Founders at Work: Stories of Startups' Early Days

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> For would-be entrepreneurs, innovation managers or just anyone fascinated by the special chemistry and drive that created some of the best technology companies in the world, this book offers both wisdom and engaging insights—straight from the source.

— Chris Anderson, editor-in-chief of Wired Magazine, and author of The Long Tail

> "All the best things that I did at Apple came from (a) not having money and (b) not having done it before, ever." —Steve Wozniak, Apple

Founders at Work: Stories of Startups' Early Days is a collection of interviews with founders of famous technology companies about what happened in the very earliest days. These people are celebrities now. What was it like when they were just a couple friends with an idea? Founders like Steve Wozniak (Apple), Caterina Fake (Flickr), Mitch Kapor (Lotus), Max Levchin (PayPal), and Sabeer Bhatia (Hotmail) tell you in their own words about their surprising and often very funny discoveries as they learned how to build a company.

Where did they get the ideas that made them rich? How did they convince investors to back them? What went wrong, and how did they recover?

Nearly all technical people have thought of one day starting or working for a startup. For them, this book is the closest you can come to being a fly on the wall at a successful startup, to learn how it's done.

But ultimately these interviews are required reading for anyone who wants to understand business, because startups are business reduced to its essence. The reason their founders become rich is that startups do what businessesdo—create value—more intensively than almost any other part of the economy. How? What are the secrets that make successful startups so insanely productive? Read this book, and let the founders themselves tell you.

Founders at Work: Stories of Startups' Early Days Details

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From Reader Review Founders at Work: Stories of Startups' Early Days for online ebook

Mark says

fascinating first-hand accounts from founders of now-ubiquitous companies: hotmail, gmail, paypal, yahoo stores, hotornot, apple, etc etc. strangely, the technical aspect is rarely the most difficult part of the company - most of the founders say marketing the product was crazy hard.

interesting factoids you'll pick up from reading the book:
* hotornot was implemented in an afternoon to rate some random girl one of the founders had seen recently. the site spread virally and they had over 50,000 page views in the first afternoon. the founder then hardly slept for the next few weeks as all time was spent getting the service to scale.
* hotmail could not explain to anyone why they would want web based mail when they were shopping it around.
* the guy who founded arsdigita hates working with programmers. he says they are all narcissistic unmanageable freaks.

if you're a programmer this book is a must-read. even if not, i think it would still be an entertaining (although sometimes challenging) read. if you have any interest in business i would also recommend this book.

Annie says

Great read. An insightful look into the experiences of successful founders. One thing I learned is that even the best venture capitalists turn down unicorns.

Saurabh says

This one is a brilliant, brilliant book.
I'm so glad I picked it up and it's worth every paisa of the 450 bucks I paid for it.

If you think you are the entrepreneur kinds, this book is a must read.

If you haven't started your company as yet, it might just push you to do it - and for those who have started it and are getting completely sloshed by the experience, it shines a nice bright light on you - letting you know that eventually everything will work out -- and even the biggest companies today went through the same trials and tribulations that you are going through now.

Jef says

One of the few books I've yet to finish, while it's great to see the journeys of the entrepreneurs in these stories there is mostly technical and very intricate details and the stories tend to drag on..

Otis Chandler says

Loved every second of this book. Each chapter is a different story of a startup founder. I read it slowly so it wouldn't end, and read many chapters twice. My biggest take was that most founders didn't necessarily know what they were doing - or even that they were on to something big. But they were all determined to start a company - that was the only thing they all had in common.

Here are some good quotes from the book:

"I'd say determination is the single most important quality in a startup founder. If the founders I spoke with were superhuman in any way, it was in their perseverance."
-- Jessica Livingston (the author)

"I see way too many people give up in the startup world. They just give up too easily. Recruiting is a classic example. I don't even hear the first "no" that somebody says. When they say, "No, I'm not interested", I think "Now it's a real challenge. Now's when the tough part begins." It's hard to identify talent, but great people don't look for jobs, great people are sold on jobs. And if they're sold they're going to say no at first. You have to win them over."
-- Joe Kraus (founder of Excite)

"Ultimately, you cannot accomplish something completely on your own. You really need to develop a network of people who win when you win."
-- Ray Ozzie (Founder of Groove Networks, Chief Architect of Microsoft)

"My philosophy on these types of companies - consumer-based Internet companies - is that you don't need to worry about the business model initially. If you get users, then everything else follows. Basically any technology can be copied, any concept can be copied. In my opinion, what makes one of these companies valuable is the users. That can't be copied"
-- Mark Fletcher (Founder of eGroups and Bloglines)

