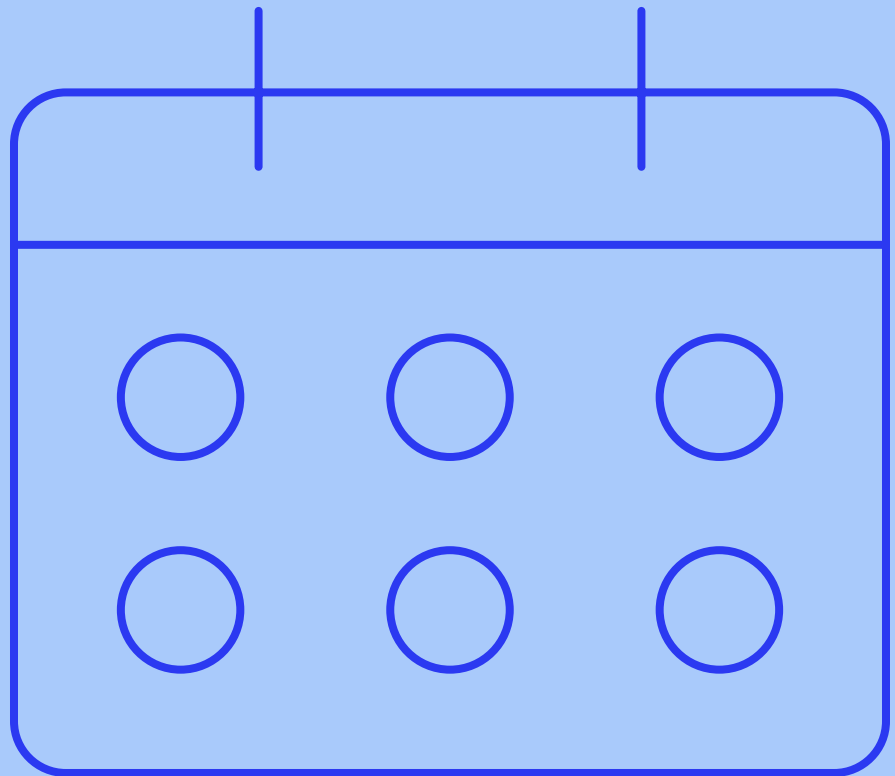


# Practical Advice to Make Your First Year Count



# Introduction

In order to position your company for success from day one, early-stage biotechs must make a range of critical, initial decisions that will directly impact their R&D strategy, corporate development, and team culture for years to come. To help you navigate this complex period of growth, we've asked four biotech industry experts to share their practical, actionable insights and advice.

Whether you're looking for new ways to identify co-founders and advisors with complementary skill sets, evaluate and choose strong incubators and accelerators, manage R&D data, or determine intellectual property (IP) strategy, our panel of experts gets into the details of how they've done it. With this guide, biotech startups can expertly navigate some of the most crucial challenges of their first year.

Learn how to:

---

Find the right co-founders and advisors

---

Evaluate incubator and accelerator programs

---

Manage R&D data to prepare for future growth

---

Determine your IP strategy

---

The quotes in this whitepaper are from **Make Your First Year Count: Practical Advice For Biotech Startups**, a session at **Build Your Bench**. Watch the **replay** for additional takeaways and actionable insights on how to start and scale a biotech company.



**Darren Cooke**  
Executive Director,  
UC Berkeley Life Sciences  
Entrepreneurship (LSEC)



**Natasha Arora**  
Head Law Firm & Service  
Provider Strategy, Carta



**Mason Victors**  
CPO, Recursion  
Pharmaceuticals



**Christian Cobaugh**  
Founder and CEO,  
Vernal Biosciences

# How to Find Co-Founders and Advisors

---

Teaming up with co-founders and advisors who possess complementary skill sets is vital. The individuals you partner with should have strengths where you have weaknesses — and vice versa. Being thoughtful about this complementary dynamic will improve the chances of constructive collaboration. Choosing a co-founder is a pivotal decision, as you are entering into a long-term personal relationship which can have large financial implications. While there's no secret formula to connecting with prospective co-founders and advisors, there are several approaches and resources that can help you build the best founding teams.

**“I urge people to really think about their personal values and use them as your guideposts because they don't tend to change very much. Keep them in mind as you build relationships and your company”**

### Tap your extended network

When seeking a potential co-founder, it's important to thoughtfully consider a wide variety of individuals with distinct perspectives, skill sets, and experience. Doing so will improve your chances of connecting with someone who has complementary skills to your own and be a good fit for your startup. Networking via LinkedIn and online forums, attending social meet ups, and participating in academic conferences and industry events are all good ways to ensure you're thoroughly tapping your network.

