Start to finish in ten years: the framework for an efficient and effective entrepreneurial journey

By Jodie Cook

TEN YEAR CAREER

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Introduction

The entrepreneurial journey is notoriously rollercoaster-like. No two paths are the same. Every entrepreneur starts at a different place and time with a unique set of skills, advantages (or disadvantages) and world views.

A select group of entrepreneurs have managed to build and sell their businesses in just ten years. When I talked to them, I found that while they created enterprises in vastly different fields and industries, their journeys followed a remarkably similar trajectory encompassing a number of distinct stages.

This paper aims to introduce a new framework to the entrepreneurial journey. Without such a framework, entrepreneurs are often confused about their day-to-day priorities and struggle to make strategic decisions. There are five main factors that most commonly stop entrepreneurs progressing in their business and career, all of which alleviated by a framework that gives clear direction about how they progress from its start to finish.

The paper outlines the paper's hypothesis then highlights these five inhibitors to progress that the framework seeks to overcome. We then introduce the Ten Year Career framework and explain its application to the entrepreneur journey. The framework is supported by case studies of entrepreneurs at each of its four stages. We then cover limitations of the framework and conclude before recommending the way forward for entrepreneurs and educators.

Business practices of entrepreneurs are often geared towards short term actions, the effect of which can be measured immediately. Business practices of those in employment are often geared towards long term actions, throughout a career that might span four or five decades. Neither route is optimal for success in business.

"People overestimate what they can do in one year and underestimate what they can do in ten years." ~ Bill Gates

Hypothesis

Entrepreneurs who set up their company and exited within ten years, achieving financial freedom, followed a specific route through the four distinct stages of the Ten Year Career framework:

1. **Execute:** where the groundwork is laid and an entrepreneur is busy establishing their business, proving their concept and finding their customer base
2. **Systemize:** where the insights from the execution phase are turned into processes and documentation
3. **Scrutinize:** where an entrepreneur steps back from their well-oiled machine and decides what to do next
4. **Exit:** where they sell their business or step back completely, and financial freedom is reached

Each stage is defined by the role the entrepreneur plays within their business and each stage requires specific focus and actions in order to progress to the next. All entrepreneurs can be placed into one of the four stages. Entrepreneurs who don't follow this framework are inhibited along the way by one of five factors, and financial freedom is never reached or takes longer than ten years.

The framework puts forward that ten years is the optimal time frame by which to operate; long term enough to not cut corners or seek silver bullets, short term enough to not waste time.

There are no rules for how long the entrepreneur remains in each stage and each will take a different amount of time depending on the business and individual. An entrepreneur may spend a few hours or nearly a decade in any one phase.

The purpose of the framework

Interviewing and surveying entrepreneurs about their daily struggles and biggest challenges, as well as the reasons why they progressed slower than expected, led to five overriding factors. Often only understood with hindsight, if known in advance they can be avoided in the first place. By understanding the Ten Year Career framework, the entrepreneur can identify where they are and what their focus should be, thus giving them a better chance of overcoming the following five inhibiting factors.

1. Taking the wrong advice

When someone is starting out or aiming to make a mark in business, they will likely receive unsolicited advice from individuals they meet during their normal course of business. They will also be advised by their friends, family, acquaintances and peers. While usually well-meaning, this advice can inhibit a naive entrepreneur because they can feel compelled into taking it. They may feel obligated to listen to someone and implement their guidance. Without being clear on their values and having a strong sense of purpose in their journey, the entrepreneur can take on advice from different sources, incorporate it into their business processes, and be thrown off track.

2. A lack of clear direction

Success is subjective. Every entrepreneur defines success differently. For some it's cash, net worth and material possessions, for some it's impact or number of people served, for others it's autonomy and freedom and for others it's brand and reputation. Most entrepreneurs incorporate a combination of factors within their personal definition of success. Without a clear direction of success, the entrepreneur isn't sure what they are aiming for. Their goals are hazy, they cannot see a finish line, and they take on the success metrics of others; colleagues, social media influencers, or the friends and family who give advice. This results in changing course or short-term thinking; which the ten year career timeframe seeks to avoid.

3. Following the norm

The average age of retirement in the United Kingdom is 65. In the United States it's 62. Education follows a clear path, from high school to college and beyond, with a teacher and mark scheme at every stage. Individuals who excel in education are brilliant at jumping through hoops, as long as the hoop is known to them. No matter how high it is held, they will make the plan and set the goals to reach the target. Success in entrepreneurship, however, requires a different set of skills. Unlike in education and many careers, the hoops aren't defined. Instead, the entrepreneur is required to conceive of the hoops from scratch, then make the plan and set the goals to reach them. Following the trodden paths of others rarely yields results, so imagination, confidence, belief and optimism are required. Aiming to copy the strategies of others inhibits the progress of entrepreneurs; they must pave their own way. Entrepreneurs who conform to societal norms think too small and either fail to create a business that delivers enough value to be successful or they don't envisage a career as short as ten years.

4. Becoming stagnant

For a journey that doesn't follow a set corporate ladder or clear path, stagnation can occur at every level. Without a clear idea of the next step, entrepreneurs are in danger of hitting plateaus at multiple stages of growing their business. Plateaus are caused by lack of motivation, market shocks, failure to innovate, becoming too comfortable and lacking the required knowledge or experience to scale. Without a boss to dictate the next steps or examples of individuals who have travelled the same path, the entrepreneur must know their own strengths and limitations to ask for help in pushing through a plateau. Then, they need to ask the right people. Because the hoops through which they jump are not defined, entrepreneurship can feel like climbing a mountain without knowing that the summit actually exists. The top of the climb might be just around the corner, but in becoming stagnant they stop trying to find it.

5. Being distracted

The entrepreneur has taken the leap to start their business and put the steps in place to build it in line with their vision. The visionary nature of such a person can become a hindrance. Rather than decide on their plan and having tunnel-vision focus on executing it, the visionary entrepreneur continues to come up with new ideas, think big and imagine new possibilities for how they spend their time or achieve their version of success. Distractions take the form of the advice and actions of other people, but also side projects. They see what other people are doing and they fear missing out. They pursue multiple businesses or lines of work at the same time, each spreading their energy more thinly. Upon deciding upon their way forward, entrepreneurs must work hard to resist the temptation to register new trademarks, purchase domain names and start new projects. Being a completer-finisher as well as a visionary is essential in order for an entrepreneur's not to become inhibited.

The framework

The Ten Year Career framework comprises four distinct stages: execute, systemize, scrutinize, exit. Entrepreneurs progress through these four stages in order, each spending a different amount of time in each stage.

At every stage there are defining components, beliefs that are useful to hold, and actions that must be undertaken. Each stage has pitfalls to avoid and stipulations on what is required in order to progress to the next stage.

Phase one: Execute →	You lay the foundations. You're curious, involved and busy. You focus on execution, find product-market fit, say yes, be exceptional and build your network and reputation.
Phase two: Systemize →	You create policies and processes, build a dream team and scale. You strategize and ramp up output. You say no. You focus and guard your time. You delegate, automate and eliminate.
Phase three: Scrutinize →	You create a sale-ready business. You work on your mindset, zoom out and think big picture, extract yourself from the day-to-day and explore your options.
Phase four: Exit →	You sell or step back further. You reach retirement or live like you have.

1. Execute

An entrepreneur is in the execution stage if they are responsible for executing a primary function of their business. This may be in the delivery of services directly to clients as a freelancer or sole trader, or by providing a fundamental internal process within a larger team. Their business relies heavily on them and wouldn't survive an absence of several weeks without a replacement. Their team may comprise hundreds of people, but if they are crucial to a fundamental process or the main bottleneck, they are likely in the execution phase.

All entrepreneurs begin in the execute phase. The purpose of the execute phase is to establish the foundation of a successful business: developing a product, refining a service and/or finding product market fit. The business should also discover the characteristics of the primary target audience as well as adjacent audiences. At first, the entrepreneur might not have sufficient resource to hire a team to execute the entire working of the business and greatly benefits from being on the ground themselves, engaging with customers and learning about the business processes first hand.

An entrepreneur may enjoy the execute phase or they may feel stretched. They are overwhelmed, doing everything in their business or stretched thinly, akin to spinning plates and hoping that one doesn't drop. Although this first stage is probably the most exciting stage, it likely won't feel like it at the time – it will probably feel like the most hard work. Execute is where most business owners are, mainly because it requires extra work to push through to systemize and, in the short term, the easy option is to remain here.

Despite its busy nature, the execute stage can be simple and doesn't need to be complicated. The entrepreneur is simply proving their product within its target audience and making sales happen.

This has three elements: finding the right product or service, finding the right audience for that product or service and finding the right channel by which to reach that audience with that product or service.

Examples of businesses in this stage include startups finding product market fit, or sole traders who do everything in their business including freelancers providing a service. Further examples include companies of any shape and size where the owner is still very much integral to the day to day running and there isn't much in the way of systems.

During execute there are some beliefs the entrepreneur should hold. They are beliefs that will be helpful for them within execute but not necessarily helpful for every stage. These beliefs are:

- → I have to do everything.
- → I'm doing things that don't scale.
- → I want to know everything.
- → I have to be busy.
- → Nothing ventured nothing gained.
- → There is benefit to everything I do.
- → I'm seeing what sticks.
- → I'm experimenting.
- → I'm playing a game of seeing what is possible.
- → I'm building a great company.

