Entrepreneurs' stories to keep you awake at night

Entrepreneurs tend to be optimistic.

We tend to be optimistic because I'm not spared either.

This distinguishes us from the rest of mortals. Where most people see risks and insecurities, we entrepreneurs see opportunities.

And that is what makes us great.

When it works.

Because let's not get carried away either.

Being optimistic doesn't mean being realistic either.

It's just the other side of reality.

The glass half full where others see it as half empty.

The optimist tends to ignore anything that sounds dangerous.

Like the child who covers his ears and starts singing so as not to hear what he is being told.

And if you ignore the dangers, they can kill you.

Out of sight, out of mind.

They say that "he who does not know his history is obliged to repeat it".

Here I tell you some stories that you'd better not repeat.

You decide if you want to listen to them or if you prefer to cover your ears and sing the latest Justin Bieber at the top of your lungs.

But these are not just any stories.

They are not stories out of books.

It's not the story of Kodak or Nokia or Steve Jobs.

How many times have you heard them told to you?



And because I am guessing you're not from Kodak or Nokia or Steve Jobs.

Oops, scary if ghosts read this.

These are my stories, the ones I have lived in some way.

They are stories of my clients, of projects I've worked on, of ideas I've been involved in.

Sometimes clients already come to me with problems and expect me to help them solve them.

Other times the problems arise while we were working together. Others were my own problems, from my own projects.

So, what a publicity stunt. Who's going to hire you if you create problems?

Not everything is perfect. Studying helps, but experience is what gives you the vision to be able to help entrepreneurs and companies.

So here I tell you about my experiences. The ones that maybe I should keep quiet about because they are not something to be proud of.

But they are the ones that can help you the most.

They are the great masters.

The ones that really teach.

I hope they help you.

Just by avoiding some of these problems you will have saved a lot of time, money and, who knows, it may mean the difference between a project failing and being cancelled or succeeding and helping you to make a professional leap.

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The Side Project

Every day is waking up and already in the shower thinking about how to get to the next level of the game.

Because yesterday, when I left work, I left it at a critical point.

I had made significant progress. I had unlocked new levels. But then the new challenge came up, the new boss to overcome.

And I tried it in different ways. Different strategies.

But I couldn't find the solution.

So, I had to quit because it was getting too late. And my family, my wife and my daughters were waiting for me at home.

But during dinner I kept thinking about it.

How do I solve this?

And as we watched the movie, after dinner, I kept thinking about it.

And I'm sure my brain kept thinking about it all night long.

So now, in the shower, I have a great idea. I'm sure this will solve the problem and we can move forward.

And I can't wait to get to work to check it out.

For many years this has been my day-to-day life.

For 15 years I have been able to "play" at work. That's the thing about working at what you love.

That work is a game.

Something I am passionate about.

Something that absorbs me.

And I'm good at it (modesty aside).

I solve the levels.

And I document how to do it and explain it to the rest of the team, so they know how to do it from now on.

And because I'm good at it and I solve problems for the business I get paid well.

Quite well.

So, from my point of view, I get paid well for playing.

What more do I want?



So over time I've been put partners in the team that works with me.

An A-team.

Our mission? To find ways to solve the problems that prevent us from being able to move the company's developments forward.

To test new tools.

Create frameworks for the rest of the teams.

And document them.

And explain it.

And we have fun.

And because we solve problems, we are valuable to the company because the company gets good results.

So with a bit more time I become responsible for all the Development teams in the company.

Development Director they call me.

And that's a lot of people.

Between our own staff and companies that develop projects for us, there are more than 100 people.

And that's a lot of projects at the same time.

And a lot of teams to coordinate.

And a lot of meetings. With my teams, with my bosses, with my colleagues, with clients, with suppliers.

And lots of budgets and lots of project plans and lots of emails and lots of presentations.

That's more responsibility and a better salary.

So far, nothing to object to.

But there is a problem.

A small problem.

I can no longer dedicate myself to my games.

My job now is to ask others to do things.

And that's not so much fun anymore.



So, I have a "hankering" for the time when I could be in front of the computer trying new tools, new strategies, creating solutions.

And when I get the chance, I go up to one of my team and, in a low voice, because I know I'm doing what I shouldn't be doing, I ask him or her:

"How are you handling the problem you told me about?"

And I can't resist suggesting, "Try this. I think the problem has to be at this point".

And I sneak away before they see me.

So eventually I decide that I still need that game.

And if I can't do it at work, why not do it at home?

So, I think and look for a subject that I can work on.

That brings me the challenge of play.

That doesn't conflict with what my company does. It would be unethical.