"I am not a hunter, never have fired a gun, but I'm told that if you want to shoot a duck, you have to shoot where the duck is going to be, not where the duck is. It's the same with introducing technology: if you're only focused on the market today, by the time you introduce your solution to that problem, there'll probably be several others already entrenched."
-- Charles Geschke (Founder of Adobe Systems)

"The biggest thrill is frankly not the financial success, it's the ability to have an impact. Because we're both engineers at heart and that's every engineer's dream - to build something that millions of people will use."
-- Charles Geschke (Founder of Adobe Systems)

"Most programmers don't think about the user experience. They get a spec book, and they say, "Well, I'm going to meet this spec to make the customer happy." That's not really enough; you have to make something good for the user if you want to call yourself an engineer."
-- Philip Greenspun (Founder of ArsDigita)

"People don't like to write. It's hard. The people who were really good software engineers were usually great writers; they had tremendous ability to organize their thoughts and communicate. The people who were sort of average-quality programmers and had trouble thinking about the larger picture were the ones who couldn't write."
-- Philip Greenspun (Founder of ArsDigita)

"Things never work out right the first time. You've always got to do it two or three times to get it right. And things always go wrong. So persistence is the key to success. I had seen that in my career. I had seen that in computer design projects. I had seen that through my whole life. And so that word is the best single advice I can give to entrepreneurs. The key to success, if you had to sum it up in one, is persistence."
-- Ron Gruner (Founder of Alliant Computer Systems and Shareholder.com)

"I'd just keep thinking, keep trying to find the language and find new employees, trying to meet the VC who would understand my vision and back me. I met with 43 VCs."
-- James Currier (Founder of Tickle.com)

Arjun says

I wish there was a 4.5 on Goodreads. This book came into my hands highly recommended by several people and when I received it as a gift, I devoured it. Most of the advice in this book is timeless, and any fan of Paul Graham's essays will really enjoy this.

However, to me (an 18y old, reading in 2013), a lot of the interviews in the book, while interesting, were a bit dated. Because of how much the VC landscape (how money is raised, how interactions are had with VCs, etc), the cost of technology and getting started (lean startup, small seed rounds, etc) and distribution models have changed over the last 20, 10 and even 5 years, it was really hard for me to connect to a lot of the pre-Dot-Com-Bubble stories that were presented. Admittedly, I skimmed a few of the extremely-dated chapters.

My favorite interviews were with Max Levchin (PayPal), Craig Newmark (Craigslist), Paul Buchheit (Gmail) and James Hong (HotOrNot).

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http://www.hindawi.org/kalimat/97308392/

Yaseen Hamdulay says

A bit outdated but really inspiring. It's interesting to note the patterns between the different founders stories. The most unexpected being that many were unaware of the importance or enormity of the project they were in the process of undertaking.

Paul Rivera says

everyone has a bad day/week/month.

Azamali says

Table of Contents

Yevgeniy Brikman says

A wonderful inside look at how a number of different startups were created. The book reinforced a few interesting trends for me:

1. Very few founders knew what they were doing when they first started; many of the ideas emerged accidentally, after many failures or experiments.

2. You *can* get more done with crazy hours and virtually all successful startups require them.

3. VC funding seemed to be an ingredient in the success if most startups, but was often a double edged sword, causing problems later on.

Some of my favorite quotes from the book:

"What surprised me most was how unsure the founders seemed to be that they were actually onto something big. Some of these companies got started almost by accident. The world thinks of startup founders as having some kind of superhuman confidence, but a lot of them were uncertain at first about starting a company. What they weren't uncertain about was making something good--or trying to fix something broken".

van Hoff: "Over the years, I've learned that the first idea you have is irrelevant. It's just a catalyst for you to get started. Then you figure out what's wrong with it and you go through phases of denial, panic, regret. And then you finally have a better idea and the second idea is always the important one."

Buchheit: "A lot of people seem to be against uncertainty, actually. In all areas of life.

I'm suddenly reminded that, for a while, I asked people, if they were playing Russian roulette with a gun with a billion barrels (or some huge number, so in other words, some low probability that they would actually be killed), how much would they have to be paid to play one round? A lot of people were almost offended by the question and they'd say, "I wouldn't do it at any price."

But, of course, we do that every day. They drive to work in cars to earn money and they are taking risks all the time, but they don't like to acknowledge that they are taking risks. They want to pretend that everything is risk-free."

Paul Graham: "Practically all the software in the world is either broken or very difficult to use. So users dread software.

They've been trained that whenever they try to install something, or even fill out a form online, it's "not going to work. I dread installing stuff, and I have a PhD in computer science.

So if you're writing applications for end users, you have to remember that you're writing for an audience that has been traumatized by bad experiences."