An entrepreneur's five-step plan for an effective execute stage is as follows:

1. **Define the goal**. The entrepreneur should get absolutely clear on what this is all for. What's that overarching goal they're working so hard towards? They should figure it out and remember it, keeping that goal at the forefront of their mind.
2. **Get out there**. This isn't the time to hide away, this is the time to meet people and talk to people and build a network. Here's where an entrepreneur should join groups, put their name forward to do talks, get seen, heard and known. Be visible and say yes. Share their journey, bring people in, say yes to coffees and meetings and events.
3. **Be exceptional**. This involves delivering an exceptional product or service that perfectly aligns with the needs of the entrepreneur's audience, and being exceptional themselves. Bring the best version of them to every scenario, sharing good vibes, doing what they say they will and not letting people down. This is where an entrepreneur establishes their reputation as being someone who is brilliant at what they do and can be trusted to deliver.
4. **See where conversations lead**. Now they are becoming known as someone brilliant, who others want to introduce, they could be one conversation away from a game-changing insight or breakthrough. Here's where an entrepreneur should aim to get on with people, build connections, follow them up, and keep a record of everyone they meet.
5. **Focus all efforts on growing the business**. The final step of execute is to keep working on making the product and service amazing, overdelivering for clients, and building a tribe of people who will be happy customers that refer them to others. This isn't the time for the entrepreneur to be starting side projects or sitting back and letting the money flow. This is where they should be focused and hands-on with growing a robust company and delivering great

work, ensuring high levels of customer satisfaction. All the conversations the entrepreneur is having, all the actions they are taking, should be channelled into that.

Entrepreneurs in execute:

We found early partners by pitching local municipalities that were open to piloting new technology and services. They were willing to try it out, and as the product quickly found a welcome reception among those customers, we began to actually monetize and sell it.

Lily Liu, PublicStaff

We were fresh out of law school in 1997 and we had an idea in our heads based off a business law class. My soon-to-be husband at the time came home from his 9-5 job to our tiny southern California apartment one day. He took $100 and launched a one-page website whereby we were able to help entrepreneurs complete the paperwork needed to form an LLC or incorporate a business.

Nellie and Phil Akalp

I read a lot. I wrote patent applications, trademark filings, and bought domain names for what eventually became the patented, and trademarked, "Edge Brownie Pan". In that time I won an invention contest funded by Microsoft and Visa that gave me just enough money to apply for a business loan.

I started selling bakeware via my website in 2004. With word of mouth and 1,000s of cold calls, there was a surge in product awareness. I found myself with 400 retailers and exposure in nearly every national newspaper.

Matt Griffin, Baker's Edge

The startup was completely bootstrapped until we got the prototype ready. The prototype was essentially a video cartoon explaining the concept, which is similar to what Dropbox did in their early days. Once we distributed that through our social network, we received the first 200 leads that proved to us that building an MVP (a minimum viable product) is worthwhile.

We had a very small team of two: the CTO and myself (a developer and a veterinarian). He was writing the code and I was taking the prototype to veterinary hospitals and testing it on the customers, perfecting it until we got the product that practices were willing to pay for.

Ivan "Zak" Zakharenkov, SmartFlow

We totally bootstrapped Notehall using our own money to build the product. While still in college, we relied on guerilla marketing to get the business off the ground, passing out flyers at the library to tell students they could earn money just by taking notes in class.

We partnered with the student body government at the University of Arizona and that was a big step and provided validation. From there, the model was that we would hire student note-takers for about $300 at schools where we wanted to launch. I graduated in 2010 and at the time we sold to Chegg in June 2011, we were at 80 universities with 500,000 students.

Justin Miller, Notehall

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Pitfalls of the execute stage are:

- → Spending too long strategizing or speculating and not enough time doing.
- → Prematurely automating or delegating tasks, for example, before the entrepreneur knows if they are optimal or effective.
- → Following the execution strategies or business models of other people without working out their own way forward.
- → Surrounding themselves with people who think too small or don't support them.

- → Too much visualisation and manifestation without the execution required to back it up.

An overriding pitfall in the execute stage is simply the business failing, in that it does not create a flagship product or service that is purchased by a specific group of customers, or the entrepreneur fails to reach their ideal customers. If a business will fail, it is most likely to fail in the execute phase. This is partly why it's so important to know when to progress from execute to systemize. Systemizing a business that is not proving successful is a pointless endeavour, and the time and energy would be better spent coming up with new products or services, approaching a different set of customers or testing different channels through which to reach an audience.

For some entrepreneurs who fail in the execute phase, their starting concept is flawed and no amount of networking or editing the business model will save them. For those whose idea is sound, however, the failure is likely a result of poor execution across one of the three identifiers: product, people or promotion.

In order to progress from execute to systemize, the entrepreneur should set one key (and significant) success metric. It might be a certain revenue or profit milestone, a venue milestone or customer milestone. The metric, once hit, makes clear that the business is on an upward trajectory and approaching a tipping point. Once they hit the goal, they systemize the business from there. Thereafter, they should move to the systemize phase of the Ten Year Career framework, make their plan for systemizing, and start to identify the people and processes that will play a role in systemizing their business.

For an entrepreneur who has secured funding to begin a business and begin to execute, the priority of establishing product-market fit in three ways remains. However, the entrepreneur may need to defend their decision to move to systemize when they want to, which may be earlier or later than an investor wants them to.

There are no rules for how long the entrepreneur spends in the execute phase. In some cases it may be as short as a matter of weeks but in more complex cases it will be several years. In the case studies analysed, the typical period is between one and three years. When the entrepreneur has found product market fit, has a deep understanding of the organisation, its audience and its place in the market, and hit its key business milestone, they can move to systemize.

If, however, the entrepreneur stays longer than required in the execute phase, failing to progress to systemize, not only may they reach burnout because they remain at the centre of their business, making most of the decisions and doing most of the work, but they may increase the (false) belief that they are the only one who can carry out certain tasks.

Moving to systemize marks a key change in the business journey. It's where the entrepreneur transforms from being someone who is open to everything, including changing quite basic elements of their business model, to someone who is setting clear, reproducible routines that they train other people and programmes to follow. The psychology involved in this leap is significant.

The owner must have trust in their business foundations and know that they are sufficiently robust, so that the systemization of operations that will now take place will not harm the business. They must go from someone who has a say over everything that happens in their business to someone who must trust subordinates and suppliers in order to systemize.

For this transition to be successful, the entrepreneur must welcome input from others, trust in their product, people and promotion strategy thus far, and be willing and eager to progress along their entrepreneur journey. They should have a clear reason for wanting to systemize, which might be:

- → The desire to successfully spend some time away from the business (for example taking a holiday)
- → The desire to grow the business to a new level (which they understand they cannot do as the bottleneck)
- → Or simply to see what is possible by establishing processes and turning a messy entity into a smooth machine

By thinking about systemizing the business, an entrepreneur may realize that the removal of bottlenecks (their own time and energy, case-by-case decisions, and manual processes that do not scale) the business should have no barriers to growth. The potential of this for their revenue, impact and progression might well excite them into systemizing.

2. Systemize

The systemize phase is the next along from execution and describes the entire transition phase from the entrepreneur working *in* the business to working *on* the business. This is enabled through the documentation of systems and processes that are automated or followed by trained and trusted individuals. Essentially, all execution is managed by other individuals or software. Here's where they have processes that run by default and break occasionally, not the other way around. There's a standard way of doing things.

By the end of the systemize phase, the business works seamlessly without the intervention of the entrepreneur. The entrepreneur may still have a role in the business, but they are not crucial to the working of the business and delivery of products and services. They are not responsible for signing off work or answering questions from team members. At this stage, the entrepreneur might feel like their company is a well-oiled machine and when they make changes they're tinkering and honing. Very few business owners truly get to this stage.

Systemizing allows for scale as well as increased strategic thinking, reflection and personal development, leading into the third phase. During systemize, bottlenecks are removed and the entrepreneur sources, trains and hands over tasks they used to run to other people and suppliers. From extensive thinking about what to systemize and to whom, they realize that they are not in fact the best person to run their processes themselves, and that other people are capable of taking specific operations further than they could.

The transition between the first two stages, execute and systemize, can be intense and laborious, because the entrepreneur may still be doing everything in their business and a central part of its operations while working on making processes.

Systemized businesses appear to be well-run operations with a distinctly relaxed owner. The owner has progressed from the busy execute stage and has more time available, brought about by the processes that are now a key part of operations. Franchises are examples of highly systemized businesses. Everything about the product and service follows a set structure which means they can be replicated again and again in new locations. A business having standard operating procedures or SOPs for how to everything in the business is systemized. Same with one making use of automation software to systemize processes.

During this stage, here are the beliefs it's helpful for entrepreneurs to hold:

→ I can train people well and trust them to deliver.
→ There are other people out there who are better placed to do these things.
→ I am removing myself as a bottleneck to my business.
→ I don't need to answer the same questions twice.
→ Case-by-case is not the goal.
→ My business runs by default and breaks occasionally, not the other way around.
→ Everything in my business can be systemized; delegated, eliminated or automated.

It's also helpful for entrepreneurs to welcome collaboration with people who hold different mindsets and skillsets. For example, the entrepreneur's mindset might be that they want to build an impressive operation and remove themselves from the day-to-day. A key hire they make, however, might be someone who Is intrinsically driven to organise and manage customers and team members. The size of the company matters to them far less than simply looking after its people really well. The entrepreneur should understand that these mindsets can co-exist and work together to progress the company according to an aligned vision.

