Kickstarter Was in Decline. Then It Had Its Biggest Year Ever. Here’s What Changed

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

When Everette Taylor became CEO of Kickstarter in late 2022, he took over a company in decline. Kickstarter had once pioneered the idea of online crowdfunding, but its revenue was down 20% year over year.

“The light was dimming a bit,” Taylor says. “You had increased competition, and the company was like, ‘Here, take it, try to fix this thing.’”

Three years later, Kickstarter has a different story to tell. Revenue has grown every year — and 2025 became the company’s best year in history, both in terms of revenue and amount of dollars spent on the platform.

So, what changed?

“It’s something that a lot of CEOs and entrepreneurs should be doing,” Taylor says. “Just listen to your audience.”

Taylor and his team talked to creators — that is, the people who launch campaigns on Kickstarter — and identified all sorts of pain points. For example, creators often struggled to build highly optimized campaigns, and then struggled to fulfill purchases after a successful campaign. This had given rise to an ecosystem of third party companies, which promised to help people launch and manage their Kickstarter campaigns.

Taylor realized: *Kickstarter should be offering those services*

itself.

“Kickstarter has only ever made money in one way – taking a cut of every dollar spent on the platform,” he says. “But there’s a lot of other ways we can potentially make money.”

Kickstarter’s product engineering team started to build what Taylor thinks of as Kickstarter 2.0 – a more “professionalized” service with end-to-end creator support, including performance marketing services and a pledge manager to help with shipping and taxes.

More services followed. Kickstarter launched a “late pledges” feature, which grew 30% year over year, and helped creators get more funding from their communities after a campaign had officially ended. A new “pledge over time” feature lets supporters make payments over a few months, instead of all at once, which helped more people pay higher-dollar pledges.

“That’s why we’re seeing our average pledge number going up: People can afford it if they split the payment up, to get higher-ticket items on the platform,” Taylor says. “These things may seem like no-brainers, but Kickstarter hadn’t done them.”

The company also started to be more responsive to creators’ changing needs. When fast-changing tariffs started to impact its creators, for example, Kickstarter began offering systems to help manage the fluctuating shipping costs.

Taylor also shifted the brand’s marketing and messaging, so that it felt more aligned with today’s creator economy. He wanted to squash any perception that Kickstarter is just a place where people beg for money.

“We spent a lot of effort on marketing about how this is reward-based crowdfunding,” he says. “Some of the biggest brands in the world use Kickstarter to launch new products. Celebrities, big names use Kickstarter to tap into our

audience — not necessarily because they need the money to crowdfund, but they want to take advantage of the millions of people who use Kickstarter."

As a result of all this, spending on the site surged. The largest campaign in Kickstarter history happened last year, at $46.7 million. It was a campaign for eufyMake, a $2,500 3-D texture UV printer from Anker, a multibillion-dollar tech company in China.

"Our biggest category on Kickstarter is design and technology. That category alone this year grew almost 70%," Taylor says. "Think about a category that was already our largest category growing almost 70%. That was what happened in 2025."

Kickstarter also started building strategic partnerships with other companies, as a way of offering creators more support. As one example, last year Kickstarter created a partnership with the free streaming platform Tubi. This means filmmakers can crowdsource funding for a project on Kickstarter, and then get distrubtion help through the Tubi partnership.

Now Taylor is thinking beyond the idea of crowdfunding. He instead says Kickstarter is building the future of social commerce — and creating the future of the creator economy itself.

"Creators large and small see that the social media landscape is changing," he says. "If you post something on Instagram or Threads or whatever, only a small percentage of your audience sees it. On Kickstarter, everyone gets notified with emails. You can galvanize your biggest audience online and be able to do commerce with your audience. It's very, very special."

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/kickstarter-was-in-decline-then-it-had-its-biggest-year/502023

MBA Grads From Top Schools Like Duke and Georgetown Are Struggling to Find Jobs: ‘It’s Been Really Terrible.’

With companies scrutinizing every white-collar hire, even business school graduates from America’s top schools are taking months to land jobs, according to a *Wall Street Journal* report. At Duke’s Fuqua School of Business, 21% of MBA grads were still looking for work three months after graduation last summer. At Michigan’s Ross School, 15% remained on the hunt.

Those rates are sharply higher than 2019, when just 5% at Duke and 4% at Michigan were still searching. John Bush, who earned his MBA from UNC Chapel Hill in May, is now considering a luxury retail job paying $80,000 annually — less than what he

earned before business school.

