



AcceleratorApp
Software for Accelerator & Incubators

THE PROGRAM OPERATIONS SERIES

The Accelerator Program Manager's Playbook

Running cohorts of 10 to 30 startups
without the ops overhead

A practical field guide for the person who actually runs the program, from application open to demo day.

The program manager carries the operational weight of the whole cohort.

Directors set strategy. Mentors give time. Founders do the work. But the person who keeps the cohort running is the program manager, and most of that job is invisible coordination: chasing reviewer scores, finding mentor slots, answering the same status question from twelve founders, rebuilding the application form for the next cohort.

This playbook is about the operational craft of running an accelerator well. Each section covers one phase of the cohort, the common ways it breaks, and a checklist you can lift directly into your own process.

The work that keeps a cohort running is rarely the work anyone sees. This guide is for the person doing it.

WHAT THIS COVERS

Nine phases of a cohort, in the order you run them. Application design and intake, reviewer coordination, selection, onboarding, mentor matching, cohort health, demo day, and the post-cohort wrap.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Each phase ends with a checklist built from how working programs actually operate. Lift them straight into your own process, or use them to pressure-test the tools you run on today. Page 11 covers the setup checklist you can reuse every cycle.

Most application problems are design problems.

A bad application form creates work for the next eight weeks. The three ways it goes wrong are predictable, and all three are fixable before you launch.

Too many questions

Good founders start the form, see the length, and drop off before they finish.

Too few questions

You collect names and one-liners but cannot actually screen on anything.

No conditional logic

Every applicant sees every field, including the ones that do not apply to them.

THE CHECKLIST FOR A STRONG APPLICATION FORM

- Lead with the lowest-friction fields: name, company, one-line description
- Use conditional logic so applicants only see relevant questions
- Cap free-text questions; every open field is a reviewer's reading minute
- Collect structured data you can filter on later: stage, sector, location
- Set eligibility rules that screen automatically on submission
- Decide video versus written before you launch, not after
- Test the full form on mobile before you open it

THE ELIGIBILITY RULE THAT SAVES THE MOST TIME

Auto-screen on the two or three non-negotiables: stage, geography, sector. A platform that filters these on submission means your review queue only ever contains applicants worth reading.

The intake window is where volume becomes manageable or unmanageable.

When the form is live and submissions are arriving, the job is to keep the pipeline clean without manual processing. The teams that stay calm during intake are the ones that let rules do the first pass and reserve their own time for judgment.

DURING THE INTAKE WINDOW

- Monitor submission volume against your target daily
- Let eligibility rules handle the first filter automatically
- Batch-communicate with ineligible applicants rather than replying individually
- Keep a public FAQ so applicants self-serve common questions
- Watch for drop-off at specific form fields and fix mid-window if needed

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The number that matters: application start-to-completion rate. If founders begin and abandon, the form is too long or asks for something they do not have ready. The window is the only time you can fix it, so watch this number from day one.

FIX IT WHILE THE WINDOW IS OPEN

A drop-off spike at a single field is a signal, not noise. Editing one question mid-window recovers applicants you would otherwise lose for the entire cohort. After the window closes, that data is gone.

Reviewer drop-off is the single biggest cause of a late selection.

The pattern is familiar: you email reviewers a batch, three of eight respond by the deadline, and you chase the rest the night before the committee meeting. Structure, set up before the window closes, is what breaks the pattern.

THE STRUCTURE THAT KEEPS REVIEWERS ON TRACK

- Pre-assign reviewers to batches before the window closes
- Configure the scoring rubric with weighted criteria, not a single score
- Decide blind versus named review per program and apply it consistently
- Set a hard internal deadline two days before the committee meeting
- Use a comparison view that builds as scores arrive, not after
- Capture conflict of interest declarations before reviewers see applicants

WHY THE COMPARISON VIEW MATTERS

If you are building the reviewer comparison by hand the night before committee, you are doing the platform's job. A real-time comparison view means the committee meeting starts from a shortlist and a discussion, not a spreadsheet.

The committee meeting should start from a shortlist and a discussion. Never from a spreadsheet built at midnight.

The transition from accepted to active is where momentum is won or lost.

A founder who is accepted on Friday and hears nothing until the program starts three weeks later has already cooled. The onboarding sequence keeps them engaged from the moment the decision is made.

THE SELECTION-TO-ONBOARDING SEQUENCE

- Communicate decisions to all applicants, accepted and declined, with structured messaging
- Give accepted founders an immediate next step: onboarding form, welcome call, community access
- Set up their cohort profile so their application data carries forward, no re-entry
- Assign their initial mentor or advisor before week one
- Share the program schedule and milestone checklist on day one

DECLINED APPLICANTS ARE FUTURE APPLICANTS

A respectful, structured decline keeps the door open for the next cohort and protects your program's reputation in a small ecosystem. The founder you decline this cycle is the one who reapplies stronger, or refers the company you most want next year.

