How to Leverage a Nontech Background (and Fight Imposter Syndrome)

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Investors may find a thousand reasons to tell you no, but take heart: Your background probably isn't one of them. A 2020 Pitchbook survey found only 15 percent of investors value background, which is less than half of what it was the year before.

Even better, the same study showed that where the value in executive branch pedigree waned, the value in profitability saw an 8 percent increase.

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These statistics show that there's a new trend venture capitalists are valuing, and understanding what VCs are looking for can help minimize the effects of imposter syndrome that those with nontraditional backgrounds tend to feel.

What's the value of a nontraditional background?

In a world where everyone seems to have a million-dollar idea, finding support and investors who believe in yours, even in the tech world, can be challenging. Another factor that may seem like a barrier? Coming from a nontraditional background outside the FAANG realm — meaning, without experience at the

tech behemoths Facebook/Meta, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Alphabet's Google.

In fact, many startup hustles begin with founders working part-time while holding down a different full-time job. Some don't have any staff other than themselves, or their team members' roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined. They may have a subpar prototype. They may be working from a basement or garage rather than a "real" office. And they may not have yet attracted a sizable customer base or have any funding.

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However, a nontraditional work background filled with diverse experiences should be celebrated when entering the startup world. Many executives I know don't come from a tech background and instead are product people who have found a tech partner. The difference in vision and perspective allows for successful collaboration.

I, for one, come from a marketing background. One of my first jobs out of college was with Hershey's as a chocolate ambassador, piloting the Hershey's Kissmobile. At the time, I was basically a kid with little life experience, but they handed over the keys (literally) and put faith in us to represent their brand all over the country. I got my first taste of entrepreneurship because I essentially became a business owner overnight: No boss was there to change my tire on the side of the highway, nor was anyone around to mediate if an interpersonal situation arose. I had to think on my feet and problem-solve quickly as entrepreneurs do.

What do venture capitalists look

for?

The key, then, is to understand how to leverage your unique skills when it comes to acquiring VC funding as a founder with a nontraditional background. Have a nontech background like mine? When planning your pitches, start with these steps:

1. Embrace your ability to think like a buyer

With a nontraditional background, you're likely more able to distance yourself from the tech and keep your focus on the business challenges of the consumer. With that focus, you can ask questions from the consumer's point of view: What are people willing to pay for? What problem does the consumer have that a product could solve?

When tech isn't your background, it's easier to see the product for its real benefits and drawbacks, plus how to improve it and how to sell it. When you're too close to your product, it can be hard to disconnect from it, which can often lead to your business failing and losing funding. Marketing is about forging connections and being believable. With that in mind, you can more deeply empathize and persuade your customers and VCs.

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2. Speak multiple industry languages

Having a nontraditional background can expose you to myriad industries and roles, which allows you to absorb the vernacular of different industry spaces and to shape-shift effortlessly to different situations. When you have this

experience, you’re better able to see how to generate revenue based on what you learned from time spent in other industries.

A 2019 Deloitte study found almost half of the U.K.’s CIO 100 recipients didn’t even have tech backgrounds before becoming CIOs. One recipient, Melissa Bell, now leads Danaher’s global IT organization after a background in consulting and business transformation. She told Deloitte that her liberal arts education taught her how to prioritize information and communicate ideas effectively.

3. Flex your skills from past experience

Another advantage of having a nontraditional background is the ability to draw on your experiences working with individuals across diverse backgrounds and within cross-functional teams. When pitching VCs and persuading others to join the company you’ve founded, you need to draw on your people skills.

My background in marketing gives me a unique advantage when it comes to building a strong sales- and customer-oriented culture. Tapping into our diverse skill sets is part of how to be a good executive; it allows tech companies that are run by CEOs from backgrounds like marketing to approach tech in a refreshing way.

Even if you’re lacking in a certain area, the most important thing is to acknowledge it. Play to your strengths and create a strong support team for your weaknesses. If you feel you personally lack the tech experience for a particular project, bring in someone who does. When I was building products at Discover, I had to make sure my teams were cross-functional. Our products wouldn’t have made it to market otherwise. Everyone carries a unique perspective, so leverage your skills from past experiences with those of your team to create a healthy amalgamation of abilities.

So never feel “less-than” for coming into the tech industry from a nontraditional background. There’s so much value to be had in having multi-industry awareness: You can think from the standpoint of the consumer, you have a larger lexicon built up, and you’re able to connect with people in an authentic way. Tapping into these assets is how your nontraditional background can work in your favor.

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