Georgetown’s career center managing director Christine Murray didn’t mince words about the situation: “The last two years have just been really terrible.” Why the slog? Companies are grappling with AI implications and economic uncertainty, leaving even elite graduates facing steep competition in a challenging market.

Read more

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If You Nail These 10 Things, Your Pitch Deck Almost Doesn’t Matter

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Key Takeaways

- Pitch decks open doors, but character determines who survives when everything inevitably breaks.
- Founders reveal more in quiet moments than in slides, metrics or polished narratives.

I’ve sat across from hundreds of founders. Coffee shops. Board rooms. Investor dinners where the food’s cold and the questions aren’t.

Some show up with beautiful decks. Perfect fonts. Charts that feel expensive. Most of those decks say the same thing. But what actually matters never appears on a slide.

You can polish a story.
You can’t edit character.

Here are 10 things I look for in founders that never show up on a pitch deck. These are the tells. The patterns. The stuff that predicts who lasts when things stop going according to plan.

1. How they talk about people who

aren’t there anymore

Pay attention. How a founder discusses everyone behind them will usually blame everyone ahead of them, too. Accountability always leaks out.

Strong founders own the mess. Weak founders rewrite history.

2. Their relationship with the truth

Pay attention to the big lies. The small ones. Rounded numbers. Soft explanations. Convenient omissions.

Founders who exaggerate early will exaggerate later. Pressure doesn’t create dishonesty. It exposes it.

Trust compounds or it collapses. There’s no middle ground.

3. How fast they follow up when there’s nothing to gain

Anyone can be responsive when money’s on the table.

What about the quiet moments?
The intro doesn’t guarantee anything.
The update no one demanded.

Discipline without applause tells me everything.

4. Whether they let the product do the talking

This one never shows up on a slide.

Great founders don’t just talk about the product. They carry it. Wear it. Use it. Share it.

I notice who shows up wearing their brand. A hat. A hoodie. Something simple and lived-in. Not staged.

I notice who brings their product to meetings without making it weird. They drink it while we talk. They hand it across the table and say, “Try this.”

Someone inevitably asks, “What’s that?”

That’s not an accident.

They believe in it enough to put it in someone’s hands.
They trust the product to speak before they do.
They understand that distribution starts with presence, not ads.

If you aren’t willing to wear your brand, carry your brand, or give your brand away, you’re probably not as confident in it as you think.

There are always ways to share.
A hat sparks a conversation.
A drink on a walk becomes a question.
A free sample turns into a story someone retells.

That’s not marketing. That’s belief made visible.

5. Their comfort with saying “I don’t know”

This separates leaders from performers.

Founders who pretend to have every answer usually stop learning. The best ones pause. Think. Ask better questions.

Confidence isn’t pretending. It’s curiosity without ego.

6. How they react when you push back

I push on assumptions on purpose.

Do they get defensive?
Do they listen?
Do they adapt?

Founders who can’t absorb friction break under pressure.

The business will push back harder than any investor ever will.

7. Their relationship with control

Great founders know when to hold the wheel and when to hand it off. Weak ones either micromanage everything or disappear completely. Both stall momentum. Control isn’t about power. It’s about responsibility.

8. Whether they can explain the business without the slides

Close the laptop.

If the story falls apart, the business probably does too.

Clarity isn’t simplification. It’s understanding.

If you can’t explain it plainly, you don’t own it yet.

9. How they treat small wins

Do they celebrate quietly and keep building?
Or spike the football like they’ve arrived?

Founders who over-celebrate early wins usually stall later. The work never ends. The market doesn’t care about your last press release.

Hunger beats hype every time.

10. What they do when no one is watching

This matters most.

The best founders show up prepared… even when the meeting doesn’t matter. They treat a junior analyst the same way they treat a lead investor.

Character isn’t situational. It’s consistent.

Who you are in the quiet moments is who you’ll be when it counts.

Related: This Is the Courage Formula You Need to Transform How You Lead

Pitch decks don’t fail companies — people do. Markets shift, capital tightens and competitors copy what works. Something always breaks, usually at the worst possible moment. When that happens, I’m not betting on your TAM or your slides.

Better decks, louder messaging and the right buzzwords can build momentum, but they don’t carry a company through stress. I’m betting on you — on the habits you fall back on when the room empties and the noise fades. The deck might open the door, but who you are determines what happens once it closes.

Key Takeaways

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/starting-a-business/pitch-decks-lie-these-10-founder-behaviors-never-do/501678

What Startups Need to Learn from Fortune 500 Playbooks (and What They Shouldn’t)

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Key Takeaways

- Startups can learn valuable lessons from the disciplines that make large companies successful, from team building to financial awareness.
- Balancing creativity with operational discipline is key to building a company that can grow, attract investment and be understood by potential acquirers.