Application data should carry forward into the cohort record. A founder accepted on Friday should never re-enter what they already told you.

Mentor coordination is the task that most often eats a program manager's week.

The manual version: a founder asks for an intro, you check a mentor's availability by email, you propose times, the mentor reschedules, you update everyone, and afterward you chase the mentor for session notes. Every session is five messages that should have been zero.

THE STRUCTURE THAT REMOVES YOU FROM THE LOOP

- Build the mentor pool with expertise tags, capacity limits, and availability
- Let founders request sessions from mentor availability directly
- Automate confirmations and reminders
- Capture session notes in a structured form attached to the startup record
- Track mentor capacity so you can see who is over or under-committed

TRACK MENTOR LOAD ACROSS THE COHORT

The best mentors get over-requested and burn out. Visibility into who has taken how many sessions lets you balance the load before a key mentor goes quiet.

A founder should book a mentor without ever passing through your inbox. That is the whole goal of this phase.

By mid-program, some startups are thriving and some are quietly disengaging. The question is whether you know which is which.

WHAT TO MONITOR WEEKLY

- Milestone progress per startup
- Mentor session count per startup
- Last activity or engagement signal
- Founders who have not booked a session in two weeks
- Startups behind on a milestone with no flagged reason

ONE GRID, READ IN 30 SECONDS

STARTUP	MILESTONES	SESSIONS	STATUS
SE Sol Energy	4 / 5	● 6 this month	On track
MH Mira Health	5 / 5	● 8 this month	On track
TR Tilt Robotics	2 / 5	● 2 this month	Watch
PW Patchwork	1 / 5	● 0 in 2 weeks	At risk

THE GRID BEATS THE MEETING

A cohort health grid showing every startup's status in one view tells you who needs a check-in in 30 seconds, without a Friday status request to the whole cohort.

Demo day is an event production problem layered on top of a program.

Everything you have built across the cohort converges into a single day with founders, judges, and investors in one room. The programs that run it well treat it as logistics, planned weeks out, not as a finale to improvise.

THE DEMO DAY CHECKLIST

- Confirm each founder's pitch slot and prep checklist in their portal
- Manage judge and investor invitations, RSVPs, and scoring
- Run a full rehearsal with the actual running order
- Give every stakeholder, founders, judges, attendees, their own view of the day
- Plan the follow-up sequence before the event, not after

THE FOLLOW-UP IS THE POINT

Demo day generates investor interest that decays within days. Have the introduction and follow-up workflow ready to fire the morning after, not assembled from memory a week later.

The pitches are the visible part. The follow-up workflow, ready to fire the next morning, is what turns interest into capital.

The work you do at the end of one cohort determines how fast you can start the next.

THE WRAP CHECKLIST

- Capture final outcomes per startup: funding, revenue, team, milestones
- Produce the portfolio report for your board or funder from the dashboard
- Survey founders and mentors while the experience is fresh
- Save the application form, rubric, milestone template, and mentor pool for reuse
- Clone the program configuration for the next cohort

20 min

Configure once, reuse every cohort. The first cohort takes setup. If your forms, rubrics, milestone structures, and notification templates are saved and cloneable, every cohort after that takes around 20 minutes to stand up.

THE COMPOUNDING RETURN ON SETUP

Everything you save at wrap is work you never repeat. The program that documents and clones its own configuration gets faster every cycle, while the program that rebuilds from scratch pays the full setup cost every single time.

AcceleratorApp is a program management platform trusted by **200+ organizations across 6 continents**, including Start It @KBC, SparkLabs, German Accelerator, Startup Braga, and MBC Africa.

It manages the full accelerator lifecycle in one connected system: application intake, multi-stage review, mentor matching, cohort management, milestone tracking, events, community, AI application scoring, AI applicant coaching, and reporting.

700k+

applications processed

6,000+

program managers

1-2 wks

to go live

\$499

per month, plans from

PLATFORM HIGHLIGHTS

- The full accelerator lifecycle in one connected system
- AI application scoring and AI applicant coaching, live today
- Multi-program support from a single admin view
- ISO 27001 certified and GDPR compliant
- Full migration included for every new customer
- Clone a program and stand up the next cohort in around 20 minutes

GET STARTED

Book a demo: acceleratorapp.co/en/demo

See pricing: acceleratorapp.co/en/pricing

Contact: support@acceleratorapp.co



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Ready to run your next cohort on one platform?

A 30-minute demo mapped to your program, from application open to demo day.

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