And I come up with one.

Instead of travel, I'll focus on wine.

I can set up a useful service for people.

I like wines.

I'm not a sommelier but I know how to appreciate a good wine.

And I see that there is a gap in the market. It's hard to find wines among so many online shops.

St. Google hasn't reached that far.

So, in the evenings and on weekends, I dedicate myself to creating my product.

And I'm back in the game I love.

Problems, challenges, results.

There are nights when I go to bed at 3 a.m. when I know that at 6.30 I have to get up to go to my other job.

But the game is engaging.

Each thing you solve is a new level you pass.

And it opens the way to new features and new challenges.

So, 5 more mins, 5 more mins. It doesn't matter. It's fun.

And the project gets going. And it starts getting traffic. And because it basically only requires my time, the costs are low.



And it starts to generate some money.

But money is not really my motivation. I'm here for the game.

For the money I already have the meetings, the budgets, and the presentations.

My work takes me 8, 9, 10 hours a day.

My game consumes 2 or 3 hours every night and as many as I can on the weekends.

And time goes by and both projects move forward.

I have an endless list of ideas to try with my wine project.

But I have no more time.

Because the other job pays well and absorbs me a lot.

And I also like it. It's not as much fun, but you learn a lot, which always motivates me.

I don't plan to delegate my wine project either.

I'm sure that, in time, it could generate a good income.

But if I delegate it, it would no longer be my game.

So I have what today I would call a side project.

More than 15 years have passed. My wine project is still there. It's still my game. It still generates some income, but not too much.

Not enough to dedicate myself exclusively to it.

Saint Google and others have been taking part of the market, so the gap is smaller to make it profitable now.

Although I have said it and repeated it many times: If I had wanted to, I would now be living perfectly well from this project.

In the meantime, my other job is over. The company was unable to withstand the 2008 crisis and ended up closing in 2013. It was nice while it lasted.

Should I have left my "job" earlier to dedicate myself to my "game"?

Obviously, I couldn't know how things would go. So, to answer me now would be cheating.



The truth is that it is very difficult to get a side project off the ground when the people behind it are not 100% dedicated to it.

When the person in charge swims and keeps his or her clothes on.

In other projects, I have left caution behind and have cut bridges with other initiatives to dedicate myself fully to it. Burning ships is the way to focus on what you really want to move forward.

Set goals, set deadlines, validate what you are doing.

And when you have the data, decide what your next challenge is going to be.

Are you going to strive to take your current project to the next level?

Are you going to delegate what is already working to diversify and try a different idea?

And be consistent with what you decide.



Whatifs

This is the third coffee served in less than an hour.

He already knows his way around the kitchen. He switches on the machine, picks up a clean cup, puts in a capsule, waits for the espresso to be ready and drinks it without sugar.

We have just gone through the list of website changes that have been finalised since last week's meeting.

We have added new features, fixed aesthetic and design issues and improved usability.

Now that we see how it looks it occurred to him that it might be interesting if subscribers could register their own businesses on the portal. This way we could show them on a map of each city so that the rest of the subscribers could find them.

Surely this possibility would motivate many small business owners to subscribe to the website.

More visibility = more sales.

More sales for them = more sales for us.

And if, in addition, they can register an offer with an exclusive coupon just for subscribers then it would surely increase their sales and that would attract more people, even if they don't have a business, to have access to those offers.

Last week we added a mechanism to be able to register job offers in the area because, apparently, many potential subscribers are new to the city and may be interested in finding work.

Three weeks ago, we included a list of events in the city. Whether it's concerts, street markets, children's shows or cookery fairs, it's always interesting for newcomers. It is always interesting for newcomers to have a place where they can find all this information in one place.

We still have to see, in the list of improvements, if we can load the information of both events and job offers automatically. The idea is to extract that data from other websites and thus simplify the data entry, have a lot of content, and attract many potential subscribers with almost no effort on our part.

Well... without effort on the part of whoever must upload the information. By the way, this is a point we haven't addressed yet.



Because I, as a developer, am supposed to be able to automate these uploads. I have already done it in other projects.

So, uploading events, job offers, shop and business cards should be easy.

And when we have all this ready, we are ready to launch the website and start looking for subscribers.

No, it's not that we have to start from scratch.

In fact, my partner the coffee maker has been building a community on Facebook for years where people are presumably interested.

So, one day, talking we saw the opportunity, the need I would say, to monetise the effort to create and maintain that community.

So, joining our strengths we could create a website where we could provide additional content for the people in that community.

Content that they would find hard to find elsewhere and that would be paid for with a subscription fee.