People often think of startups and Fortune 500 companies as opposites, the small disruptor versus the corporate giant. In reality, the startups that survive and grow borrow from the same disciplines that make large companies succeed.

After helping Staples scale from a startup to a Fortune 100 company and leading the development of a major transformation plan for Barnes & Noble, I have seen both sides of business growth. Today, as an investor in over twenty early-stage companies, I find that founders often underestimate the importance of structure, discipline and focus. These are the fundamentals that define strong enterprises and make startups more attractive to investors and acquirers.

Here are some lessons from the Fortune 500 playbook that every startup should learn.

1. Know your numbers

When I took over as CEO of a Fortune 500 national retailer, I discovered the company had a very short cash runway left. That fact shaped every decision that followed.

Startups rarely bring that same level of financial awareness. Founders sometimes say, “We’ll figure out the financial model later.” That is a mistake. If you cannot clearly explain how your business generates revenue, it is not yet a business.

Leaders in large companies live by their numbers. They understand margins, cost structures and unit economics. A startup founder does not need a full-time CFO in the early stages, but they do need a financial roadmap.

Know your burn rate, your break-even point, and how much time you have before the money runs out.

Related: Inside the Startup Playbook That Silicon Valley Doesn’t Want You to Know About

2. Build the right team

Startups often start with friends, classmates or family members. Trust is valuable, but comfort can be dangerous. I once advised a founder whose college friend became his COO. They were too similar and constantly stepped on each other’s work.

Fortune 500 companies build teams around complementary skills. They understand that good collaboration requires balance. If you are a visionary, find an operator. If you are technical, find someone who knows how to tell your story.

Outsource what you cannot yet afford in-house. Use contract CFOs, fractional marketing leads or freelance developers until full-time hires are justified. Instead of thinking it’s your job to simply fill seats, think of making sure each seat is adding value to your company and culture.

3. Focus on what matters

Big companies know how to prioritize. They are relentless about aligning people and resources with their top goals.

Startups, on the other hand, often chase too many ideas. I once met a founder running ten product lines at once. My advice was simple: pick two. Every dollar and every hour spent outside your core focus is a distraction.

Fortune 500 companies focus because they must. If they don’t relentlessly align financial, human and technology resources, the result is chaotic and inefficient. Startups should focus because they cannot afford not to. You can do anything, but you cannot do everything.

4. Create structure that speeds you up

Many founders resist structure because they confuse it with bureaucracy. In truth, structure is what enables speed.

In a large organization, everyone is aware of who makes which decisions and how information flows throughout the organization. That clarity eliminates bottlenecks and prevents confusion. It allows people to move fast without tripping over each other.

Startups need the same clarity. Define who owns what and how decisions get made. Agree on the priorities and communicate them often. When everyone knows their role, things move faster. Fortune 500 companies succeed because they operate with precision, not chaos.

5. Grow with intention and plan for acquisition

Most founders I meet are not trying to become the next Google. They want to build something valuable enough for Google to buy.

There is nothing wrong with that goal, but if you plan to be acquired, you must build a company that a larger organization can understand and integrate into its operations. Big corporations want to buy clarity, not risk.

Think about companies like Chobani or Dave’s Hot Chicken. Each created something unique and well-run that major players wanted to add to their portfolios. Dannon could not invent Chobani’s appeal, but it could buy it. KFC could not replicate the cult following behind Dave’s Hot Chicken, but it could invest in it.

When an acquirer looks at your business, in addition to a compelling vision, they should see strong operations, reliable systems and clear financials. Build a company that is easy to understand and easy to plug into a bigger machine.

6. Adopt discipline but keep your spirit

Fortune 500 companies are known for discipline. Startups are known for creativity. The best businesses blend both.

A founder's strength lies in passion, imagination and speed. Those traits drive innovation. But without accountability, even the best ideas fail. Structure gives creativity room to grow.

When you combine the startup mindset with enterprise discipline, you create something powerful. You stay agile while building a foundation that can scale. Investors see that balance and acquirers value it.

Related: 5 Things I've Learned by Co-Founding a Successful Business

Sustaining success over time

The truth is that big companies and startups have more in common than they realize. Both are built by people who take risks, learn from failure and adapt constantly. The difference is that the Fortune 500 have learned how to sustain success over time.

If startups can master even a few of those lessons — understanding their numbers, hiring with intention, staying focused, creating smart structure and planning for growth — they will not only survive but thrive.