Regarding skillset, the entrepreneur may enjoy and be skilled in analysing and changing business models but be less good at networking and sales. Knowing their limitations and weaknesses means they can hire people whose strengths fill the gaps. The entrepreneur should view their business not as dependent on their skills, but the sum of the team (and software)'s skills. During systemize the organisation becomes a combined entity of ability and proficiency, with every part working towards the same vision. The entrepreneur should seek to strengthen their organisation by hiring diverse skillsets and mindsets, rather than clones of themselves.

Proportionately, not that many businesses make it to systemize because there is a lot of work to get there. Systemizing in itself is unlikely to make the business money, it's more likely to cost the business money because of the need to hire people and build or subscribe to software programmes. Therefore, it should be seen as an investment that will allow future growth rather than a growth driver in itself.

Many entrepreneurs also remain in execute because they are unable to remove themselves fully from delivery of the customer-facing service or from a key internal process. Here is the five-step plan for how entrepreneurs can complete their systemize stage:

1. **Write down the processes**. In a blank spreadsheet, the entrepreneur should use column A to write down the title of every single process that happens within the business. That's sales, delivery, operations, everything from running a client meeting to hiring a new team member and whatever is in between. They might find they have 50 rows when when this exercise is complete. In column B, they should write down who is currently responsible for each process. This first step is about awareness.
2. **Make the plan** for how these processes are handled in the future. In column C of their table should go one of six things: the name of a team member they currently have, the title of a role they will hire, the person or company they will outsource this process to, the word eliminate, or the word automate. The sixth option is that they put their own name in some of the processes, but they should make sure these are things that only they can do. After writing one of the six options in column C. In column D, the entrepreneur should make their plan. What do they need to do? Train, hire, set up a software? They should add the date that they will do this by and commit to doing it. This is how a business becomes systemized.
3. **Create documentation**. As well as following this plan it's about writing up a process document for every process, so that the person or company following it knows how to follow it to the entrepreneur's standards.
4. **Test and monitor the processes**. As they start to train, hire and eliminate, the entrepreneur should switch their focus from carrying out the process to monitoring the process. They should work out where they need to train people better and work out where the process document needs explaining or expanding.
5. **Train and trust**. At this stage, the entrepreneur is removing themselves from specific processes and is required to trust other people to do them. Here they must train and trust, repeat and keep repeating rather than micromanaging.

Entrepreneurs in systemize:

I systemized my business by using Asana, the project management too,l to manage content ideas, writers, editors, posting, and content optimization. I also built out a Google Data studio profile to track all of my revenue across my advertising partners. Between Google Analytics, Google Data Studio, and Asana I'd designed a simple but scalable system to run, monitor, manage, and optimize the website. This is how my team of 7 worked completely remotely to help me scale the website.

Grant Sabatier, MillennialMoney.com

We systemized things when we created departments each having its own set of rules and responsibilities with department leads who would lead that specific department. We created training manuals so that things were all followed in one way to create a more seamless customer experience. The departments created started from the client considering our services to closing that sale, placing *that order into processing, then fulfilment and once the order was fulfilled, follow up and engagement post sale.*

Nellie and Phil Akalp

I had worked to develop relationships with my primary manufacturers. That means I had a long history of paying on time and being a great partner to those suppliers. I always paid a fair amount and was easy to work with - at all levels of production. I had nurtured close relationships with key members of every team - and most importantly - I was on a first name basis with every person in the shipping and packing departments. These folks were pen pals and online friends for nearly 15 years - and as a result - I had a team of 3rd parties pulling for me every step of the way.

Matt Griffin, Baker's Edge

We decided to rigorously follow an OKR structure from top to bottom. This helped organize small task forces composed of people from all departments on common goals. Our entire company also ran on Trello, a popular task management software to ensure everyone was organized and on the same page. Finally, the numbers were tracked live on cyfe dashboards and every single person had their own dashboards with clear metrics and targets.

Pawan Gupta, Curofy

We built custom software for all of our notetakers so we could track their progress and follow up with them. Our CRM tools included automatic emails and text messages and a database. The business process definitely helped scale, and we probably wouldn't have been able to sell the business to Chegg if we were just tracking these relationships by hand.

Justin Miller, Notehall

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Pitfalls of this stage include:

→ Omitting processes from the spreadsheet either accidentally or when dismissing them as inconsequential.
→ Creating the documentation for processes but either not using it or not insisting on team members following the processes as detailed.
→ Reverting to case-by-case decision making (as in execute) rather than referring to the processes in the first instance.
→ Mistaking new information or challenges as exceptions that do not follow an existing process, even though there is likely an existing process already in place.
→ Training and trusting but failing to check the required standards are being met or omitting quality control entirely form the process.

Some entrepreneurs progress too quickly from this stage without a full list of processes or sufficient process details in place only to find themselves regularly pulled back in to their business. Some delegate, automate or eliminate the wrong processes because they haven't sufficiently completed the execution phase: they either don't fully understand their business or they haven't proven their business model and infrastructure are sound.

This stage can progress as fast as the entrepreneur can train, hire and automate; essentially handing processes over effectively and letting them go. They will know that they can progress from systemize to scrutinize when they can take an extended trip away from their business. During this period, the business should not only run without them being there, but it should grow in line with the sales and expansion processes. Only high-level strategic inputs should require the entrepreneur's input.

Where possible, the outsourcing of processes should be done to software programmes. If a software programme can carry out a process to a defined quality without fail, a human should not do it instead. Taking into account an employee or freelancer's salary plus benefits and other costs of employment, software subscriptions are nearly always worth it. If a software programme cannot look after a process, the entrepreneur should seek the person most skilled in that specific task, which might be a company they can outsource to.

While the entrepreneur is likely to be a generalist (in that they are good in many areas) the people they hire should be more specialist. In working together, the specialists learn to engage in discussion about the best ways of carrying out tasks for the benefit of the business. For this to be successful, each process in the business must have a clear owner, which is understood and respected by everyone else in the say.

Sales, for example, may be looked after by Hayley. Hayley is responsible for following the sales processes, reporting on success and asking for help. Other team members may make suggestions, but they must be communicated to Hayley rather than changed without her knowledge. If the entrepreneur is confident in Hayley's ability and trusts her to deliver her role, this will work successfully. If, however, Hayley loses the entrepreneur's trust by demonstrating a lack of knowledge, making mistakes when following the process or failing to make sales for the company, the entrepreneur must train Hayley further or replace her. The entrepreneur's first reaction might be to undermine Hayley and carry out sales processes themselves. Not only would this be detrimental to the entrepreneur, because they would be back in the execute phase, but it would leave a team member demoralised and unlikely to improve in this working scenario.

As systemize is nearing completion, the entrepreneur should not feel overworked or burnt out like they might have during the execute phase. Instead, they should have more space to do some deep thinking, engage a business coach with the relevant experience or reflect on their work with close friends. It's becoming clear that their effective actions during execute and systemize have opened up previously unattainable options. Scrutinize is where they assess these options.

3. Scrutinize

Scrutinize is the third stage and the next stage along from systemize. The entrepreneur has a working model that is documented and running smoothly by trusted people, suppliers and programmes. The business is growing without the entrepreneur's input. The company's team members are empowered to excel in their roles and the entrepreneur may find that they have a lot of blank space and moments of calm because all is happening around them without them.

They have strong second-tier management in place to manage other team members and carry out the operations of the business. These team members may also be vested in the stability and growth of the business. These people take pride in resourcefulness and self-sufficiency but are aware of their limitations and know when to ask for help.

Scrutinize appears most prominently after execute and systemize, but there are elements of scrutinize before starting out at all, before systemize, and then significantly more after exit. Every stage of an entrepreneur's Ten Year Career has to be a conscious choice.

An entrepreneur is in scrutinize when they have executed extensively, systemized meticulously, and found themselves with options. Scrutinize is where an entrepreneur answers the question, "what do I want to do now?"

Scrutinize is where the entrepreneur can decide what they do next. They have manoeuvred themselves into a favourable (and rare) position and they have many options which can be summarised as:

1. **Return to execute in the business.** Their aim is to find the new challenge. This may mean they start a new project within the same business, raise capital and scale further, acquire another company to bolt onto theirs, explore verticals, work out how to expand the business in a new direction or simply decide to take on processes that represent working *in* the business rather than *on* it.

2. **Begin the execute phase in another business.** Now they have one business that generates cashflow without their involvement, they may decide to use this business as a cash cow and start a new one, perhaps in an unrelated field and perhaps with profits from the first business.
3. **Explore other interests.** They may decide to start traveling or spending more time with their friends and family now their business has reached the third stage. They may spend more time on a sport or hobby at a level that wasn't possible while they were executing or before the business was systemized. They may run their business as a lifestyle business while they do this, continuing to be involved but not in a time-intensive way.
4. **Proceed to exit.** Having scrutinized and decided to exit, the entrepreneur could now move towards a business sale or move towards an arrangement where they continue to own the business but don't have any involvement in the day-to-day operations.

Many of the world's most successful entrepreneurs, including Bill Gates and Elon Musk, did not exit at the ten-year mark. Their business journeys, however, included distinct execute and systemize phases. When these entrepreneurs reached scrutinize, they simply moved back into execute on higher levels each time, working on a new project on the level above, tinkering until that was proven and could be systemized and then beginning the cycle again. In continuing to grow an enterprise to new heights, this repetitive cycling between execute and systemize may prove fruitful.

In scrutinize there are some helpful beliefs to hold and they are as follows:

→ Everything is being taken care of.
→ My purpose is to think about the future.
→ I'm holding the best interests of me, my team and clients.
→ I'm working out what I want to do next.
→ I have created a great situation.
→ This is a great problem to have.
→ It's up to me to decide.
→ I will choose my way forward and not be swayed by the opinions of others.