So far so good.

The project looks interesting.

My partner will bring the existing community and his marketing knowledge.

I will contribute the web development part and the automation of the content upload.

That was months ago.

The website has been in the making for a while.

The first version was quite "Lean".

A Minimum Viable Product of those that make you feel ashamed when you show it.

Just as the first commandment of startups demands:

"If you're not embarrassed by the first version of your product, you've launched too late." - Reid Hoffman, founder of LinkedIn

But after that first version came a few tweaks.

So, it would be much more presentable.

And then some new functionality.

That would make it much more attractive for people to sign up.

And so, the months go by.

We have now institutionalised the weekly meeting every Tuesday at 10am.

The coffee machine is ready: well stocked with water and coffee capsules and clean cups.



Sugar is not needed.

The question is, when are we going to launch the website?

When are we really going to know if people in the free Facebook community are willing to pay for that information?

Because there is a huge difference between free and what you have to pay for. No matter how cheap the price is.

For the free stuff, people usually don't give it much thought.

But when you have to type in your credit card, it's a different matter.

And meanwhile our Minimum Viable Product is turning into a Medium Viable Product and getting a little bigger every day on its way to becoming a Mastodon Viable Product.

Viable" is still assumed.

Because at the moment there is no one to pay for all that functionality.

Stage fright is always there.

At the moment of exposing yourself in front of the public, doubts arise.

What if they consider it too simple?

What if part of the audience does not see enough value in the current functionality?

What if the price is too expensive for what we offer now?

What if we waste our only cartridge with a hasty launch?

That's a lot of what ifs.

In the meantime, there is a simple escape from that stage fright: let's delay the release date.

Let's find other things to do before exposing it to the scrutiny of the market.

But the point of the Minimum Viable Product is precisely this: to respond to the yesses.

And delaying the launch has a significant cost in perhaps unnecessary effort, in anxiety about seeing the product not validated, and even in adding excess fat to the product that may have to be eliminated in the end.

Moreover, the more effort we invest in the product, the more we will be reluctant to throw it away if in the end it turns out that nobody really wants it.

We have to get out of this spiral. As soon as possible.

Pivoting

The president stands up, picks up the wine glass and taps it a few times with his fork until we all fall silent and pay attention to him.

"Thank you very much for being here, all of you.

Especially those of you who have travelled just to attend this event from as far away from Mallorca as Germany, Sweden, and Finland.

Well, I don't really know if I dare say that Berlin is further away than Madrid.

The truth is that the occasion deserves it.

This club, founded less than two years ago, had planned a big joint celebration when it reached 600 members.

And, in fact, in the few months that have passed since we called it, it turns out that we are already almost 700 members.

This is a networking club for businesspeople with a very simple basic operation: we organise meetings for people to get to know each other.

That's all there is to it. During these lunches or dinners, we can introduce ourselves and meet people and talk to them about whatever we want.

There is only one condition: no selling during the events.

Because we know that people do business with people they trust.

And this is the place to establish that relationship of trust.

If someone sees a possibility of collaboration, just pass the business card, and meet at any other time.

And with this simple way of working, this organisation is generating great value.

Because month by month the organisation grows and expands.

Founded here in Mallorca less than two years ago, there are now almost 20 clubs in 12 countries, including all major European cities, and it is starting to expand to America, Asia, and the Middle East.

So, thank you very much for attending. Cheers!"

Well, more or less the speech went like that.

And the evening was very enjoyable.

I was invited to attend one of the first dinners. When I had only one club.

We could all fit on one big table.

I certainly wasn't very clear, at that first meeting, what I was doing there and even less clear why I had been invited.

Firstly, because I was the only Spaniard at the table, even though we were in Mallorca.

On the other hand, listening to their stories around the table, I quickly saw that they were businessmen. Like that: with a capital letter.

I was a consultant/entrepreneur/engineer with powerful projects and working with companies of all kinds. But my consulting business was light years away from the projects that the rest of the attendees were talking about.

Nor was I at all clear about the objective of such a club.

But during the dinner I began to sense it: businessmen who can afford to go where the quality of life is better. But once there, it is difficult for them to find friends to share experiences with and reliable professionals to do business with.

So, at the end of the dinner the president came up to me and said:

"What did you think, would you like to join us?"

And my answer was:

"I'm still not very clear about the purpose of all this. It's not even clear to me that I can help others in their projects. But what is clear to me is that I want to hear stories like the ones told around the table tonight.

They have made my head explode.

They have made me see a world and a potential and a spirit of people so far removed from what I usually relate to.