At the end of the day, no one wants to buy chaos. People

invest in potential, and potential only scales when it is built on discipline.

Key Takeaways

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/starting-a-business/what-startups-need-to-learn-from-fortune-500-playbooks-and/499835

How We Out-Innovated Industry

Giants on a Modest Budget — and How You Can Do the Same

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Key Takeaways

- You don’t need more money than the biggest players in your space to compete with them. Industry partners can provide much-needed financial support for a new business.
- When looking for partners in the private sector, ssk yourself: What do you really need? Who’s going to help you move in the direction you need to go, vs. who might make that journey more complicated?
- While the private sector can provide funding, public institutions like universities and colleges can give you access to lab testing and research.

Most startups are budget-conscious by necessity in the early days, if not totally strapped for cash. That’s certainly what I remember when Roof Maxx was getting off the ground. We just couldn’t afford to outspend the biggest companies in our industry when it came to product or business development.

So we didn’t try. Instead, we sought out strategic partnerships that would help us punch above our weight.

Collaborating with respected private and public organizations in our home state of Ohio lent legitimacy to our novel roof restoration solution for homes and businesses without requiring massive marketing or R&D budgets.

Here’s what I learned about identifying and approaching these entities, and how you can do the same.

How to court the right industry partners

Industry partners can provide much-needed financial support for a fledgling business. But not every business association or advocacy group is going to be right for your company.

Before Roof Maxx even had a name, I was experimenting with the idea of replenishing the asphalt in roofing shingles. I had previously licensed a formula from a Canadian company that was working on a product aimed at achieving this goal, but patent issues and missed filing dates had prevented us from being able to adequately protect the technology.

That’s when I met Barry McGraw of the Ohio Soybean Council (OSC). He and I agreed that soy-based oils were a viable way to restore flexibility and durability to shingles that had lost their natural petrochemical oils over time.

The OSC is run by a volunteer farm board, and its mission is to invest funds in products and initiatives that support soybean farmers across the state. They didn’t need to be involved in the nuts and bolts of bringing our product to market; they just wanted to support our development and testing. They provided grants and left the rest to us.

So when you’re looking for partners in the private sector, ask yourself: What do you really need? Who’s going to help you move in the direction you need to go, versus who might end up making that journey more complicated?

Why the public sector is an

overlooked R&D goldmine

The private sector can provide critical funding for a new business, but public institutions like universities and colleges can give you unprecedented access to lab testing and research. For a business like Roof Maxx, that kind of academic clout can go a long way towards legitimizing your value within the industry and putting you on even footing with larger competitors.

Our partnership with the OSC allowed us to pursue product testing at Battelle Labs, one of the nation's most prominent research and development firms. This was fundamental to evolving the soy-based formula at the heart of our flagship product. But we still needed an independent evaluation to verify its efficacy.

That's what Ohio State University (OSU) provided. ASTM-compliant lab testing in their facilities coordinated with PRI Testing Labs, used by major U.S. roofing manufacturers, confirmed that treating asphalt shingles with Roof Maxx could improve flexibility, reduce granule loss and make them more resilient against natural hazards like high winds, moisture penetration or hail damage.

Thanks to that research, we had specific studies we could point to and prove that our product worked. When you're trying to disrupt a legacy industry with a solution barely anyone has heard of, that's the best way to deflect doubters and win early adopters.

Leveraging partnerships to create tangible value

Whether your partnerships are private or public, you need to know what you're hoping to get from them to help your business grow. You also need to have a plan for what you'll provide in

return.

It’s critical to understand that we didn’t just seek out organizations with more resources than us and ask them for favors. We made offers and brought value to the table. The OSC was excited about helping us develop the Roof Maxx product because the more we sold, the more demand there would be for the soybeans their farmers produced. For OSU, our partnership provided secure funding for research and valuable industry experience for their lab team.

But the most important lesson here is this: Forging partnerships that provided mutual benefits to all parties allowed us to develop a best-in-class product without a biggest-in-class budget.

You don’t need more money than the biggest players in your space to compete with them. You just need to identify a real need in the market, find partners who can help you develop a high-quality solution and make them an offer that compels them to throw their weight behind you.

Sign up for the Entrepreneur Daily newsletter to get the news and resources you need to know today to help you run your business better. Get it in your inbox.

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What Entrepreneurs Get All Wrong About Patents — and How It's Holding Them Back

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Key Takeaways

- Many founders delay patents, thinking they are expensive, unnecessary, or only useful for litigation.
- In reality, startups with patents are far more likely to raise funding, protect their technology and gain leverage during acquisition talks.
- Filing early, even with provisionals, prevents self-

inflicted loss of IP rights and keeps costs manageable.