The five-step plan for scrutinize is as follows:

1. **Do some soul searching**. Here the entrepreneur should work out and be certain of their strengths and weaknesses, what they enjoy doing, how they want to spend their time and what their personal mission is.
2. **Play with the different options**. The next step is for them to visualise each way forward being their reality. They should notice how they feel, what they are excited by and scared of. They should ponder questions including, "what do I really love doing?" "If I didn't have to work for money how would I spend my time?" And then finally, "how much potential do I see in my business?"
3. **Decide the way forward**. After they have laid out all of their options in step two, the entrepreneur should decide which one of those options they want, and commit to it.
4. **Make the plans** to line this up.
5. **Act with intention**. Move forward with determination now they have made their mind up.

Something that may affect the entrepreneur's final decision is whether they have taken the funds of investors during their business journey. If so, the investors may want to have their say in what the entrepreneur decides to do right now. They may have strong opinions about whether now is the right time to scale (perhaps by taking on further investment) or sell, and they may have a right to vote on the decision.

Entrepreneurs in scrutinize:

I decided to sell the business because I had moved on to my next business. In classic entrepreneur style I was not able to focus on just one business at a time, and I had tried a few ideas and [the one] that got to a few thousand a month in monthly recurring revenue I felt that we had product market fit, steady growth, I felt that this new business has proven to me that I can go all in on it and that makes me feel that it's really time to release the previous business so that's what I did.

Laura Roeder, Meet Edgar

We were at our E round of funding. With the E round, we lost majority share control of the company. Knowing this, we decided to exit the company seeing as the PE fund did not have the same vision we had for the company.

Chris Ciabarra, RevelSystems

I had been running Baker's Edge for 17 years. When looking at where my family was in life (kids now getting ready to go to college), I considered the price being offered, and more importantly how many years of running Baker's Edge it would take for me to realize that amount. Then I tried to imagine running the company that many years into the future, and it seemed like such an opportunity cost was too high. I opted to sell, and then reinvest those funds in other opportunities.

Matt Griffin, Baker’s Edge

There was a competitor that entered the market and they were also being reviewed by our potential strategic exits. Second, because we were the first-to-market, we also were looking at the next round of investment, but that would dilute the control of the company and we didn’t want to lose control over our roadmap. During that period, my partner was feeling burned out and I was pulling all the weight while he was taking significant time off. So the combination of those three things, and the offer from a strategic acquirer, helped us to make the decision to exit.

Ivan “Zak” Zaharenkov, SmartFlow

I decided to sell because, after 12 years, I was tired of dealing with employees, contractors, and the business being offline. I had discovered the possibility of creating an online business and wanted to go that route; selling information seemed easier and more scalable.

Kimanzi Constable, Z’s Relief Services

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Pitfalls of this stage are:

- → Not using it as the checkpoint it is, and instead meandering around and getting involved in the business’ day to day. This will only be confusing to the entrepreneur and team and will not help their business or career.
- → Some entrepreneurs in scrutinize suspect they want to exit or start a new, bigger project but they don’t get round to doing it.
- → Not being intentional. An entrepreneur can remain in scrutinize for as long as they like but they should make sure they have chosen it.
- → Consulting too many people about the next step. No one will know better than the entrepreneur what is best for them.
- → Rushing into a decision to scale, sit back or exit without considering the pros and cons of doing so, or having researched the possibilities.

Being in scrutinize is a really good problem to have. Rather than decide straight away where the entrepreneur goes forward from here, they may just want to enjoy it. They may choose to spend an extended period in scrutinize and figure out their next move as they’re doing that. With such autonomy over their time, location and headspace, they could very well feel retired right now.

Here an entrepreneur may decide they want to go back to the execute stage, with the same business. They may look at taking on investment, making acquisitions or reinventing their business in some way. They may revisit scrutinize and continue to hone and iterate the processes. If the entrepreneur decides here that they want a new challenge in a different field and they do want to progress to exit, the entrepreneur should run the numbers and work out what they want from their exit.

4. Exit

The final stage is exit and it comes after the other three. Not every business gets to the exit phase and exiting is not everyone's goal. Once a business owner gets to scrutinize they might decide they quite like it there. They enjoy having a business, they enjoy doing their own thing and dipping in occasionally. They're quite happy to run a company that facilitates their lifestyle.

Exit is where the entrepreneur removes themselves from the business completely, most likely in one of two ways. One is that they sell. They find a buyer, negotiate their deal, hand over and leave. The other is that they remain the owner of their business but don't do any part of the operation at all. They are truly out of the business, not to be drawn back in no matter what happens.

Like scrutinize, the exit stage is a very good stage to be in for the entrepreneur. An entrepreneur who has reached the exit stage has a saleable entity that they are looking to sell or a business that they own but do not run that they are looking to step back completely from.

The systemize phase is key to reaching the exit phase because without systems or documentation, and processes that run like clockwork, a business is far less saleable. This means it might be sold for a lower value than it's capable of or the owner might be required for an extended earnout period, where they are effectively hired by the buyer to oversee the business upon sale. If the entrepreneur wants an exit, it's likely they don't want an earnout, and they want to sell their business for the highest amount it can command.

Exit stages tend to be the shortest and also the most secretive. When a business owner is looking to exit (to either sell or step back completely), it involves a lot of admin to make happen. It likely won't be publicised at all until after they have made the exit. This should be the same for all entrepreneurs; there are very few people who need to know what they are doing until it's all done.

During the exit phase, the beliefs helpful for the entrepreneur to hold are as follows:

- → I'm ready to leave or step back completely.
- → I have created a valuable asset that someone else would be lucky to own.
- → I'm happy to stay but ready to go.
- → I know what I want to do next or I'm looking forward to finding out.

The five-step plan for an effective exit stage is as follows:

1. **Know what they want**. It's imperative that the entrepreneur knows what they want from a sale: the amount, the terms, the non-negotiables, and so on. If they're not selling but stepping back, they should know what they want here too. Where are their boundaries, what does their ideal day-to-day look like? They should create "if this then that" scenarios for things that might come up in the future.
2. **Conduct research**. An entrepreneur's next step is to find examples of what companies in their industry of a similar size have sold for and find out who they sold to. Gather more information about how these types of deals work. This step involves ensuring the business is sale-ready as well as the actual process of exiting.
3. **Keep it a secret**. The entrepreneur should operate in stealth mode to get this exit secured, telling other people on a strict need-to-know basis.
4. **Line up plans**, including a broker, if using one, a legal representative, an accountant, anyone within the business who needs to know the information. Ensure all routes are in place to meet with buyers, drum up interest and be in a strong position for any negotiations.
5. **Act with intention** to make the sale or exit happen.

Entrepreneurs in exit:

I cold emailed my way to selling my business. I did a lot of research on the process of selling and figured out that I had a financial sale, [then] figured out the most common types of companies that buy companies like mine.

Laura Roeder, Meet Edgar

I created an extensive standard operating procedure (SOP) document the acquirer could use to integrate the process and systems I'd designed to manage the site, which made the transfer more efficient. From interest to a closed deal took about 6 months.

Grant Sabatier, MillennialMoney.com

The entire process of selling the company took a very long time and was stressful. The important considerations are financial terms, lock-ins, outcome for employees, incentives to stay, position within the company, autonomy post acquisition, non-compete, etc.

Pawan Gupta, Curofy

The way I went about selling it was to first offer the business to my contractors and employees for sale. One of them decided to buy it and the process was fairly smooth compared to what I had read about selling a business.

Kimanzi Constable, Z's Relief Services

It was actually not difficult, since we had actually had a relationship with the acquiring company for years before the acquisition, so we had been building that partnership. We never had to shop around for a buyer given both this relationship, as well as the fact that they'd just raised capital specifically to make acquisitions, and that was their directive.

Lily Liu, Public Staff

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Pitfalls of the exit phase can be the most costly and are as follows:

→ Telling anyone about the plan before it's signed and sealed. Telling the wrong person might cost the entrepreneur their deal.
→ Taking their eye completely off their business while an exit completes, to the detriment of its future success and the detriment of the entrepreneur's work and life should the deal fall through for any reason.
→ A lack of understanding of the requirements of the sales process and failure to bring the right people on board, for example a broker, legal guidance and accountancy support. If support is missing, this can result in paperwork issues and naivety in negotiation that might compromise the deal or mean the business sells for less than it could warrant.
→ Not being prepared at all for the next step. An exit can be another confusing step for an entrepreneur, but if they are prepared for it to be confusing they can prepare to do the necessary reflection afterwards, which is also a really good problem to have.

Considerations and limitations of the framework

The Ten Year Career framework, although comprehensive, comes with five key limitations an entrepreneur or educator should keep in mind when following or teaching it.

1. No specific time in stages

The framework is not prescriptive as to how long an entrepreneur should spend in each stage, rather it teaches that an entrepreneur should define their success metrics and be aware of the signals that the stage is nearly complete. Not only does each stage hold unique characteristics, but there are also clear signs when it has concluded.

2. Different skills

The skills of one entrepreneur will differ from another. Some entrepreneurs will be more natural executors; their skills include creating, implementing, building a network and holding a high capacity for work. Other entrepreneurs are good at creating comprehensive and highly detailed process documentation, while others hold high self-awareness or can expertly prepare a business for a successful sale. Different entrepreneurs, therefore, will require varying levels of assistance at each stage, either from their support network or people they hire or outsource to.