### Enroll in a business course

There are many success stories of scientific founders enrolling in university courses to expand their entrepreneurial skills and form organic relationships with business-oriented classmates. Having the gumption to place yourself in an unfamiliar situation can result in unexpected yet natural matchmaking between scientific and business founders.

**“Reach out into your extended network and identify people whose experiences align with the gaps that you have.”**

**Christian Cobaugh,**  
Founder and CEO, Vernal Biosciences

**“I've seen some real success stories of scientific founders signing up for a class to learn about entrepreneurship and to find an MBA student who has complementary skills and can help them bring the company forward.”**

**Darren Cooke**  
Executive Director, UC Berkeley LSEC

### Seek out matchmaking programs for founders

For instance, UC Berkeley's tech transfer office is rolling out a matchmaking program for potential startup founders. Rather than a long process, the program is pure speed dating. Founders quickly interact with a large number of people in succession to increase their likelihood of finding a potential co-founder with the right skills and interests. Programs like these are becoming more popular, so be sure to investigate whether one is available to you.

### Seek "been there, done that" experience in advisors

You and your co-founder likely already have the right education and training to make your company go, but experience is another vital asset. Look for advisors who have real-world experience starting a company and deeply understand the growing pains of launching a startup. Find someone who understands the unique challenges of starting from scratch to help you power through early obstacles.

**"The secret is just to meet as many people as possible and hear as many views as possible with the hope of meeting the right person."**

**Darren Cooke**

Executive Director, UC Berkeley LSEC

**"Finding someone that doesn't just have an MBA, but has been there, done that; that has built a company and gone through some of the growing pains and understands the challenges of going from zero to something greater than zero is really key."**

**Mason Victors**

CPO, Recursion Pharmaceuticals

### **Be thoughtful about advisor equity**

There may be a temptation to entice advisors with equity. While it can be a good way to compensate someone for their valuable time, it is also helpful to find people who don't necessarily need the equity to generate their own wealth. Advisors in this position will be able to take a long-term view of your business and won't be fazed by short-term challenges because they aren't focused on immediate value creation.

**“Have a healthy mix of advisors with different compensation structures so they can really shoot straight with you and have the patience that’s needed to work through issues that will always come up. Just be very cautious about that mix of how these advisors are incentivized.”**

**Christian Cobaugh**

Founder and CEO, Vernal Biosciences

### **Consult an attorney for your advisory agreement**

Often, first-time startup founders will leave the scope of performances in an advisory agreement broad, so seek expert advice on how the documents should be structured, what specific language should be included, and what equity should be offered based on current market standards.

“In cases where you’re expecting specific performance and certain milestones, ensure that when you document the advisory agreement it states that their performance will include—but not be limited to —what you discuss. And for companies that are currently on Carta, I can tell you that we generally see advisors have anywhere from 1% to 2% of the fully diluted equity of the company in their early days.”

**Natasha Arora**

Head Law Firm & Service Provider Strategy, Carta

---

# How to Evaluate Incubators and Accelerators

---

Similar to identifying complementary co-founders and advisors, biotech startups can benefit from identifying incubators, accelerators, and venture capital funds that will fill gaps based on their specific needs. Ultimately, it's not just about the prestige or the money offered by the incubator — it is also about the people you will meet as part of the experience. It's important to be intentional when evaluating incubators and accelerators, so here are some key considerations to keep in mind.



### Identify incubators that can fill functional gaps

Seek out incubators and seed funds that have specific expertise in areas where you need help. Looking for complementary skill sets is something that entrepreneurs should embrace, and this holds true for incubators and accelerators as well.

**“The most powerful thing you can do is associate and align with incubators and smaller funding apparatuses that will really complement any gaps you may have. Oftentimes the incubator may be aligned with the technology field that you’re in, but I would really encourage folks to identify human resources within those seed funds and incubators that are filling functional gaps.”**

**Christian Cobaugh**

Founder and CEO, Vernal Biosciences

### Understand the human resources made available to you

Incubators typically provide a startup with funding and lab space, but there can be additional resources available that can make the program more valuable. For example, it’s important to understand which advisors an incubator will be able to connect you with during your program.

“I ran the biology track at Berkeley SkyDeck — which is a startup accelerator — for seven cohorts and three and a half years. Yes, there’s a \$100,000 investment that helps to some extent; there’s a demo day at the end; there’s investor introductions — but the real secret sauce was that each of the teams at SkyDeck, over the course of six months, gets paired up with three key advisors. These are people with complementary skills who are dedicated to seeing this company move forward.”

