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How Unplanning Your Business Can Make It Happen Faster

Ian Sanders & David Sloy

Q: What's top of the list for most people launching a new business?

A: A business plan.

You've just cracked a genius idea. Now you're motivated to get it out there and make it happen. And then, for some inexplicable reason, you follow a pattern that dates back to the industrial revolution—you sit down and write a business plan! A 20 page document full of financial projections and assumptions about the next five years. Why? Is it because that's what advisors tell entrepreneurs they need; what banks ask to see; what you're expected to prepare? Really, how useful is a linear explanation for how you're going to grow your business? We gave a talk at South By South West Interactive in 2010 and asked a room full of entrepreneurs who had written a business plan if they had actually looked at it since launch. A resounding "no" came back. So we asked if the business they now owned and ran looked anything like the one they had written about in the business plan. Another "no." They all admitted that they had written the plan simply because they thought that is what you're supposed to do. They had exerted great effort on a document that they would not look at again. How does this make sense? And this is from entrepreneurs that made their business idea happen—these were the successful ones.

So what of the thousands that started to write a plan, got a little stuck and gave up?
What ideas have the world been deprived of because they believed they needed a fully detailed plan to make that thing real?

Gary Vaynerchuk told us: *“A Five Year Plan is impossible in a world where what five years represents is so different than it used to. We’re going through a technology explosion, and you can’t possibly do that; think about what five years ago looked like.”*

“What ideas have the world been deprived of because they believed they needed a fully detailed plan to make that thing real?”

The problem with writing a fixed plan is that you can get stuck in amber. You get so bogged down with hypotheticals, financial modelling and revenue projections that your cool business idea gets stuck in a spreadsheet and the light never goes green. Instead of focusing on making your business idea happen, you end up suffering from analysis paralysis: the number one killer of all great business ideas.

The Trouble With Planning

So why are business folk obsessed with writing plans? Because you think that, somehow, by creating a plan for executing your idea that it will guarantee its success. But the truth is that you can't predict how things will look in just five months time, let alone five years. Right now, businesses have to be agile, prepared to rethink and reinvent what they do and how they do it. They need to be ready to react to sudden new entrants to market: Twitter, Instagram and that little social networking site Facebook. They all came along and upset the status quo. Was that in anyone's business plan? We doubt it, as we doubt that Mark Zuckerberg labored for weeks trying to decide what Facebook would look like in 5 years—and then articulated it on a spreadsheet. No, but we do believe he had a goal. And goals are powerful.

The idea for Hotmail was written overnight by one of the founders, Sabeer Bhatia. It was enough to secure finances to hire programmers to create the webmail service that was later sold for \$400 million to Microsoft. The world is full of businesses that began without a chunky, explain everything, business plan. They had a goal, a vision, a desire and passion.

“Really, a business plan is another way of saying ‘guess’, a strategy is another way of saying ‘hunch’. The awful truth is that we don’t know what will work” David Hieatt, entrepreneur, co-founder of howies clothing company and curator of Do Lectures

So does your business really need a plan? What if you’re a business that can launch with minimal investment, what if you don’t need a bunch of staff, a warehouse or specialists to launch? If that sounds like your kind of business idea, then the good news is you probably don’t need a 20 page business plan.

So now it’s time to unplan your business.

What Is Unplanning?

Unplanning is a mindset that encourages entrepreneurs to launch and test their ideas in the market, rather than get stuck in over-analysis.

Unplanning replaces the focus on long-term business planning with business doing. All you need is focus on achieving a defined goal, because without a destination in mind, your idea may suffer at the hands of unwanted and unhelpful distraction. So you need goals, not a plan.

Goals are powerful in motivating you and giving you a sense of getting the good stuff done.

Make decisions quick and don't be afraid to change them when new information presents itself. Then you won't become a victim of over analyzing. Then you'll stay free of the analysis paralysis deadlock that consumes people who think they must have every scrap of information before they can make a decision, people who believe they must weigh every possible piece of information against every possible outcome. Those people, and we all know one, tend to tell you about great ideas they have had, yet have done nothing practical about making it real. They have failed to realize any of those ideas because they have over analysed them to the point that they are stuck in a knowledge trap.