3. Transitions not clear cut

Although there are signals when a stage is nearly complete, the transition between them is not always clear. Many entrepreneurs will go back and forth between stages as their business requires. An entrepreneur, for example, may continue to execute in their business as they are documenting processes and systemizing their business. They will need to assess when it’s the right time for them to leave execute completely. An entrepreneur building a team and business might cycle between execute and systemize repeatedly, addressing a new product or service each time. Some entrepreneurs, for example those whose business relies on their specific creative skills, may always hold an element of the execution. Similarly, an entrepreneur in systemize or exit may occasionally be required to execute or create new processes.

4. Market shocks

External forces including market shocks may force an entrepreneur to enter a stage without prior warning. An entrepreneur who has completed execute and systemized their business, for example, may need to re-enter execute again if unforeseen challenges occur for which there is no blueprint. Similarly, an entrepreneur who has not yet completed the systemize stage may receive an offer of sale for their business that they want to accept, thus rushing the scrutinize phase and entering exit sooner than planned. An entrepreneur ready for exit might face challenges selling their business at a specific time, requiring them to execute or scrutinize further to achieve a sale.

5. Business types differ

No two businesses are the same, and each require varying degrees of complexity in order to execute, systemize or exit. This holds true across different industries, geographic regions and personality types of the entrepreneurs at their helm.

Comparable models of the entrepreneur journey

There are several other models for the entrepreneurial journey. These serve to validate, contrast and compliment the Ten Year Career framework to varying degrees.

1. The business lifecycle model: launch, growth, maturity and decline

The traditional model of the business lifecycle is launch, growth, maturity and decline. The stages of the Ten Year Career framework can be mapped onto this journey to provide entrepreneurs with key actions for progression. The launch or introduction phase almost always requires the entrepreneur to be in execute mode; developing the business and finding product market fit.

Systemising the business enables scale in a sustainable way, facilitating the growth and ultimately maturity phase of the cycle. Once the business is fully systemized, the scrutinize phase helps an entrepreneur decide where to take the business. The maps to the maturity phase but also the decline phase where an entrepreneur must decide how the business evolves to stay successful. This may also be the time at which the entrepreneur decides to exit the business, enabling others to capitalise on the opportunities the future holds.

2. James Clear: beginner, intermediate, advanced

James Clear, author of Atomic Habits, shared a simple model for entrepreneurs to help guide them in their focus area depending on their stage of business. He suggests entrepreneurs work on the following in the following stages:

Beginner: execution
Intermediate: strategy
Advanced: mindset

The beginner entrepreneur working on execution is the same as the Ten Year Career framework. For the intermediate, strategy is the focus. This perhaps assumes that product market fit has been achieved and the focus is now scale and navigating broader challenges facing the business. This can be achieved through systemizing the business as this reduces the burden of execution on the entrepreneur who can work more strategically before understanding what they want from their life and business.

The advanced entrepreneur should focus on mindset. There is some crossover with scrutinize here because this suggests an entrepreneur should focus on becoming the best version of themselves, while understanding the role their business plays in that person's life. Clears' model is highly simplified, meaning there isn't a clear end or exit stage, but it is likely implied in the advanced stage.

It is difficult to assign these labels to entrepreneurs as there are many variables that determine how advanced an entrepreneur is within their journey. Furthermore, mindset is a crucial part of the entrepreneur journey at every stage.

3. Ayman Al-Abdullah: 12 plateaus of progress

The start-up phase: person, product, promotion and process
The scale-up phase: people, performance, plan, profits
The grow up phase: psychology, pinnacle, protection and press

Al-Abdullah's model relates to businesses as opposed to entrepreneurs. However, his focus areas in the start-up phase are reflected in the demands of the execute phase and beginning of the systemize phase. "Person, product, promotion" relate to finding product market fit and being able to market the offering effectively to the audience. This stage of the business is likely to be managed by the start-up entrepreneur, themselves, during their execute phase.

The "process" element of the start-up phase can be related to systemize as the entrepreneur begins documenting their tried-and tested-business processes. This lays the foundation for Al-Abdullah's scale-up phase which then focuses on "people, performance, plan and profits". These are all elements that the Ten Year Career framework addresses in its systemize stage. The grow up phase relates to businesses with over $100m in annual revenue that face different challenges to those of most entrepreneurs. By this stage, an entrepreneur would inevitably have scrutinized their role in the business but also the role of the business in their life and their appetite to continue on that journey. Therefore, the scrutinize and exit phases as outlined in the Ten Year Career framework would lie in the scale-up or grow up phases.

4. Daniel Priestley: entrepreneur journey

Author and entrepreneur Daniel Priestley developed an entrepreneurial journey that aligns with the number of team members a business has. This is simplified to:

→ Start-up: pre-revenue, testing out ideas
→ Wilderness: a struggling entrepreneur with no or very few team members, juggling multiple responsibilities, up to $300k turnover
→ Lifestyle business: lifestyle or boutique business where the entrepreneur has more time and has a small team of three to 12 people, with revenue between $300k - $2m
→ Desert: a team between 12 and 50 employees, between $2m and $10m turnover where the business is "too big to be a small businesses but too small to be a big business"
→ Performance business: $10m+ in annual revenue and a large team showing steady growth and a high valuation

(https://www.keypersonofinfluence.com/wp/where-are-you-on-your-entrepreneur-journey/)

This matches well with the execute phase as the entrepreneur may feel they are in the wilderness until they have built a team that follows processes. Systemizing the business enables the scale to a lifestyle business and beyond, at which point an entrepreneur can determine their optimal route in terms of business growth.

Priestley's model is more prescriptive in terms of business size, but it doesn't relate to the personal journey of an entrepreneur and the demands on them within the business at each stage. For example, it's very possible for an entrepreneur to have fully systemized, scrutinized and exited a business in the "lifestyle" phase whilst an entrepreneur with a "performance" company could still be executing within the business.

5. Duncan Cheatle: Helm Club support model

The Helm Club has created a three-stage model to support its member entrepreneurs. These are:

Scale: for businesses with a £1m-£10m turnover
Step back: for businesses with a £10-£20m turnover
Life after exit: for entrepreneurs who have sold their business

These three phases map well to the systemize, scrutinize and exit stages of the Ten Year Career framework. It would be assumed that in the pre-£1m per year turnover that the entrepreneur is still finding product market fit and is likely in the execute phase.

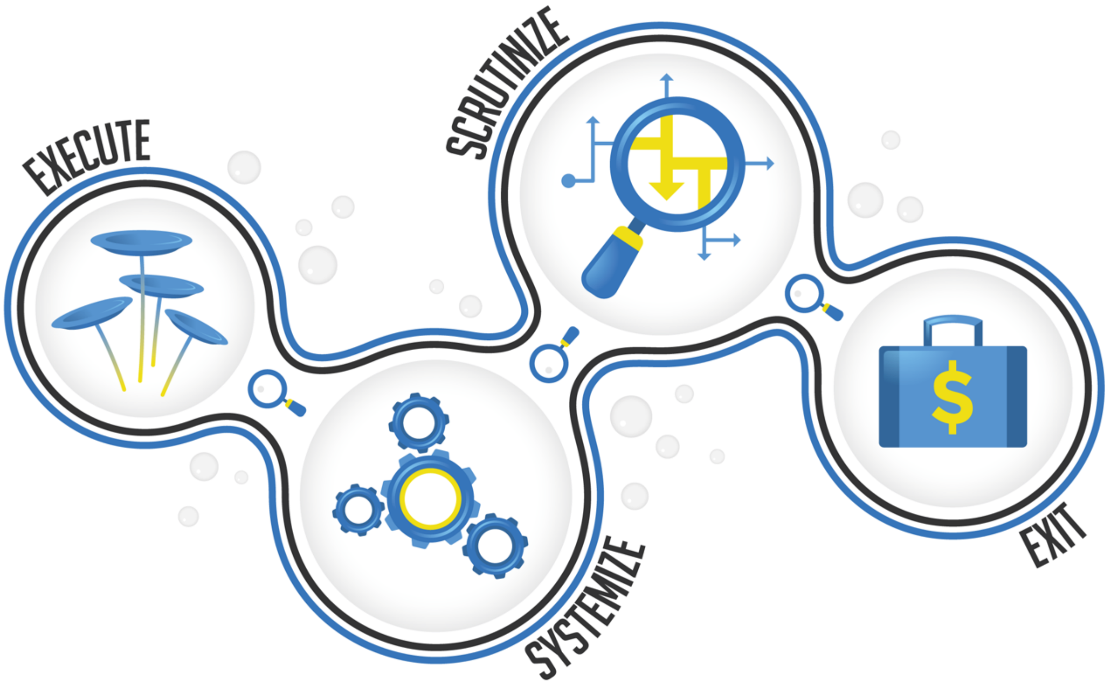
The scale stage is focused on ensuring scalability and profitability through systemization and staying focused and motivated; all key features of the Ten Year Career framework. "Step back" focuses on the personal journey (akin to scrutinize and James Clear's "mindset"), hiring and securing great people and preparing for a potential exit. There is a strong correlation with the scrutinize and exit phases of the Ten Year Career framework.

Conclusion

The Ten Year Career framework maps the journey of entrepreneurs from concept to exit. The four stages; execute, systemize, scrutinize and exit, are present in the journeys of the entrepreneur case studies in this paper, each of which resulted in a successful exit. The framework is a valuable tool for entrepreneurs because it enables them to identify which stage they're currently in and, therefore, which beliefs they should hold and actions they should take to progress to the next stage.