I talk to founders every week who tell me patents aren't their priority now. They're focused on building products, shipping them to customers and pitching investors. Many assume IP protection can wait.

But if you look at who's getting funded and who's getting acquired, a different picture starts to emerge. An EPO–EUIPO study found that startups with patents are 10 times as likely to raise early-stage funding.

In this piece, I'll unpack the most common misconceptions I hear from founders around patents. Later, I'll share how getting your strategy right early can unlock capital, protection and leverage when it matters most to your startup.

So let's start with the myths.

Related: Your Big Idea Is Worth Protecting – That's Why You Need to Patent Your Invention

Misconception #1: We don't need patents to succeed

I hear this one constantly: *"Patents aren't really necessary to build a successful company."*

And yes, you'll find plenty of stories and a handful of high-profile outliers. One is WhatsApp, with a few patents, and it is still sold for billions.

But that's the exception, not the rule.

WhatsApp scaled rapidly in a narrow window when the messaging infrastructure was evolving. Later acquired by Facebook, a company with tens of thousands of patents and a deep IP strategy. Most startups don't operate in that environment.

So here’s my advice: Scan your ecosystem. What are the serious players doing, the ones you want to compete with or be acquired by? Chances are, they’re filing. So should you – at least hedge your bets.

Many innovative startups are doing the same. Take Solenic Medical. They filed early, and it helped them raise $5.1 million. That’s not luck. That’s leverage.

Misconception #2: We’ll file a patent once the product is ready

Founders tell me this all the time: *“We’ll sort out patents once the product’s ready.“*

And I get it, you’re focused on pitching, building, getting to market, etc. But here’s the problem: If you show your tech before you file, you might lose the right to protect it. Completely.

You don’t have to take my word for it. Courts have ruled this again and again. In Netscape v. Konrad, the inventor demoed too early – patent gone. Minerva Surgical showed their device at a trade show, then filed. The court tossed it.

This didn’t happen because these ideas weren’t strong. But because they waited, their own marketing effort spoiled any possibility of protection.

That’s how patent law works. You don’t get a second chance.

So file early, even a quick provisional will work. It’s cheap, locks in your date and keeps your options open.

Because once it’s public, it’s out of your hands and given to the public domain in many cases.

Related: 4 Surprising Patent Myths That Could Cost You Big – What You Need to Know Now

Misconception #3: Not every idea is patentable

Founders often assume their innovation isn't "*groundbreaking*" enough. They say: "*We're not inventing anything new, just improving something that already exists*."

I hear this all the time. But most patents aren't for game-changing inventions. They're for smart improvements that solve problems better than before. Inventors are often too humble to appreciate the patentability, so they seek a professional opinion.

Let me give you an example. Edison didn't invent the first light bulb. Others built versions, but they didn't last. Edison tested thousands of materials before finding carbonized bamboo. That made the bulb last long enough to replace oil lamps. It worked as an incremental advancement, and it was a patentable roadblock that justified commercialization.

I've seen the same pattern with startups. One change in design, one better method, and suddenly the product has real IP value for an incremental feature that every competitor will need to add to their alternative to remain competitive.

So don't underestimate your work. If it's new, useful and solves a problem, it might be patentable.

Misconception #4: Patents are too expensive for startups

Founders often assume patents are unaffordable. They're only for big companies with deep pockets. But that's a misunderstanding of how patent costs actually work.

In one of my earlier articles, I outlined how startups can manage IP costs strategically from day one.

Yes, a U.S. patent might cost up to $50,000 over its lifetime. But smart teams use provisionals to delay costs, limit filings to high-value ideas and plan ahead.

The cost isn't the problem. Poor planning is. When you treat IP like a business asset, it becomes affordable and powerful.

Misconception #5: Why patent if I don't plan to litigate?

Thinking that patents are only valuable if you want to litigate is a common disconnect with what sophisticated enterprises know. Litigation is just one use and often the least relevant for early-stage companies.

Take Tesla. In its early days, it filed key patents around its battery systems and charging tech. But when it opened those patents in 2014, it wasn't abandoning IP. It was using it to lead the market. Those early filings signaled technical leadership, attracted investment and helped establish Tesla's ecosystem. Even to litigate those patents against a competitor recently.

That's the real power of IP: signaling strength, building trust and opening doors.

So how do you build that kind of foundation from day one without hurting your budget and other resources?

Here's a roadmap I've seen work for startups.

