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WILL THE COMPANY KEEP GROWING WITHOUT ITS FOUNDER?

Twenty-four questions to ask before an employee ownership trust or a sale.

Is the founder the keystone, or the architect? Take out a keystone and the arch falls. An architect leaves something that stands. This checklist shows which one you are, today.

In a founder-led software company, the founder is often the chief architect, the release manager, and the only person who knows where everything is. That works until they step back.

In an employee ownership trust, the purchase is usually paid out of future profits over several years, so the business has to keep delivering without them. In a sale, the buyer's technical due diligence finds the same gaps, and turns them into a lower price, a retention, or an earn-out.

THE RISK ISN'T THE CODE. IT'S WHO HOLDS IT.

Most technology risk in a founder-led company is key-person risk: knowledge, access, and decisions that live in one or two heads. It doesn't show in the accounts, and it rarely shows at all until someone leaves.

The good news: it's fixable, usually in months, and usually without hiring.

How to use it

FOR THE OWNER

Answer honestly.

Tick yes only if you could show the evidence tomorrow. "Mostly" is a no, and so is "I think so".

FOR THE ADVISER

Start early.

Hand it over a year or more before the transaction: long enough to fix what it finds, and soon enough that nobody has to price it in.

WHAT IT ISN'T

An audit.

It starts a conversation; it isn't technical due diligence. It shows where to look, not what you'll find there.

The eight areas

01 People and knowledge
02 Access and ownership
03 Delivery
04 The codebase
05 Security and resilience
06 Customers and contracts
07 Leadership
08 Money and capacity

WHO'S ASKING

I'm Tom Hill, a fractional CPTO. I help founder-led software companies grow without giving the company away, by unlocking the capacity they already have, and making delivery dependable after I've gone.

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01

PEOPLE AND KNOWLEDGE

If one person left, would anything stop?

- [ ] Could someone other than the founder or the lead developer get a change to customers tomorrow?
- [ ] Is the way the product works written down well enough for a new engineer to ship in their first month?
- [ ] Would the engineers you'd most hate to lose stay through the transition, and do you know why?

02

ACCESS AND OWNERSHIP

Does the company own what it runs on?

- [ ] Are the domains, cloud accounts, app store accounts, and code repositories in the company's name, with more than one administrator?
- [ ] Does every employee's and contractor's contract assign the code they wrote to the company?
- [ ] Do you know which open-source licences the product uses, and that you meet what they ask of you?

03

DELIVERY

Can you say when, and be right?

- [ ] Can you say how long a typical change takes to reach customers?
- [ ] Do releases happen on a steady rhythm, rather than whenever someone finds the time?
- [ ] Do most of the dates you give customers hold?

04

THE CODEBASE

Is there a part nobody dares touch?

- [ ] Could the team change any part of the product without fear, the oldest part included?
- [ ] Are the languages, frameworks, and servers it runs on still supported by their makers?
- [ ] Does an automated check catch a broken change before your customers do?

NOTES

Tick yes only if you could show the evidence tomorrow. "Don't know" counts as no: a buyer will treat it as one.

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05

SECURITY AND RESILIENCE

If it broke tonight, what would happen?

- [ ] Have you restored from a backup, for real, in the last 12 months?
- [ ] Is it clear who responds to an outage out of hours, and is that someone other than the founder?
- [ ] Do you hold the certifications your customers ask for, such as Cyber Essentials or ISO 27001, or know which you'll need?

06

CUSTOMERS AND CONTRACTS

Have you promised what the software can't keep?

- [ ] Do the service levels in your contracts match what the system actually achieves?
- [ ] Do all your customers run on one version of the product, rather than builds of their own?
- [ ] Could you list every outside service the product depends on, and what each one costs?

07

LEADERSHIP

Who decides, when the founder doesn't?

- [ ] Does someone other than the founder make the day-to-day technical decisions, and are they trusted to?
- [ ] Is the roadmap owned by someone, written down, and tied to what customers pay for?
- [ ] Do engineers hear from customers directly, not only through the founder?

08

MONEY AND CAPACITY

Do you know what the technology costs, and what it earns?

- [ ] Do you know what technology costs you each year, people included, as a share of revenue?
- [ ] Do the hosting and licence bills go to the company, and does someone review them?
- [ ] Is most of your engineers' time spent building what's new, rather than keeping what exists running?

NOTES

Tick yes only if you could show the evidence tomorrow. "Don't know" counts as no: a buyer will treat it as one.

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COUNT YOUR YESES.

20 OR MORE

Ready, or nearly.

Keep it that way. The risk comes back every time the team changes.

12 TO 19

Fixable, if you start now.

Most of this is months of work, not years, and it's cheaper before the deal than after it.

UNDER 12

It depends on the founder.

Fix that before a buyer or the trustees have to, and before it's priced in.

WHERE I COME IN.

I work alongside the founder and the team for a few days a month: getting what's in one head into many, making delivery predictable, and growing the people who will lead it after the founder steps back, and after I've gone.

Your growth. Your equity. My problem.

The first step is the same whatever your score: the Growth Without Dilution Plan. Three or four days of my time inside your company, over two weeks, then a written plan. It costs £5,000, paid up front, and you keep the plan whatever you decide. If you go on to the turnaround within 30 days, the fee comes off the retainer, spread evenly across its months.

PROVE IT.

<50% → 90%+
delivery reliability
30 engineers on three continents, after a merger

3 months → 2 weeks
release cycle
70 engineers in six teams

~30%
less engineer churn
a careers framework adopted by 300 engineers

FOR

Founder-led, bootstrapped or owner-funded, mission-driven companies at the fork: wanting to grow faster, and told the answer is capital.

NOT FOR

Growth at any cost, or anyone who wants a CTO-for-hire to run sprints.

"You've got a rare mix of keeping things human while also bringing much-needed structure and discipline to the chaos."
SHALIM, VP OF AGILE

Let's talk it through.

Book 30 minutes, and bring this checklist, ticked or not. It isn't a pitch.

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General guidance, not legal, tax, or financial advice: the transaction's own advisers lead on those.