The psychology of an entrepreneur as they progress along their journey is a key component that can mark the difference between business success and failure. The entrepreneur mindset is not a single set of attributes, rather an entire library of attributes that must be utilized differently during different phases.

The mindsets necessary at various stages in starting, growing and exiting a business are distinctly different, and an entrepreneur needs to make key transitions and evolve with their business in order to build one that thrives.



Case studies of entrepreneurs who have successfully exited or removed the financial requirement to work within a ten-year period demonstrate that progress through all four stages is required.

Entrepreneurs whose businesses stagnate or who take several decades to achieve financial freedom have fallen into one or more of the pitfalls outlined. These entrepreneurs typically remain in one stage for too long, lacking the knowledge or intentionality required to progress.

Whilst there is no specific time span for entrepreneurs to spend in each of the four stages or in order to complete the full framework, ten years is an aspirational but highly realistic time frame. This is backed up by several case studies.

Recommendations

Entrepreneurs who aspire to experience a successful exit, whether in selling their business or owning but not running it, should first identify the stage they're in. This requires an understanding of each stage of the framework as well as awareness of their role within their business. Familiarity with these two components inform the focus areas and actions of the entrepreneur.

Entrepreneurs who identify as being in any stage beyond execute must minimise activity representative of the previous phase. For example, an entrepreneur in systemize must minimise the amount of execution in their day-to-day. An entrepreneur in scrutinize must finalise their systemizing or ensure team members are in charge of further systemization. This ensures two outcomes; first, the entrepreneur is less likely to regress to a previous stage and second, the tasks required to reach the next stage are clearer.

At each stage, seeking support from others in the same stage or just one stage ahead may be the most fruitful for entrepreneurs. Being guided by someone in a completely different stage, who doesn't have knowledge of the framework, may result in advice that isn't optimal for the entrepreneur's current stage. An entrepreneur's support network is most beneficial when it consists of people in the same stage, each working on progressing to the next.

Some attributes and practices are beneficial at every stage and these include self-awareness, coaching, journaling, meditating and exercising. Maximum success in each stage requires the entrepreneur to be in their best health, both physically and mentally.

Entrepreneurs should seek to remove unhelpful influences from their life and create boundaries around their time so it can be spent most effectively. Unhelpful thoughts, beliefs and people should be noticed and removed.

Case studies

Laura Roeder – founder of MeetEdgar
2014 - 2021

Execute

When I launched MeetEdgar we self-funded it from my previous business, a social media online course business. MeetEdgar is a social media scheduling tool, before that I was doing online courses that taught entrepreneurs how to do social media marketing. We took the course material and turned it into software that does for you what we were teaching to do manually in the course. We used the customer base and launch list from the previous business to get MeetEdgar off the ground.

Systemize

As a SAAS business it's not an agency or service business that you're doing something manually and then it gets systemized, the core business is the software, which is always great for selling a business, making the business saleable and scalable was really all about putting a team in place to makes sure that the business didn't rely on me as the founder, instead we had a person who is not me in every part of the business fulfilling development, marketing and operations.

Scrutinize

I decided to sell the business because I had moved on to my next business, in classic entrepreneur style I was not able to focus on just one business at a time, and I had tried a few ideas and the business that I'm doing now, Paperbell, which is a SAAS to run a coaching business, basically once that got to a few thousand a month in monthly recurring revenue I felt that we had product market fit, steady growth, I felt that this new business has proven to me that I can go all in on it and that makes me feel that it's really time to release the previous business so that's what I did.

Exit

I didn't use a broker, I cold emailed my way to selling my business, I did a lot of research on the process of selling and figured out that I had a financial sale, figured out the most common types of companies that buy companies like mine. In my case, a SAAS business, there's a group of micro PE firms that acquire a bunch of SAAS businesses so I emailed them all and told them I had a SAAS business to sell and it was a very quick and easy process, relatively speaking, a few months start to finish, and I ended up selling to a company called Shareswift, they've been a really great partner, a great steward of the company so I'm really happy with my decision to sell and how the whole process went.

Grant Sabatier, founder of MillennialMoney.com
2015-2020

Execute

The business started as a simple personal finance blog built on WordPress for me to share my strategies for investing. I spent a lot of time writing high quality content that I hoped both users (and Google) would value as being highly relevant. I then made sure the site was fast and engaging through simple user experience and site optimization. It took about a year for the website to make any money, but I was able to earn about $1k a month after the first year primarily through display ads. Over 5 years I scaled this to over $100k a month in ad revenue, mostly through affiliate ads.

Systemize

I systemized my business by using Asana, the project management tool to manage content ideas, writers, editors, posting, and content optimization. I also built out a Google Data studio profile to track all of my revenue across my advertising partners. Between Google Analytics, Google Data Studio, and Asana I'd designed a simple but scalable system to run, monitor, manage, and optimize the website. This is how my team of 7 worked completely remotely to help me scale the website.

Scrutinize

I decided to sell because I was both burnt out and there was a lot of interest from potential acquirers all at once. Since there was so much interest in buying the website, I quickly decided to try and capitalize on the interest by creating a bidding war between interested parties. I was worried that I would never have that level of interest again, so I took advantage of the demand for the site during the pandemic.

Exit

I have a great a M&A attorney that I used who charged by the hour to review the letter of intent, the contracts, as well as make sure I was protected legally. I didn't use a broker so I didn't have to pay the typical 10-20% fee, which kept more money in my pocket.

I also created an extensive standard operating procedure (SOP) document the acquirer could use to integrate the process and systems I'd designed to manage the site, which made the transfer more efficient. From interest to a closed deal took about 6 months.

Jennifer Williams, founder of Cuddle Clones
2010-2022

Execute

I first found inspiration for Cuddle Clones in my beautiful Harlequin Great Dane, Rufus, who had one blue eye and one brown eye and a white-and-black coat. As a creative at heart, I wanted to make a stuffed animal inspired by him just for myself. But once I met my eventual co-founder Adam Greene while I was earning my MBA at the University of Louisville, I realized I could turn my hobby into a fully-fledged D2C business.

Systemize

From the beginning, Adam and I were obsessed with quality. It took two years just for us to be able to make a product that resembled what we thought a Cuddle Clone should look like in terms of quality, cuddliness and accuracy. For the first three years of the business, we manually reviewed every single Cuddle Clone. Since those days, we've grown to become a data-driven company—maintaining time studies, quality control measures and constantly optimizing the production team with the newest best practices to meet demand.

Scrutinize

In 2021, I decided it was time to develop an exit plan that would keep my original vision alive. Dianthus' proprietary AI platform filled in the missing gap that was needed to rapidly grow the brand and scale Cuddle Clones long-term. Since Dianthus acquired Cuddle Clones, the business has grown from $15M in revenue in 2021 and is now on track to generate $26M in revenue in 2022—increasing revenue nearly 2x and profit 5x.

Exit

Long before I started devising an exit plan in 2021, I worked hard to position Cuddle Clones so that it would be attractive to potential buyers down the line. Suitors interested in Cuddle Clones included a public company, another company in the custom print-on-demand space, Dianthus, and a few others. But Dianthus stood out to me. I liked the pitch of the business, and that it was a startup itself. I felt Cuddle Clones could help contribute to the vision of the tech-forward brand builder.

Nellie and Phil Akalp, anonymous company (MyCorporation)
1997-2005

Execute

We were fresh out of law school in 1997 and we had an idea in our heads based off a business law class. My soon-to-be husband at the time came home from his 9-5 job to our tiny southern California apartment one day. He took $100 and launched a one-page website whereby we were able to help entrepreneurs complete the paperwork needed to form an LLC or incorporate a business.

Systemize

Word got out quick about our services and business started flowing in. We were soon able to move that company out of our apartment into an office and hired our first employees. It grew from there, expanding with both team members and services which increased sales.

We systemized things when we created departments each having its own set of rules and responsibilities with department leads who would lead that specific department. We created training manuals so that things were all followed in one way to create a more seamless customer experience. The departments created started from the client considering our services to closing that sale, placing that order into processing, then fulfilment and once the order was fulfilled, follow up and engagement post sale.

Scrutinize

In 2005 we were handed an opportunity from Intuit that we could not pass up. The price was right, the timing was right, and my husband and I were in a place in our life where we felt it was the right time to make changes and so we decided to sell. We weren't actually in any sort of a position to want to sell our business, nor had we even discussed any potential type of exit strategy at that time. In fact, when we were confronted with the opportunity it first came to us as a business development partnership opportunity and then soon thereafter the conversations changed to one of acquiring our company. As such, when we looked at all elements of the potential transaction and the parties involved and the person wanting to purchase our company, we felt this was not only a great opportunity for us as a couple but also for our entire team and the company itself.

Exit

My husband and I stayed on as lead roles of that previous company after Intuit came on board. We had an agreement where we would still be involved in the business, after all it was our baby. However, both my husband and I are very much free spirits and were used to coming into the office in their gym clothes, and hosting business meetings at the beach. With Intuit in control, the atmosphere was very different so my husband stepped down first, then I followed shortly after. At the time we had three children (now four) so we decided to retire early and focus on our family. So it was then that we stepped away completely from that first company.

Although we were technically able to never work again, within a few years we found ourselves 'too young' and 'too motivated' to retire early. So we launched a new company in 2009 when our non-compete with Intuit was up. Our journey with CorpNet has had its highs and lows but I'm thrilled that we had our biggest growth ever (200%) in 2021 and we're slated to keep growing!

Chris Ciabarra, founder of Revel Systems
2010-2017

Execute

Revel Systems was the first iPad POS to connect to high volume peripherals such as a card swipe or receipt printer. What helped us get noticed was when we printed from an Apple iPad before Apple came out with the ability to print from the iPad 1, which was released in 2010.