Related: What Most People Get Wrong About Inventions, According to a Leading Patent Lawyer

A strategic IP roadmap for any

startup to succeed

After two decades advising startups on building IP portfolios that attract funding and strengthen exit value, here's what I recommend:

- **Don't let ideas slip through the cracks:** Capture innovations enterprise-wide. Product, engineering and support teams often surface technical solutions. Set up a simple system where any team can submit ideas easily, without friction.
- **Filter and file only high-quality patent ideas:** Not every idea is worth protecting. Focus on innovations tied to revenue, defensibility or investor interest. Use attorney input early to frame what's protectable, increasing the likelihood of success.
- **File strategically to save cost and create leverage:** File provisional applications to secure early dates. Leverage government fee discounts and defer global spend through the PCT. File where IP adds real business value.
- **Align IP with business milestones:** Time filings around fundraising, product launches and partnerships. A well-timed application strengthens your pitch or valuation.
- **Revisit and refine quarterly:** Your product evolves, so should your IP. Realign filings to what still drives business value.

Startups move fast. But your IP strategy should be just as nimble.

The founders who treat patents not as paperwork but as business infrastructure are the ones who raise stronger rounds, build more defensible companies and exit on their own terms.

Key Takeaways

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- In reality, startups with patents are far more likely to raise funding, protect their technology and gain leverage during acquisition talks.
- Filing early, even with provisionals, prevents self-inflicted loss of IP rights and keeps costs manageable.

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/growing-a-business/5-myths-about-patents-that-are-holding-entrepreneurs-back/501129

What Growing a Niche Conference From 80 to 800 Attendees Taught Me About Building Something Meaningful

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Key Takeaways

- The best platforms are built with input from many different team members with unique skills and experiences. The same applies to building a community.
- When you're bringing a group of people together, the environment you provide for them shapes their creative potential.
- Whether you're building technical systems or human networks, you need an incremental process of introducing new ideas and carefully testing them until they function effectively within the whole.

I'm well-known as a tinkerer who loves building apps and tools. But I also love building communities.

Bringing the right people together for a team or conference requires the same core skills as determining the right features for a platform: You need an ability to appreciate the value of each individual component and the vision to see how they come together to serve a higher purpose.

I discovered precisely how true this was when I created the DRIVE (Data Reporting Information and Visualization Exchange) Conference at the University of Washington in 2011. Its goal was to help people turn technical data into actionable strategic insights.

I've always believed in the power of finding new ways to present information clearly. It's a thread that has carried into my role as the CEO of PhoneBurner – a power dialing platform that includes advanced call analytics to improve outreach for phone sales teams.

But breakthroughs in fields like this don't only result from individual achievements. The real value of DRIVE was that it

let me take some of the most brilliant people in my field out of the silos and echo chambers they were stuck in and put them in a place where they could build on each other's knowledge.

In just a few short years, the conference grew from 80 attendees to over 800. Here's what I learned in the process, and why you should be putting the same energy into organizing people that you put into optimizing features.

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Diverse inputs contribute to stronger overall outcomes

The best platforms tend to include a range of tools and capabilities. They're also built with input from many different team members, each with unique skills and life experiences.

The same applies to running a successful conference. Even in the early days, I knew DRIVE could only be a success if it brought together a variety of perspectives.

In 2011, data visualization was nowhere near as prominent a concept as it is today. Most of the reporting tools that existed weren't much more advanced than simple spreadsheets.

Many people wanted to solve this problem, including some brilliant individuals at the University of Washington, where the conference was hosted. But their work was mostly academic. They didn't have experience translating their expertise into real-world impact. So I made sure the people I invited to the DRIVE Conference included private-sector professionals with practical ideas for turning abstract knowledge into usable power.

Those speakers would include everyone from Jeopardy! champion

Ken Jennings to the entire data team at Wikipedia. We've even had scouts from Major League Baseball teams share how they use data to look for talent. Together, the experts and attendees have been able to learn from each other and discover insights they might never have found if they'd stayed in their own fields.

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Create an environment that facilitates brilliance

When you're designing a piece of software, the system architecture dictates user behavior. When you're bringing a group of people together, the environment you provide for them shapes their creative potential.

DRIVE quickly started to attract interest from other major universities like MIT and Princeton. I remember taking an attendee from Princeton out for dinner during one night of the conference and asking her why she thought such talented people were gravitating towards the event.

It was simple, she told me. The event made people feel like they were rich for three days of their lives. Their needs were taken care of, they were surrounded by like-minded peers, and they had creature comforts that helped them relax and bring their best ideas forward.

