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IDEA OR SKILLED-FOCUSED ENTREPRENEURS

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Quick Summary: Entrepreneurs who are artists or subject matter experts face unique challenges; get help!

Abstract:

Entrepreneurs come in all sizes and shapes but have many things in common. The most common attribute is the desire to build a business to realize their vision. Entrepreneurs fall into two broad categories that differ based on their origins but face similar challenges. Those categories are entrepreneurs with an idea and those with some personal talents and skills. Of course, both groups overlap, but understanding the differences can help them map their journeys to success.

Most entrepreneurs start their businesses based on what they feel is a unique idea they can turn into a profitable business. Their idea may involve finding a way to solve a customer’s problem or finding a market for a new product or technology they have developed. Either approach can be successful, presuming the entrepreneur can validate market demand by answering the question:

“We are solving a problem that prospects agree needs to be solved now and are willing to pay us for it.”

There is another equally valid category of entrepreneurs that do not seem to get the same attention but probably have a better chance of achieving success – as they define it. Those entrepreneurs have a unique skill valued by others who are willing to pay for access to it. The special skill can involve a talent such as an artist or can be based on their training and experience. The individuals in the latter category are referred to as Subject Matter Experts or SMEs.

I define an Artist as someone who creates something in some media.

I define Subject Matter Experts as someone with insightful knowledge in a specific area.

From a business perspective, both definitions can be extended with the comment “that is valued by others.”

Some examples of talent or skills-based entrepreneurs are:

Artists working in...	SMEs with skills...
Cloth	Artificial Intelligence
Canvas	Communications Coaching
Stone	Healthcare IT

Artists working in...	SMEs with skills...
Wood	Marriage Counseling
Music	Executive Coaching
Paper (Author/Poetry)	Network Security
Music	Website/SEO Development

The advantage that artists and SMEs have over their “idea” entrepreneur counterparts is that they can usually commercialize their “product” -- their talent or expertise -- much faster than those attempting to implement their idea.

Subject Matter Experts become experts based on their education, training, and, most importantly, their real-world experience. So, they are generally more “seasoned” than those involved in the arts. We have all seen young artists, many of whom are in their teens, who exhibit extraordinary talent. That talent can, of course, be refined and honed over the years. Unlike SMEs, artists can begin their business pursuits based on their rare talent instead of their curated know-how.

Artists and, to a somewhat more limited extent, SMEs can incrementally enter the business more easily than Idea-based entrepreneurs. The artist/SME journey can move from one phase to the next:

Pass Time → Hobby → Part-Time → Lifestyle Company → Exit Focused (Merger or IPO) Company

They can stop anywhere along the path based on their long-term goals.

The path for idea-based entrepreneurs typically does not have the Past Time and Hobby phases. Instead, they start working alone and follow a rather complex journey, encountering many pitfalls and detours along the way to receiving revenue.

However, artists and SMEs have a significant disadvantage in scaling their businesses since it is based on their individual involvement. With artists, they have to create one thing at a time, and SMEs have to work with one client at a time.

To scale their businesses, artists must find a way to replicate what they have created, and SMEs must find a way to generalize and document their expertise. However, replicating and documenting is not enough. Each entrepreneur needs to find a way of addressing a host of business-related issues that most likely involve skills and training they do not possess. As an example, which is common to artists, SMEs, and “idea” entrepreneurs, all must have the ability to:

Create → Produce → Market → Sell → Fulfill → Support their customers.

Further, they must provide the “back office” activities, including finance, legal, and H/R. Indeed, finding someone talented and motivated to perform all the required tasks is very rare. One of the keys to success for every entrepreneur is embracing the notion that they cannot do it alone. They need to rely on others to help them address all of the elements required for the business.

A common trap that many entrepreneurs fall into is to hire their “clone” when confronted with all of the required tasks. Their “logic” is: “I am so busy with all of these tasks; I need to hire someone to help me.”