The start of Revel Systems was not as easy as some may think. It was a crazy adventure with constant highs and lows. Truth be told we were selling an Uber eats like app to restaurants before Uber eats or any of the ordering apps were big. The app cost 19 a month when we were going door to door to get clients. We had about 5 clients when we ran into a Restaurant in Sausalito California called Hamburgers in Sausalito. The owner had his number on the wall so I called him on the phone and scheduled a meeting at his other location, Fish and Chips in Sausalito. Our co-founder Lisa and I talked to the owner, Michael Lappert, one morning and learned he had a 6 store operation. He gave us something bigger than the online ordering app we were selling him: the POS (point of sale). Both he and the industry called this "piece of sh*t." Needless to say we needed a new name for our brand. The owner showed us his main points in the restaurant world: it took too long to get someone on the phone, too long to get a system, too long and expensive to fix a system. The cost of systems were too expensive, too hard to operate, it took days to learn. Lisa and I accepted the challenge to fix all of this and wanted to create the best POS in the world! Note that neither Lisa nor I have ever worked in a restaurant. I was a tech security geek and she was an entrepreneur out of Stanford.

Lisa and I had no money to start. We had just spent it all building the online ordering app but our hearts were ready to go. Our first customer Michael gave us a check for $3,800 before we even had a system created. We needed to hire a team so we started to ask around for angel investors to invest in our idea.

Our first couple of meet ups were a hard "no" since we had no sales and no product- just an idea and now a check for 3,800. While we were pitching to the 10th investor, we had ears listening behind us which we did not know. The investor we were pitching to said no but before we could get up the man behind us said "let's talk." He was interested in giving us $20k to go create this POS platform. We took the check that week and I said I would fly to India and create a team to program the app for 40 days. We had no experience on POS systems so we started to research. I downloaded some POS software open source online to get familiar with the POS. We then recruited 10 restaurant owners in a meeting to give feedback of main points and how they wished the POS worked. I took all of this knowledge and flew to India. I remember on the plane I was designing the UI with one of the developers in India. By the time I landed, we had the first screen of the point of sale already done. We were ready to hit programming.

I had a team of 10 people in India. We had to figure out so many unknowns like printing from an Apple iPad. Apple did not have a print feature at this time in 2010. We had to manage to add a high volume card swipe seeing as the other players in the market had card swipes that took 3 or 4 tries before a card would work. That was not good for high volume restaurants, and we knew it. Amazingly enough, at the end of the 40 days and many new memories, we got the working prototype ready to go. I came back to the USA in one piece and we installed Revel's first unit at Fish and Chips in Sausalito. It was the adventure of a lifetime.

As soon as we got back, we needed press to get noticed. I called NBC and sent an email with images. To our surprise, the next day we were on the front page of the news for building an iPad POS. This got us clients from around the world calling in. Business was booming.

Systemize

We looked at the market as a whole to make this company go. Therefore, we had to fix all the issues that were plaguing the marketplace for point of sale. Supply chain: customers complained it took weeks to get a point of sale vendor on site and even longer to get one ordered or repaired. Hardware: the hardware was out of date and costs a fortune. The software was so backwards it hurt to even look at. I have to tap the screen ten times to get one item ordered. All of that which we fixed and made better with the Revel iPad point of sale. Revel means to party and have fun which is an example what we did in the market.

Revel was created to run a restaurant and retail store from the start. Revel added in time and attendance, as well as inventory control for both restaurants and retail business features. Other back of house controls included bar code scanning items into inventory, breaking up items into ingredients, cash out, end of day reporting, tip distribution, and scheduling of employees. These features help streamline any business on the Revel Systems platform.

Behind the scenes we had to do shipping. That changed the industry since we were able to ship out within 24 hours of a payment being placed. We also learned very quickly that we had to take payments upfront. Some businesses would not pay if we did not collect upfront, even big businesses. For shipping out the next day, we had to have 2 warehouses to ship products out to the customers. We put one in Florida and one in California to make shipping costs lower and to get orders out fast. All systems were pre configured because it makes it easier for customers. We were frequently asked "Why don't you use a third party shipping and kitting company?" Our reasoning was that no other shipping company would do it correctly. We tested a few out, some customers who received items but not pre configured which was a nightmare giving a restaurant owner a new iPad, router, switch, card swipe machine, printer, and cash drawer not setup properly. It took 4 hours to configure over the phone dealing with networks and such. This was key since we wanted our customers to have a plug and play feeling when getting the Revel iPad POS.

The sales process was tricky. We noticed when we pick up the phone without customers leaving a message, we were able to get one day or quick closes. If the customer went to voicemail the sale process took longer since they called another vendors and now we have to compare systems. Having real salespeople pickup calls fast was key to closing sales faster. We made sure we had sales staff ready to go.

In the beginning of Revel, we relied heavily on Google to send us leads. We were number one in Google for keywords in POS.

Scrutinize

"We were at our E round of funding. With the E round, we lost majority share control of the company. Knowing this, we decided to exit the company seeing as the PE fund did not have the same vision we had for the company.

Exit

We took the money from the PE fund and now we never have to work again. This was the easy part because the months went by traveling the world. Then, we got bored and started a new company, Athena Security, which detects concealed weapons. We started this due to the rise in numbers of school shootings and we wanted to make a difference in the world. Seasoned entrepreneur here with over 150 million raised in capital and exited my last company after reaching 500 million in evaluation. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Ciabarra

Matt Griffin, founder of Baker's Edge
2004-2022 (and Griffin originally started the site in 1998)

Execute

I started Baker's Edge the year I graduated from college, 1998. It was one of those cliched moments of "oh no, I don't think I want to work a day job my whole life, I better invent something". Well, a few hours into this crisis (while eating a brownie) I came up with a concept. I realized that no one had ever made the observation of which brownies were the best, corners or middles. I could make a polarizing product that catered to the corner loving people, cand make a conversation starting product that could be carried forward by a debate!

So from that point to 2004, I read a lot. I wrote patent applications, trademark filings, and bought up domain names for what eventually became the patented, and trademarked, "Edge Brownie Pan". In that time I won an invention contest funded by Microsoft and Visa that gave me just enough money to apply for a business loan.

I started selling bakeware via my website in 2004. With word of mouth and 1,000s of cold calls, there was a surge in product awareness. I found myself with 400 retailers, and exposure in nearly every national newspaper. In addition, we got coverage on The Today Show, Martha Stewart, Shark Tank, and even the coveted final episode of Oprah's Favorite things (2010).

Over the next decade we saw sales rise and fall and eventually transitioned to an Amazon.com exclusive model. With the rise of associate fee articles (Buzzfeed, Business Insider, CNN, Mental Floss) we found that our sales continued to rise.

In addition, we had always maintained our price points and delivered exceptional quality and value. As such, our reviews on Amazon continued to gain steam. At nearly 5,000 reviews and a 4.7 overall score, we began to attract attention from "Amazon aggregators".

I sold Baker's Edge to Sorfeo (one such aggregator that is owned in part by Mark Cuban, who passed on me while on Shark Tank) in April of this year.

Systemize

My buyer had certain metrics that they found attractive. Over the past 10 years, I had transitioned my business to an Amazon.com exclusive and had focused on that space. Building awareness, keyword references, and the "Amazon's Choice" badge were all valuable items for my buyer.

I had also eliminated all traditional wholesale accounts, giving me ultimate control on pricing with no risk of vendor loss.

In addition, I had worked to develop relationships with my primary manufacturers. That means I had a long history of paying on time and being a great partner to those suppliers. I always paid a fair amount and was easy to work with - at all levels of production. I had nurtured close relationships with key members of every team - and most importantly - I was on a first name basis with every person in the shipping and packing departments. These folks were pen pals and online friends for nearly 15 years - and as a result - I had a team of 3rd parties pulling for me every step of the way.

Scrutinize

When price and timing intersect, a transaction is born! In short, I had been running Baker's Edge for 17 years. When looking at where my family was in life (kids now getting ready to go to college), I considered the price being offered, and more importantly how many years of running Baker's Edge it would take for me to realize that amount. Then I tried to imagine running the company that many years into the future, and it seemed like such an opportunity cost was too high. I opted to sell, and then reinvest those funds in other opportunities.

Exit

I had positioned the company to be attractive to a segment of buyers....and continued to do so knowing that those buyers were my most likely "eventual" exit. I had been approached by several of these companies over the past year...and finally started to imagine selling.

Selling was a fairly simple process - as selling an "Amazon based business" is a lot like selling a piece of real estate. There is a buyer due diligence period, a purchase agreement, and some seller deliverables. I transacted in April of this year, and still have a few transitional items on my list of "to dos". I act as a resource and transition agent for them over a set period and then they take the baton and run!

Pawan Gupta, co-founder of Curofy
2014-2017

Execute

After spending two years post college at Deutsche Bank I realized I wanted to go out there and build something meaningful for the real world. Three of us from college came together and started Curofy. We realized that most of the doctors in India practiced in small clinics or hospitals unlike the west. Hence, they don't have a community or department to discuss their patient cases for better outcomes. That's why we decided to build an Instagram-like community for doctors to discuss real-life patient cases on a mobile app.

Systemize

We grew to almost half a million doctors in India and suddenly 50% of the doctor population in India got connected online. It is an amazing platform and is still going strong. We systemized the business into three parts: technology development, medical content, and business development. It was a very tough task to get three very distinct departments working together and in sync with the overall goals of the company.

