

Your Next Good Idea Can Change Your Life

Reuben Mondejar and Arthur Gogatz

It was Thomas Edison who said that nearly every man who develops an idea works it up to the point where it looks impossible, and then he gets discouraged. That's not the place to become discouraged, Edison wisely pointed out.

How many good ideas do you get in the course of a year, a month, a week or even a day? The answer is many more than you think you do. It is said that people think over 50,000 thoughts each day. Many of our thoughts are highly innovative and some could well develop into profitable new businesses, yet the overwhelming majority of us never act on our thoughts. It is also said that every time a person gets a brilliant new idea there are ten people who have already thought of it, but that those ten people only thought of it. They failed to act.

A recent article in The Wall Street Journal stated that over 50% of adults in America would choose an entirely different line of work if they could. Becoming an entrepreneur is one way to do that. When you start your own business, you can choose the field you're most interested in.

The most common ingredient for success is that people love what they're doing. If you truly love something, you'll be successful at it. If you really care about something, you are more able to take the risks necessary to achieve it. If you really care about something you'll pour everything you have into it, and your enthusiasm will inspire others. If you really care about something, you'll have a better chance of success. A business shouldn't be something you do to live, but something you live to do.

We all have good ideas, just as we all have dreams. Most of us never do anything with our dreams or our ideas. We shelve them and eventually abandon them. There has never been a lack of good ideas, yet the people who are sufficiently moved by an idea and have the courage to risk taking a stand to defend and push the idea is relatively small.

Only 16% of adults in Brazil are entrepreneurs. That percentage dips in half for most of the other countries in South America. Only 6% of the people in India are entrepreneurs, while in the United Kingdom the figure is only 5%. In Japan the rate is even lower.

Many people want to start their own businesses. The principal reason they don't is because they're afraid of failure. If you knew for certain that your new business would be a success you'd start one, right? Therefore, to understand why more people don't become entrepreneurs we have to understand the fear of failure.

Most people believe that if you ever go bankrupt you're finished. They equate bankruptcy with having to beg coins on the street, yet statistics tell us that the average millionaire entrepreneur in the United States went bankrupt 2.8 times before he or she made their million dollars. Most of us never give ourselves the chance to go bankrupt. Risks, we constantly tell ourselves, must always be minimized.

Everything new carries an element of risk. Just because something is new it will be attacked. Entrepreneurs have to have enough confidence in their ideas and in their abilities and not be swayed by the people around them who will always rush to point out all the problems with any idea.

Fear of failure

We pay a heavy price for our fear of failure. It is a powerful obstacle to growth. With time, it brings a progressive narrowing of the personality for it prevents exploration and experimentation.

There was a man, who was born in the USA in the year 1809. He 1831, he started a business, a business which when bankrupt.
 In 1832, he ran for the legislature in his home state but lost the election.
 In 1834, he started a different kind of business. Again, his business failed.
 In 1836, he suffered a nervous breakdown.
 In 1838, he again ran for political office and lost.
 In 1843, he ran for the US Congress, but lost the election.
 In 1846, he again ran for Congress, and again lost.
 In 1848, the same thing happened.
 In 1855, the tried for the Senate, and lost.
 In 1856, he ran for Vice President and once again lost.
 Any normal person would have given up. He didn't. Again, he tried for the Senate and again he lost.

In 1860 he was elected President. Who was this man? His name was Abraham Lincoln, one of the most famous presidents in the country's history.

It is said that a man is not finished when he is defeated. He is finished when he quits, when he gives up his dreams, when he settles for anything less than what he wants, when he tells himself, it no longer pays to try.

Human beings are the only creatures who are allowed to fail. If an insect, indeed if any animal in the wild fails, it will probably die. But people can learn from their mistakes and from their failures. Still, many people are stopped from pursuing their goals because they fear they won't be successful. You'll never make it, they convince themselves. It makes no sense even trying.

“A man will never do everything he dreams, but he will never do anything he doesn’t dream.” William James, American psychologist, philosopher.

Most people pretend that they don’t really want what they want because they’re not ready to risk what it would take to get it. Instead they look for excuses so that they don’t have to act on their dreams and visions. Not acting on our dreams is the easy way. It lets us avoid failure. The saddest summary of a life contains three descriptions: could have, might have and should have.

Another reason why people are reluctant to start their own businesses is that they look for the problems instead of looking for the opportunity. If you look for problems in anything, you’ll find them, probably lots of them. A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity while an optimist (or an entrepreneur) sees the opportunity in every difficulty.

Tell one of your friends that you plan to start your own business and you may well hear something like this:

“Do you know how hard that is? It takes money to start a business and a lot of it. Who’s going to lend it to you? Someone must have tried this same business before, you know. No idea is completely new. Anyway, you don’t know anything about running a business. What are you going to do if it fails? If I were you, I wouldn’t take the risk.”

In less than a minute your friend has already opened and closed your business and is feeling sorry for you.

If you let conditions stop you from opening your own business, they will always stop you. If you wait for the perfect moment, when all is safe and assured, it may never arrive. If you let people stop you, they’ll also always stop you. It has been said that every man has a scheme that will not work. Well, every man also has a scheme that will work. He just needs the courage to put that plan into action. You have to try. If you do, you may fail, but if you don’t you’ll never know if you could have made it.

Most of us never come to really completely know ourselves. We focus on what we think we are instead of what we can be and never appreciate how much more we could do if we just gave ourselves the chance.

Risk

“Man wants to swim and still keep one foot on the ground.” Marcel Proust, French writer.

Fear pushes us to stick to what we know, to only those patterns of behavior, which have been successful in the past. If we never try anything new, however, we can’t hope to grow. Growth means advancing to some place, to some state

that we have yet to experience. When you try something new you don't know what your chances of failure are, and thus you imagine them to be disproportionately high, but if you try something you've done before you know your success/failure ratio.

A lot of entrepreneurs today opt to buy an existing business or for a franchise. When you buy a business which is already up and running the chances of making a lot of money are not very high but the chances of going bankrupt are also less. Buying an existing business may be a good thing if you are inexperienced or risk adverse. It's a good way to break in because procedures are in place, suppliers are there and a customer base is yours to expand or lose. Franchises represent the surest bet, for a return on investment. You are, after all, buying a set up which has been proven to work. Again, you may not get rich with a franchise, because you have to pay royalties to the parent company, but at least you will be buying a proven business model. Buying a franchise or an existing business, however, often requires more capital than if you were to start a business based on your own original idea.

Next time you get what you think is a good idea, don't be one of the ten people who only thought of it. Act on it. Turn it into a business and yourself into an entrepreneur.

Reuben Mondejar is an Associate Professor in the Business School at City University of Hong Kong. Arthur Gogatz is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nancy, France, and international consultant on creativity in business.