All of us naturally seek help or companionship from others who mirror ourselves. Successful entrepreneurs do the opposite – they partner with their opposite. Those “opposites” can bring the required skills to the table to provide a complete solution by addressing the “other” things that the entrepreneur cannot or does not want to address. The “opposites” could be co-founders, employees, contractors, or other companies. Usually, it is a combination of different talented people or organizations. The key is to work with the right experts at the right time on the right issues. Unfortunately, knowing the “right” people and the “right” things to do is only clear in hindsight. To help avoid this trap, it is necessary to find and rely on a mentor.

A mentor is someone with the experience and willingness to help you, the entrepreneur, with the almost countless decisions and situations you face daily. Their goal is simple: To help you succeed, not just make you feel good. They will help:

- Identify what you do not know.
- Identify what you should do and when you should do it.
- Identify what you should not do.
- Stay on track and remain focused.
- Prioritize your activities.
- Find the necessary resources.
- Be accountable.
- Determine if or when you should pivot.

The above list details what a mentor can do for you but who makes a great mentor? The following are some attributes to look for.

- ✓ Will do it for free.
- ✓ Has specific startup experience.
- ✓ Is available.
- ✓ Is patient.
- ✓ Is a good listener.
- ✓ Is objective.
- ✓ Will suggest alternatives.
- ✓ **Will be blunt!**

The last item on the list is the most important. Your relationship must be based on trust and respect. With their relevant experience and, probably, “skinned knees” from stumbling over many of the same issues that you face, their advice and counsel will be very helpful. Many entrepreneurs fall into the trap of selecting a mentor with unwittingly biased experience. Two extremes are illustrative of this trap. At one extreme is a major corporation's retired CFO or CEO with no startup experience. It is doubtful that they have ever had to worry about making payroll. At the other extreme is an entrepreneur who has had one successful exit. Serial entrepreneurs, especially those who have stumbled along the way, will be far more aware and sensitive to issues you will likely encounter.

Eliyahu Goldratt. A famous business consultant once said: “An expert is not someone who gives you an answer; an expert is someone who asks you the right question.” This notion equally applies to mentors. By probing and asking instead of telling, they can help an entrepreneur reach their own conclusions. However, a mentor can only be effective if the entrepreneur is willing to listen objectively, keeping their passion, emotions, and preconceived ideas in check.

This article may seem overwhelming or discouraging. Its purpose is to make entrepreneurs aware of the broad issues they will face. As a first step, the articles listed below are intended to help you get started – until you can find a mentor to guide you along your journey.

How do you find a mentor? Ask. Someone you know will introduce you to one. It is that simple!

Article	Title	Quick Summary
3.010104	It is Hard to Make Money Alone	Turning your highly developed marketable skills into a business is harder than one would think.
3.010201	What Is Your Goal For The Business	Do you want to run or sell your business in the long term?
3.010303	Misplaced Encouragement	Truthful feedback, even if it hurts other’s feelings, may be appropriate in the long run.
3.010305	Firing Your Brother-In-Law	Hire only people that you need and not friends and relatives that you may have to terminate.
4.030501	Whom to Hire	Thoroughly developing and documenting the expectations for a new hire are critical to success.
4.050201	The Buck Starts Here	Focus on vision, strategy, and tone to move the organization in the desired direction.
4.050206	Your Top Priority	Spending the right amount of time on the right things must be every CEO’s top priority.
4.050208	They Are Not You	As the CEO, you have a unique perspective on the business, do not expect others to share it.
4.050406	Good Intentions But Bad Advice	Listen to the advice from individuals with applicable experience, then decide to follow it or not.
4.060402	Be Willing to Let Go	Explaining why a task needs to be performed is as important as explaining what has to be done.
5.010301	One Question: Multiple Parts	One seven-part question provides an accurate assessment of a sales opportunity.
8.040309	Artists in Business	Entrepreneurs that are artists and subject matter experts face unique challenges

Article 8.040309, once downloaded, provides a link to the Artists in Business PowerPoint™ presentation that discusses all of the issues mentioned in this article. Although focused on artists and SMEs, it is applicable most any entrepreneur. The article contains instructions on registering for the site, finding, and then downloading an article and presentation.