"We decided to rigorously follow an OKR structure from top to bottom. This helped organize small task forces composed of people from all departments on common goals. Our entire company also ran on Trello, a popular task management software to ensure everyone was organized and on the same page. Finally, the numbers were tracked live on cyfe dashboards and every single person had their own dashboards with clear metrics and targets."

Scrutinize

We weren't looking to sell, but we got a great offer from Edifecs who had invested earlier in our previous round. We saw a great partner in them to carry the business to the next stage and for us, we saw a life-changing outcome. At first we didn't know if we should sell and we had to have many discussions as a leadership team. Ultimately we decided to sell for two reasons.

First, we knew the company needed more capital to move into the next phase of growth. While we had interest from new investors, we felt that the market size was not large enough to keep growing fast for another 10 years. That is when we thought that a stable corporate partner with global presence could really fuel the company to reach its long-term goals. Edifecs had invested previously and we knew them, making us comfortable with the sale.

Second, the founders and early employees could achieve a level of financial independence from the sale that would allow us to pursue our passions in much larger markets. For me, I care most about the impact, and changing the way things work. Now my focus is on changing the fashion industry and the lives of millions of workers that work in the supply chain.

We were not expecting to get the offer from Edifecs but once we did our leadership team had to sit and consider it. The most important considerations for us were financial terms, lock-ins, outcome for employees, incentives to stay, position within the company, autonomy post acquisition, non-compete, etc.

We wanted to achieve great outcomes for ourselves, for our investors, and for our employees. It was important for us to be transparent with our employees and this turned out to be a great strategy because not a single team member left the company during this time. Because the company kept growing and the team kept intact, we were able to get the best possible outcome for everyone with a successful negotiation.

Exit

Personally, it was an emotionally draining experience. The company was doing well and we wanted to continue growing it. We had term sheets for further investment and could keep going but I was nearly broke and had been living hand to mouth for a very long time. That stress was starting to take a toll on my mental health and personal life. At that time, it was a decision for me to risk further deterioration of my health or take an outcome that wasn't what I had dreamt about but will solve financial challenges for the foreseeable future. I took the latter option and can't say that I regret that. With the cushion that I have now, I am able to take bigger and bolder risks.

"The entire process of selling the company took a very long time and was stressful. The important considerations are financial terms, lock-ins, outcome for employees, incentives to stay, position within the company, autonomy post acquisition, non-compete, etc.

Ivan “Zak” Zakharenkov, founder of SmartFlow
2012-2018

Execute

After working for 12 years as an emergency veterinarian in Canada, I saw multiple workflow issues that could be improved through the use of technology. This is how I came up with SmartFlow: a workflow optimization system for veterinary practices.

“The startup was completely bootstrapped until we got the prototype ready. The prototype was essentially a video cartoon explaining the concept, which is similar to what Dropbox did in their early days. And once we distributed that through our social network, we received the first 200 leads that proved to us that building an MVP (a minimum viable product) is worthwhile.

We had a very small team of two: the CTO and myself (a developer and a veterinarian). He was writing the code and I was taking the prototype to veterinary hospitals and testing it on the customers, perfecting it until we got the product that practices were willing to pay for.

We didn’t have a salary for four years, and to keep the project afloat, I continued working in the emergency hospital to make a living. Later we got a grant from an incubator in Toronto called RIC Center which allowed us to move forward.

Systemize

We didn’t have a traditional business plan. We used a more agile approach - a business model canvas, which we iterated every week and then every month, continuously testing the market. Once we raised an initial round of capital through a venture fund, we were able to hire a couple of developers, but we still had quite a weak development process. It was again, very bootstrapped, just three people working together. I understood that I need a business education which led me to discovering a methodology called Traction by Gino Wickman. That's when things really picked up, because we systematized through using Traction and its frameworks such as Leadership Level 10 meetings, the cadences that they recommend, roles and people analysers, and all the assets that come with it. I am building my new business now using this methodology.

Scrutinize

“There was a competitor that entered the market and they were also being reviewed by our potential strategic exits. Second, because we were the first-to-market, we also were looking at the next round of investment, but that would dilute the control of the company and we didn’t want to lose control over our roadmap. During that period, my partner was feeling burned out and I was pulling all the weight while he was taking significant time off. So the combination of those three things, and the offer from a strategic acquirer, helped us to make the decision to exit. At that time, SmartFlow had already gained significant traction and was used by 650 veterinary hospitals across the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe.

Exit

We have had a long-term relationship with a company called IDEXX, which eventually became our exit. Every year, they were checking in and trying to understand what we do because we were gaining significant traction with their customers. And every year, we were showing progress. And then it was just another year at a veterinary conference where IDEXX’s head of their software division offered to explore an acquisition with me. SmartFlow was acquired and I came on board with IDEXX to work as the general manager of the software division. I worked there for some time until I decided to move on and create new businesses in the veterinary domain. I’m now running Galaxy Vets, a veterinary consolidator co-owned by its employees.

Justin Miller, founder of NoteHall
2007-2013

Execute

It’s actually a great story. I used my bar mitzvah money to fund Notehall before our Shark Tank appearance! Notehall was founded by University of Arizona students Sean Conway, Justin Miller, Fadi Chalfoun and D.J. Stephan in 2008 while they were still at the university. The startup was originally financed with co-founder Justin Miller’s bar mitzvah money and eventually ended up taking part in the Dreamit Ventures incubator program as well as making an appearance on the TV show Shark Tank.

“We totally bootstrapped Notehall using our own money to build the product. While still in college, we relied on guerilla marketing to get the business off the ground, passing out flyers at the library to tell students they could earn money just by taking notes in class. We partnered with the student body government at the University of Arizona and that was a big step and provided validation. From there, the model was that we would hire student note-takers for about $300 at schools where we wanted to launch. I graduated in 2010 and at the time we sold to Chegg in June 2011, we were at 80 universities with 500,000 students.

Systemize

“We built custom software for all of our notetakers so we could track their progress and follow up with them. Our CRM tools included automatic emails and text messages and a database. The business process definitely helped scale, and we probably wouldn’t have been able to sell the business to Chegg if we were just tracking these relationships by hand.

Scrutinize

It’s always difficult to sell a business that you put so much of yourself into. Ultimately, my co-founders and I simply felt we could accomplish our mission of serving more customers by partnering with a larger player. Chegg was the perfect fit and we certainly don’t regret the way things turned out.

Exit

We were approached at a conference and asked about potential opportunities for strategic investment. To that point, we had been heads-down building the company, so it felt great to be validated by a larger player in the market. From there, we had good help, from bankers, lawyers, and advisors, some of whom I still work with in running my current company.

Kimanzi Constable, founder of Z's Relief Services
1999-2013 (14 years)

Execute

I worked for Sara Lee delivering baked goods to grocery stores. I would interact with the vendors from Brownberry Bread (which was purchased by Bimbo Bakeries). These vendors were 1099 independent contractors, which meant they had no one to cover their bread routes so that they could go on vacation. Some of these independent vendors hadn't taken a vacation in ten years.

I convinced one of the operators to train me and introduce me to the other drivers if I did good work. I told him I would run his route whenever he wanted if he got me in the door. He did. After I proved myself by running his route well, I had a full calendar of work for two years. In year one, I made $125,000. By year two, I had five employees and the business was doing $550,000 a year.

Systemize

I systematized the business by hiring an executive assistant and putting a system in place for operators to choose their vacation and any additional services they'd like (weekend merchandising support, etc.) I developed a team of ten contractors I would rotate from to cover the routes. The business covered vacation relief services in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Indiana.

Scrutinize

“I decided to sell because, after 12 years, I was tired of dealing with employees, contractors, and the business being offline. I had discovered the possibility of creating an online business and wanted to go that route; selling information seemed easier and more scalable.

Exit

“The way I went about selling it was to first offer the business to my contractors and employees for sale. One of them decided to buy it and the process was fairly smooth compared to what I had read about selling a business.

Lily Liu, founder of PublicStuff
2011-2015

Execute

PublicStuff was an app-based version of 311: residents could easily submit an issue such as a pothole to their city and track the progress of their ticket, while municipalities enjoyed the streamlined way to get their residents engaged and helping participate in keeping the community in shape without being bombarded by phone calls.

“We found early partners by pitching local municipalities that were open to piloting new technology and services. They were willing to try it out, and as the product quickly found a welcome reception among those customers, we began to actually monetize and sell it.

We were then able to leverage our existing customers (cities) as traction, demonstrating the case studies and success metrics there. It’s scary to be the first one to try something, so decision makers became much more willing to give our product a go once they knew other cities that were using it.

Systemize

When you have customers with such unique challenges, it’s tempting to try to customize your product to their needs. But our trick was to create a universal platform that would empower our customer cities to make it their own and adjust it to whatever would maximize value for them.

The result was a systemized product and process that could be used across hundreds of cities across the country, from small towns to large metros, and even by city-like spaces including large resorts and skyscrapers that had a self-contained system. This allowed us to grow at a faster rate, expand our customer base, and cover a broader swath of the market.

Scrutinize

There were a few factors that really contributed to my decision to sell the company: market conditions, competitive landscape, and a fundraise by a major player in the market to make strategic acquisitions. All these factors aligning at the same time presented the perfect opportunity.

Exit

“It was actually not difficult, since we had actually had a relationship with the acquiring company for years before the acquisition so we had been building that partnership. So we never had to shop around for a buyer given both this relationship, as well as the fact that they’d just raised capital specifically to make acquisitions, and that was their directive.

For more information
visit jodiecook.com/ten-year-career

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