Paul Graham: I found I could actually sell moderately well. I could convince people of stuff. I learned a trick for doing this: to tell the truth. A lot of people think that the way to convince people of things is to be eloquent—to have some bag of tricks for sliding conclusions into their brains. But there's also a sort of hack that you can use if you are not a very good salesman, which is simply tell the truth. Our strategy for selling our software to people was: make the best software and then tell them, truthfully, "this is the best software." And they could tell we were telling the truth.

Another advantage of telling the truth is that you don't have to remember what you've said. You don't have to keep any state in your head. It's a purely functional business strategy. (Hackers will get what I mean.)"

Winblad: "You'd think that everybody would want to have our jobs. We've all been handsomely rewarded. The stories are not like, "Hey, we had patrician backgrounds and silver spoons, and we bought our way into this." We just "thought" our way into these industries. The power of thought "and math and science and computing, you're given that for free—it's a choice you can make. You take that choice, and it gives you sort of a magic wand to be a captain of an industry that's still fairly young, that's driving the whole world economy"

Spolsky: "These were all marginally good marketing ideas. Unfortunately we spent a lot of time chasing them. The one thing we learned over 5 years is that nothing works better than just improving your product. Every minute, every developer hour we spent on any one of these crazy things—although they had some marginal return on the work that we put into them—was nothing compared to just making a better version of the product and releasing it"

TarasProkopyuk says

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Andrus says

Fascinating stories about early days of pre-2008 technology companies like Apple, Blogger, TripAdvisor, etc. Some of them were absolute gems worth a 6-star review, others that got into fine details about uninteresting stuff by today's standards (technical aspects of hardware in early '80s) needed faster page flipping. But all in all a must-read for early stage startup founders.

Herve says

Another great book, so great I decide to write this post even if I have not finished reading it: Jessica Livingston in Founders at Work has interviewed 32 entrepreneurs about their story. The lessons are convincing, fascinating. Without asking for copyright, I copy here some quotes. The book is just a pleasure to read even if sometimes the Q&A are too specific about the start-up, but I assume it is part of the exercise. A Must-Read.

Paul Buchheit, creator of Gmail about Risk Taking

As I say, for people, it depends on their situation if they can take that risk of joining a startup or moving to a new city if they don't live in the right place. For me, I was actually single at the time, I didn't have a mortgage, so the idea of joining a little startup that may well be destroyed was just like, "That will be fun." Because I kind of thought, "Even if Google doesn't make it, it will be educational and I'll learn something." Honestly, I was pretty sure AltaVista was going to destroy Google.

Mike Ramsay, founder of Tivo about Silicon Valley

I was curious to see what's the attitude of a typical startup in Scotland compared to here. I found that they are just culturally a whole lot more conservative and cautious. And somewhat lacking in self-confidence. You come over here and . . . I had a meeting recently with a couple of early 20-year-olds who have decided to drop out of Stanford because they got bored, and they are trying to raise money to fund their startup. They believe they can do it, and nothing's going to hold them back. They have confidence, they have that spirit, which I think is great and is probably unique to this part of the world. Being part of that for so long, for me, has been very invigorating.

Joshua Schachter, founder of del.icio.us about implementing

But the guy who says, "I have a great idea and I'm looking for other people to implement it," I'm wary of—frequently because I think the process of idea-making relies on executing and failing or succeeding at the ideas, so that you can actually become better at coming up with ideas.

and about VCs

In general, I found VCs to be significantly politer than the folks I worked with. The worst they did was not call me back. I'd never hear from them again. Brad Feld does a nice blog talking about how the VC process works. He says they never call you back to say no—they don't want to close the door in case they want to open it again, but they don't want to actually give you a response. Very few VCs actually said, "Sorry, we're not interested."

Craig Newmark, founder of craiglist on the definition of start-up

"in the conventional sense, we were never a startup. In the conventional sense, a startup is a company, maybe with great ideas, that becomes a serious corporation. It usually takes serious investment, has a strategy, and they want to make a lot of money."

Mohamed Diab Embbya says

No structure, no themes, but 30 odd interviews with tech business founders, and yet it worked and made for a great read.

The business media usually distills fundamental concepts such as team building, creating a good product and perseverance to the point where you either get a generic phrase or a string of dull paragraphs where a single generic phrase would do; the effect is that reading about business becomes a boring activity, but Founders at Work was different.

It's not a how-to book but narratives that really do drive home the above concepts and other such as business

model flexibility and the importance of listening to the customer.

These concepts were brought up by most interviewees in their different settings and contexts, and as I usually feel that having a context or a story when reading about these concepts makes them more fun and yields better educational value, I thought Founders was a great book.