### **Treat your search as if you are looking for an additional founder**

Although most incubator programs only last for a period of months, choosing the right incubator can provide benefits for years to come. Because of this, it's a good strategy to evaluate incubators through a similar lens as you would a potential co-founder.

**“It’s almost similar to when you’re looking for a founder, but in this case it’s an external party who truly wants to see you succeed, but may have additional market knowledge that will help in that process”**

**Natasha Arora**

Head Law Firm & Service Provider Strategy, Carta

---

# How to Manage R&D Data

---

Startups typically hope to grow and scale in the future. Almost universally, growth means grappling with more data and more people, and managing more projects with greater complexity. However, these aren't easy tasks to begin with — and only become more difficult without the proper solutions. Managing data properly is mission-critical because it is a biotech's most important asset. Moreover, figuring out how to manage your data now, rather than later, is not only easier, but contributes to greater efficiency as you scale.

### **Treat data as your currency**

As a biotech's most valuable asset, data should be treated as such. Investing in the appropriate solutions for data capture, sample tracking, and collaborative project management will not only bolster efficiency and collaboration from the very start but also create value for your organization in the future.

**“In R&D, data is our currency. Getting it right alone represents tremendous value creation. Because of the concept of future-proofing and growing the business, I think later-stage investors are going to put a real multiplier on you if you’ve got it right.”**

**Christian Cobaugh**

Founder and CEO, Vernal Biosciences

### **Less is More**

Implementing a small number of high-quality data tools early on will allow you to avoid the unnecessary challenge of extensive system integrations, while still making sure your data is structured for long-term success. Rather than bring on every system under the sun, carefully select a few key partners and systems that align with your biotech's future plans.

“It’s easy to get sucked into, ‘What do I need to do right now?’ But I think it’s important to lift up and align on some key principles in approaching how you select technology partners. And one of those principles that has guided me in my thinking is figuring out fewer systems is better.”

**Think long-term**

Consider the trajectory and pace of innovation of a potential technology partner. If you are planning to grow, you'll want a vendor that can support your needs now and in the future when you are a larger company. It's wise to avoid vendors that only support early-stage startups, because their solution likely won't be future-proof for your business.

**“You’re not just building something right now, or next year. You’re building a company that should last for many, many years. Given this, it’s important to recognize if a technology partner matches your trajectory and ambitions.”**

**Christian Cobaugh**

Founder and CEO, Vernal Biosciences

# How to Determine Your IP Strategy

---

Intellectual property is the bedrock on which biotech companies are built. Long before products are commercialized and brought to market, IP creates continuous value for a startup. Given its importance, there are many nuances to keep in mind while developing a successful IP strategy.



**Recognize that not all IP is the same, but it all comes from your data**

IP doesn't necessarily mean you need to have filed patents. IP can also be trade secrets, which is where companies often start out in their early stages and can be valuable due to their longer shelf life. In contrast, filing a patent is all about showing the public what you have invented, so it's important to differentiate between different types of IP.

**Filing patents takes time, money, and experience**

Patent applications are expensive and time consuming, so it is prudent to consider whether the investment to file is worth it based on your unique circumstances. It's also important to keep in mind your long term goals as a company, as IP decisions can have implications many years down the road.

**“Recognize that not all IP is equivalent and it can play different roles in a growing company. And, recognize that your data is extremely valuable. It's not some byproduct that you really don't care about — it is one of your primary products. Your data is IP.”**

**Mason Victors**  
CPO, Recursion Pharmaceuticals

**“Your IP strategy will take years to develop. In the biotech industry, it's almost gaming the system, in a way — you need to figure out what works for your company and what will be best for your company's growth.”**

**Natasha Arora**  
Head Law Firm & Service Provider Strategy, Carta

### **The tech transfer office is an academic's friend**

If you are founding your company in a university setting, the tech transfer office is there to help from day one. Not only can they help with patent filing and licensing, but they can also advise you on a more holistic IP strategy that will eventually become a core part of your company's success.

**“I've seen examples where the tech transfer office actually has licensed the technology to someone else without the inventor knowing about it, so I encourage people to engage with them early. They really are there to help.”**

**Darren Cooke**

Executive Director, UC Berkeley LSEC

### **Different investors have different expectations**

Each investor will have their own unique strategy when it comes to IP. Some investors want to see a well-defined idea that they know is go-to-market ready while others may be more interested in partnering with you to develop your IP from nothing more than just an idea supported by a great team. Partner with investors who meet your needs and goals.

The Final Word

# Lasting Advice From The Experts

To close out the discussion, each panelist was asked to provide one final piece of advice for prospective biotech startup founders. Their responses are below.