The people that succeed, the ones that don't get stuck at first base are the ones that recognise that they don't have all the answers and probably never will, but pursue their goal anyway. And the number one tool those people use is instinct. Believe us when we say instinct is the most universal tool to have in your toolkit. You can analyze the pitch count and game situation all you want, but getting a good jump toward second base requires instinct.

37 signals is the software company based in Chicago that has become legendary by creating productivity tools and books that are used by companies around the world. They launched in 1999 as a web design business but soon pivoted to sell the productivity tools they'd initially

developed for in-house use. 37 signals has achieved success by reinventing their offering and keeping their operation lean. We asked partner David Heinemeier Hanson what role instinct has played in the company's success:

"We rely heavily on instinct. An instinct that has been developed and formed from a decade in business. Sometimes careful analysis is helpful, but often times you're just trying to justify what your instinct is already telling you. Why not follow that straight from the get go?"

The Unplan State Of Mind:

Here are three tips to get in an Unplan State Of Mind:

- 1 → Take action.** Unplanning is about moving from a passive to active mindset. Get used to making quick decisions, focus on outcomes and getting your business out there. Do something!
- 2 → Test it.** Don't test your idea on a spreadsheet, test it live in the marketplace. Launch a prototype or in beta, then monitor, get user feedback and adapt your offering as you go.
- 3 → Be agile.** Be open to change: embrace random opportunities and be prepared to take left turns along the way. Be flexible enough to react to opportunities as they arise.

A friend of ours, Pascal Grierson, recently launched FrenchRadioLondon, a French-speaking radio station in London. Over a beer in a Parisien cafe we asked him what business plan he had. Pascal told us that he had one side of paper with two sections. One was “the why” and the other, “the who”: why London needed a French radio station, and who will make it happen? As soon as he told us that London is the sixth biggest French-speaking city in the world, we realised that was a compelling reason to open a French radio station in London. The “who” was Pascal himself, with 20 years experience in broadcasting. With that clarity of mindset, he got his investors and London got a French-speaking radio station. There was no big complex plan. He kept it simple.

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Success isn’t about how good your business plan is on paper, it’s about having the courage to make the leap. It’s the ones doing something about their idea that are succeeding. The ones that are still thinking about it don’t stand a chance.

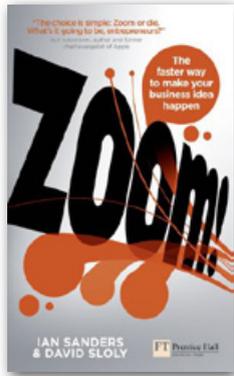
Guy Kawasaki is the former chief evangelist of Apple and is now a venture capitalist at Garage Technology Ventures in Silicon Valley where he invests in some of the most cutting-edge technology companies in the world. Guy explained his frustrations seeing entrepreneurs with their business plans:

“Many entrepreneurs show up to us with these ‘magna carta’ size business plans; they’ve spent two weeks cranking out a spreadsheet so they have this Excel sheet that says five years out, times twelve months, times 200 line items ... they’re going to tell you how much to spend on pencils in the fourth month of the fifth year! And you know what, basically, I know they’re making it up.”

Unplanning might not be for everyone, but for companies stuck in neutral or on repeat with a broken business model, it can be liberating. Whilst for the start-up economy, the home business launch, the “I have an idea” folk, Unplanning is about positive actions to realise your goals.

After all, you can think, analyse and plan all day long, or you can actually do things and see what works in the real world. 📌

Info



BUY THE BOOK | Get more details or buy a copy of Ian Sanders and David Sloly's [Zoom: The Faster Way to Make Your Business Idea Happen](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS | **Ian Sanders** specializes in the creative industry, where he's helped launch ideas in TV, radio, advertising, design, software and technology. He's also the author of *Leap! Ditch Your Job, Start Your Own Business & Set Yourself Free* and *Juggle! Rethink Work, Reclaim Your Life*. **David Sloly** creates ideas for a living. After producing programmes for stations including BBC Radio 1, Virgin Radio and Kiss FM, David started producing content for digital platforms, soon getting snapped up by tech marketing agency Mason Zimbler as their Digital Guru. He rose to become Executive Creative Director working on campaigns for Microsoft, Toshiba and EMC.

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