Hearing that was a relief. I had obsessed over the smallest details when planning the event, leaving no stone unturned. I had even insisted on samples of everything the caterers were planning to serve beforehand.

It wasn't about showing off. It was about making sure that the tone and setting of the conference were as exceptional as the people I had invited. Just as the features in a platform are

only as useful as its foundations, an organization is only as effective as its culture and resources.

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Grow via iterative refinement

Finally, technical systems and human networks are similar in that they almost never experience sustainable growth at random. Building either consistently requires an incremental process of introducing new ideas, then carefully testing and editing them until they function effectively within the whole.

I think it's safe to say that going from 80 attendees to 800 in under 15 years is a fairly significant accomplishment for a conference focused on something as niche as data visualization and reporting. The ideas we discuss each year have major implications for almost every industry under the sun, but the global pool of experts in the field is still fairly exclusive, so this represents a great deal of growth.

But the number of attendees at the conference has always been less important than the quality and integrity of our work. We didn't grow by inviting anyone loosely involved with data science; we grew by carefully curating our list of speakers each year and gradually developing a reputation as a mecca for the best and brightest. In fact, we currently cap the number of attendees, and the last few years have sold out completely.

People don't want to come to a conference that's sprawling and unfocused; they want to participate in an event made by people who have invested significant time and effort to reach the top of their game. There's a quote I heard somewhere that I think of often when I'm inviting speakers to DRIVE and when I'm leading the team at PhoneBurner: "What got a wow five years ago won't get a yawn today."

If that means growing a little more cautiously so you can grow intentionally, so be it. Ultimately, it’s a much better way to create something meaningful, whether it’s a software program, a company or a conference.

Key Takeaways

- The best platforms are built with input from many different team members with unique skills and experiences. The same applies to building a community.
- When you’re bringing a group of people together, the environment you provide for them shapes their creative potential.
- Whether you’re building technical systems or human networks, you need an incremental process of introducing new ideas and carefully testing them until they function effectively within the whole.

I’m well-known as a tinkerer who loves building apps and tools. But I also love building communities.

Bringing the right people together for a team or conference requires the same core skills as determining the right features for a platform: You need an ability to appreciate the value of each individual component and the vision to see how they come together to serve a higher purpose.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/how-i-scaled-a-niche-conference-from-80-to-800-attendees/501021

This Is How GLP-1 Drugs Are Forcing Restaurant Chains to Change Their Menus

Would you like to supersize that order? Not anymore. Restaurants built on big portions are facing a new reality: Customers on GLP-1 weight loss drugs like Ozempic, Wegovy and Zepbound can’t eat as much. In response, major chains are quietly redesigning menus with smaller servings and higher protein content.

Olive Garden added a “lighter portion” section in December with seven downsized dishes at lower prices. Chipotle now offers a high-protein cup with 32 grams of protein for the price of a latte. Subway launched “Protein Pockets” this month with over 20 grams of protein in snack-sized wraps. Shake Shack introduced lettuce-wrapped burgers on its “Good Fit Menu.”

The shift reflects surging GLP-1 adoption. A November Kaiser Family Foundation poll found 12% of Americans now take these drugs, double the rate from May. Since the medications suppress appetite, users prioritize protein to preserve muscle mass.

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How 2 Developers Turned a $50,000 Basement Side Hustle

Into a $120 Million AI Business

Zhen Lu and Pardeep Singh spent $50,000 on GPUs in their New Jersey basements to mine Ethereum, they told TechCrunch. When that was unprofitable, they needed to justify the investment to their wives. So, they converted the mining rigs into AI servers and built software to make GPU development less painful.

They posted on Reddit offering free server access for feedback. Their big break came when Dell Technologies Capital partner Radhika Malik spotted their posts and reached out. Within nine months of launching in early 2022, they'd quit their Comcast jobs and hit $1 million in revenue.

By May 2024, Runpod had 100,000 developers and closed a $20 million seed round co-led by Dell and Intel. Today, the AI app hosting platform serves 500,000 developers, including OpenAI, Perplexity and Zillow, and generates $120 million in annual revenue. Their timing was perfect. They launched AI hosting two years before ChatGPT made it essential.

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I'm an AI Architect: You're Not Being Replaced — You're Being Revalued

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Key Takeaways

- AI won’t just change jobs — it will redefine what human work is worth.
- Careers built on human connection, presence and experience will outlast purely cognitive roles.