**Start thinking early about the foundations of your company**

“Start thinking early about the foundations of your company. You’re building amazing products and amazing businesses that help our world become a better place — but you need to make sure your foundation isn’t messy so that you can go build those products.”



**Natasha Arora**  
Head Law Firm & Service Provider Strategy  
Carta

### Get your IP on file and patent applications in-process

“If you’re a life sciences founder the importance of getting your IP on file and patent applications in process is crucial. If you are an academic, it’s important to go to the tech transfer office early at your university and raise your hand to say ‘this is actually something that we are interested in commercializing.’”



**Darren Cooke**  
Executive Director  
UC Berkeley Life Sciences Entrepreneurship

### Remember, it’s a balancing act.

“Figuring out your technology partners is a balancing act between the principles you have around technology and being really pragmatic about your immediate needs.”



**Mason Vectors**  
CPO  
Recursion Pharmaceuticals

### Embrace imperfection with transparency and flexibility

“By embracing imperfection and being transparent about it, you’ll hear feedback on priorities — whether it’s your staff, your investors, your partner, or even your clients. For me personally, that’s been the most effective way to make good decisions.”



**Christian Cobaugh**  
Founder and CEO  
Vernal Biosciences

To learn how Benchling has supported more than 325 new biotech startups on their journey towards becoming thriving biotech companies, visit [www.benchling.com/startups](http://www.benchling.com/startups).

Learn More

# About Benchling

Benchling's R&D Cloud makes it easier to capture and access the data you need, collaborate as a team, and accelerate decision making. Benchling has helped hundreds of innovative biotech startups to establish solid data foundations for future growth. With our Benchling for Startups program, early-stage life science companies get rapid access to a unified platform for core functions including molecular design, lab notebook, biological registration, and inventory management – all at a price that works with your budget. We provide everything you need to be successful today, and as your team grows, Benchling will be able to grow with you. If you're ready to get started, request a demo, and our biotech experts will personalize one for your team.



## Notebook

The most user-friendly electronic lab notebook in the industry — reduce time to data entry by 85% with the first cloud-based notebook built for modern life science.



## Molecular Biology

A comprehensive molecular biology suite of 10+ tools in one collaborative environment — build, share, and record DNA and amino acid sequences in one unified platform.



## Registry

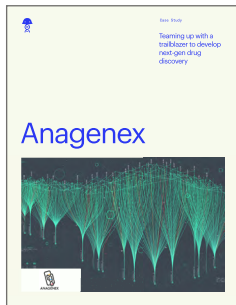
A convenient and easy-to-use registration system built from the ground up for large molecule R&D — model biological entities and easily enter and extract the data you need.



## Inventory

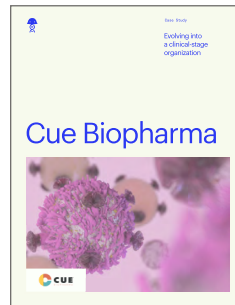
Laboratory inventory management — track the locations of vials, wells, batches, and more, and automatically link results to them.

# Startup Success Stories



**Case Study**  
Teaming Up With a Trailblazer To Develop Next-Gen Drug Discovery

[Read the Case Study](#)



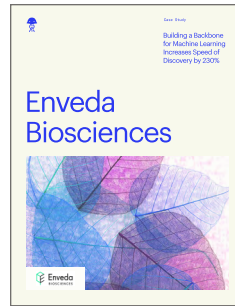
**Case Study**  
Evolving Into a Clinical-Stage Organization

[Read the Case Study](#)



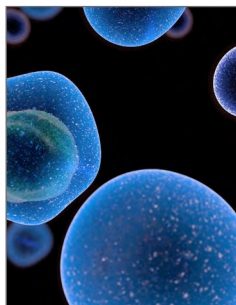
**Blog Post**  
Why Biotech Startups Should Get Their Data Right Early

[Read Now](#)



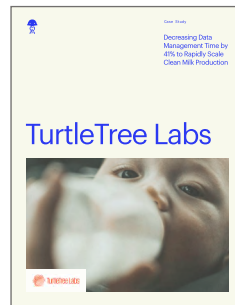
**Case Study**  
Building a Backbone for Machine Learning in the Life Sciences

[Read the Case Study](#)



**Blog Post**  
Next-Gen Cell Therapy Built on Next-Gen Informatics From Day 1

[Read Now](#)



**Case Study**  
A Data Foundation to Rapidly Scale Clean Milk Production

[Read the Case Study](#)

Join over 200,000 scientists using Benchling to power life science R&D.

[Request a Demo](#)