO) started a company, and you realize you lack strong technical expertise and need to hire for a distinct technical leader. In this stage:

- The company is building an MVP.
- The company is talking to pilot customers and iterating on the initial product.
- The founding team has an idea for a business and may or may not have the product building capabilities (depends on the product expertise of the founding team).

**Early-PMF – Once PMF is achieved, you need a CTO and/or VP of Technology/Engineering.**

This will require you (Founder/CEO) to reflect on your current technical Co-Founder/ Leader. Your initial builder or founding engineer may not scale past this point. If that is the case, you will likely need hire to supplement. Key requirements for a leader at this stage include:

- Implementing an entire tech system (you need someone with experience doing this).
- Managing the early team and operations.
- Setting the technical vision (perhaps in conjunction with others, i.e. CEO or VP of Product) and preparing the product for scale.



### **Early Trial & Scaling – Check in on current CTO’s ability to handle continued scale.**

This point is often a natural exit point for some candidates (i.e., some engineering leaders are more comfortable with the initial build versus scaling a product). In this stage:

- The company is gaining a great deal of input and learning from early trials with initial users/ customers.
- The team is likely struggling with prioritization on product roadmap priorities
- Compliance, regulation, and security become an important priority (The VP of Technology/CTO may work in tandem with a CISO on this initiative). This will be relevant based on the product type and its geographic expansion.

#### **Key responsibilities:**

- Core responsibilities mentioned above will remain, but the primary change factor is the company’s/product’s scale.
- Leadership, collaboration, estimation, optimization and fulfillment skills become increasingly important.

### **Larger-scale Growth – Optimize the CTO for scale and public company readiness.**

At this stage, you will need to assess the current CTO’s continued ability to handle the scale. It is possible that you may want to bring in a new candidate with prior experience in different scale environments (i.e. early-stage experience and growth-stage experience). Added responsibilities in this stage include:

- Keeping track of all systems and making sure all processes work.
- Assessing if engineering team members are evolving well, or if the product’s growth stage is outside their scope. The CTO will need to make hiring adjustments as needed.
- Building a bench of high-quality managers and key contributors.
- Managing compliance, regulation, and security – as these components continue to be a key priority. At this stage, certain certifications (i.e., SOC II, HIPPA, GDPR, FEDRAMP, etc.) will likely be required.

# STEP 4 :

## Thorough Diligence is a MUST

After you understand your company's needs + the key deliverables for the technology leader you are targeting, it is important to do the proper work to prepare for the interview process. Note: many of these components are repeats from prior roles' diligence checklists, however they are still relevant for the VP of Technology/CTO.

### (1) Tips on reading a resume - things to pay attention to:

- **Find a demonstrable track record of success** – Make sure there is evidence of the candidate moving up in their career (i.e. vis-à-vis the companies they joined and roles attained). You want to know the candidate is constantly trying to improve.
- **Frequency of job change** – If there is a lot of “job hopping”, dig into the reasons why. You want someone who is a builder. If they are only at a company for one year, they likely did not build anything substantial while there. It will take time to build out effective teams, processes and implement key systems.
- **Are they an “A-Player” ?** – Did they work at winning companies? Generally, “A-Teams” hire “A-players” and will drive significant output from them. Be sure to investigate the candidate's prior companies and see if they have reputations for strong accountability models. If not, it is important that the candidate is aware of that and articulates it to you.
- **Are they a modern technical leader?** – Do they have evidence of prior experience leveraging third party resources and services? Do they demonstrate experience shipping product features and enhancements quickly? Were they mostly around quick sprints and iteration? Or do they have experience with larger, more time intensive lifts?

## (2) Cautions right off the bat – before and during interviews:

- **Referrals** – Do not advance internal, or in-network recommendations too quickly – dig in deeper. Do not immediately assume that the candidate will be a fit just because they come in referred from people you trust.
- **Do not assume executive recruiters are the reference check** – DO IT YOURSELF.
- **Listen for “I” statements versus “we” statements** – “WE” needs to be the primary word used by the candidate when they speak about prior experiences. A VP of Technology’s work requires contribution from a multitude of team members. They are a direct partner to product. It is not a solo journey, so the candidate should not be speaking as such!
- **Never hire someone after one interview!** – CEO needs to spend ample time with the candidate. You should feel like you are gaining value from each interaction + getting more excited with each interaction.

## (3) How to complete good reference checks

- **Allocate substantial, quality time** – reference checks are beyond a “check the box” activity. It is important that you spend ample time preparing for and conducting reference checks.
- **Ask for a well-rounded, “360-view” list of references** – Ask the candidate to provide references from three different levels – someone who worked above them (manager), a peer\*, and a direct report. \*At least one of these individuals needs to be a Product leader.
- **Understand what you are asking about / looking for** – Most people will not agree to do a reference call if they do not have good things to say. As such, make the conversation about FIT, not about generically judging whether this person is “good” or “bad”.
- **Spend time preparing the list of questions** – this is crucial for ensuring you get the most out of the diligence call. Be sure to ask questions that aim to figure out what the person can DO, not what they are like (at least at first). As noted above, culture fit is important and something to address, but you must first understand what the person is capable of, as this will be the initial go/ no go point.
- **Do a lot more LISTENING than talking on these calls** – the more talking the reference does, the more you will learn and the more data you will collect. A good rule of thumb is: 90% listening, 10% talking.
  - **When you talk:** Any speaking you do should be to describe the role and traits you are looking for upfront. OR what you want to validate and / or risk areas you want insight on. Once you have stated those items upfront, direct the conversation from there.
  - [**Note to CEO:** If someone is vague in explaining why said person is no longer at their company, they are probably not disclosing something to you = **RED FLAG.**]
- **DO NOT be swayed by a single reference.** Use it as a data point, not the absolute truth.