It was a very 2024 kind of image: a laid-off tech worker reduced to posting his availability on Manhattan streetlights with a QR code connected to his LinkedIn. “I thought that would make me stand out,” Glenn Kugelman told the *Wall Street Journal*.

UC Berkeley computer science professor James O’Brien immediately followed up the WSJ investigation with his own story of students with perfect 4.0 GPAs in their major contacting him worried about having zero offers. “Tech degrees no longer guarantee a job,” he wrote on LinkedIn, comparing it to the relatively recent days when Berkeley CS graduates received multiple good offers.

As a Berkeley grad myself who has worked in finance, crypto and AI, I have mentored students facing these anxieties about where to take their careers. It’s pretty clear that what is happening is very different from the boom-bust cycle of previous tech downturns.

IT sector unemployment grew from 3.9% to 5.7% in a single month earlier this year, and Mark Zuckerberg has already said AI will replace mid-level engineers in 2025. Yet we have massively overallocated our youth to roles like software engineering and the diagnostic aspects of medicine that AI will replace en masse.

This is just the start of a fundamental restructuring of what human labor is actually worth. With that in mind, we have to

think about what work retains value when machines can do almost everything.

The framework

The jobs that will become more resistant to AI displacement need to be valuable, scalable, ethical and what I call “AGI-resistant.” The outcome of that last criterion is the hardest to predict.

We are potentially years, not decades, from achieving AGI — artificial general intelligence that can handle virtually any cognitive task — but the advancements toward that goal are already changing the labor market. I am concerned about a shock where large segments of the population are made unemployed very quickly.

I have serious doubts that governments would adapt quickly enough to issue universal basic income, so we need to think proactively about which roles can actually sustain people through this transition. The principle of AGI-resistant work is that there are tasks, roles and performances where humans are simply preferred, regardless of capability.

It’s present in human chess tournaments, remaining popular due to the jeopardy of error and chance, despite chess bots being definitively stronger. The Olympics limits performance-enhancing drugs to preserve natural human ability. In both cases, we are choosing the human element over optimal performance.

This preference also shows up in community work, where compassion and empathy matter and are essential for the emotional and social development of children. And in the service industry, where it’s seen as higher status to have human labor over machines. Entertainment sits at one end of this spectrum, where human preference is strongest and most durable.

Why entertainment stands out

Entertainment has proven resistant to AI alternatives so far, though sentiment can change over time. The category is actually broader than most people assume. It includes the service industry — restaurants, hospitality and personal training — where customers pay a premium for human interaction.

The durability stems from three interrelated psychological drivers: boredom, loneliness and scarcity. People crave authentic experiences such as live performances, real connection and moments that feel unrepeatable. They also want to belong to communities and feel valued. None of these can be optimally offered by AI because it's the human element itself that is the product.

The work is valuable, scalable and offers sufficient ethical examples. This creates an odd inversion of what we have told young people for decades, pushing them toward "practical" fields like STEM degrees, medical school and corporate law. The calculus is shifting.

The scale and urgency

This isn't a small problem we can address gradually. India's youth population — 371 million people — faces an unemployment rate of 16%. In the United States, millions of high earners, including software engineers, will find their work replaced. Over the next three to five years, we will see major shifts as software investments reallocate and AI capabilities expand.

Any interim solution needs to employ hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people, and it needs to happen soon. The next wave of innovation lies in the physical world. The U.S. administration should institute a *new* New Deal, employing millions of Americans to develop bleeding-edge public

infrastructure. This could take two forms:

- **Near-term terrestrial projects** like national high-speed rail networks, modernized electrical grids for renewable energy, and climate-resilient infrastructure would create immediate employment while addressing urgent domestic needs.
- **Longer-term space infrastructure,** including launch facilities and manufacturing capacity for off-world construction, would position the U.S. for the emerging space economy.

All this work would provide large-scale employment while we navigate toward the longer-term reality where entertainment and human-centered service work become the economic foundation.

Start incentivizing now

Students should think differently about skill-building. Knowing what I know now, I would have encouraged my college self to take more probability and statistics classes. Today, quantitative literacy pairs well with the human-centered skills that will only become more relevant like understanding psychology, creating experiences people want and building genuine community.

I don’t have all the answers, but no one does. Those Berkeley students with 4.0 GPAs and zero offers deserve better than false promises about “practical” degrees. We cannot keep preparing young people for careers that won’t exist in five years.

In my view, it’s wise for us to institute the relevant legislation and large-scale solutions to incentivize a shift toward roles that are sustainable in the medium-term. I’m interested in hearing feedback and connecting with others who are working on this problem because this conversation needs to

happen now, before the shock hits.

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