People who look for the potential of opportunities and, if they can't find them, they create them".

So, I became the 17th member of the club.

And that was certainly my goal. To soak up that spirit and learn from them.

I wasn't looking for and didn't see how this could generate any business for me.

But the truth is that within a few months I started having conversations outside of events with fellow club members.

And out of that came interesting contacts and project partners.

And the club was growing.

And the president told me at a dinner if I could help them with the club's website because I had to be able to scale up now that the club was growing internationally.



And I experienced from the inside how the club was expanding to other cities, other countries, and other continents.

What we didn't know when we celebrated the 600-member dinner (almost 700 members) was that we were less than half a year away from the pandemic.

And COVID-19 changed the rules of the game in a matter of weeks.

Organising events was no longer possible.

And for an organisation with such a simple model, that meant a complete halt to business as usual.

And therefore, the members stopped receiving the value for which they had joined.

The first reaction to the crisis was to hibernate.

To let a few weeks or months pass until the situation was restored.

But how long?

As the situation dragged on in an environment of total uncertainty as to when normal activity could be resumed.

So, the next step was to look for other solutions.

Virtual meetings, which had started with the pandemic, now opened other possibilities that had not been explored before.

For example, you could now organise thematic meetings with specialists or stakeholders on a particular issue from anywhere in the world.

And you could access specific forums.

And you could talk directly with people with whom it would otherwise be unfeasible to have a physical meeting.

So virtual communication and the web and the app became the new working and meeting environment.

It is not the perfect solution either.

It lacks the informality of a meal that does not have a specific agenda and where you have to let yourself flow in search of common interests, often beyond business.

It is much more difficult to establish trusting relationships beyond the purely professional.

Are you prepared to pivot in the face of a sudden change in your market?



Can you adjust quickly, not just the technology solution, but the value proposition and your own organisation?

Do you have a team of people capable of stepping out of their comfort zone and coming up with new solutions?

Can you turn a crisis into an opportunity to create something new and valuable?



Two men and one destiny?

We haven't spoken in a while.

Maybe it's time for a phone call.

To find out how things are going.

Months ago, the project started with a lot of energy.

The first meetings in the meeting room of the incubator in the technology park.

When they explained the project to me.

Where you can clearly see the usual hesitation of those who doubt if it is too early to tell.

How far can they tell me?

They're worried that I'm going to steal their idea.

But they know that all help is little, and they have to trust someone.

We've known each other for a long time. We have worked together in the past.

From when the two partners were on the staff of a big company.

From when they didn't have to worry about thinking about strategy or raising funds. Only about getting things done on time and on budget.

From when the big company was looking to establish itself as one of the big players in the Spanish market and go public to play in another league.

From when there was money for any campaign to increase its visibility.

From before the 2008 crisis put an end to it.

But friendships came out of that experience.

And out of that crisis came entrepreneurs.

And out of that crisis came interesting projects.

And one thing led to another. And a few months later we are in the incubator room.

They tell me about their project: they want to create an online marketplace for selling sports equipment.

It is an interesting niche where there is a chance to position themselves well.

There is a lot of work to be done: the business plan, the design, countless meetings, finding suppliers, advertising, developing the website, integrating shops, ...

Some things cost time. Others cost money.

Of the former there is now plenty. At least 8 hours a day. Usually much more.

The second is more complicated. There are some savings. There are some subsidies. There are official grants, such as the incubator in which we are gathered. There are friends and contacts that can facilitate the work at an affordable cost during the first months.

And the project takes off.

And things are happening.

Suppliers are interested, presentations are going well, web development is progressing.

Slowly but surely.

The idea is validated, although each step takes time.

And the perception of time varies among the partners.

After a while, the technological part is working: the website is available and the integrations with suppliers are operational.

However, I haven't heard from the project for a while.

How are things going?

So, I finally call one of the partners. And he confirms my suspicions.

"My partner received an offer to join the marketing department of a large company.

We had been building up the project for some time and it was progressing well, but my partner couldn't wait that long to see the benefits.

I, for my part, was aware that it would take time and I was confident that it would start generating profits in the medium term.

But my partner did not see it the same way. He has his family and obligations and prefers the bird in the hand.

So now I'm looking at what to do with the business. I just see it as very difficult to get the whole project off the ground".

Different partners have different perspectives, different motivations, different influences, different situations.



Over time these differences have many opportunities to become real.

The more time, the more likely.

And it is very different to raise them with a project that is launched and generating profits than when it is still a promise.

Growing up

As much as I practice it, it is still a great relief when I can sit down at the end of my presentation in front of a room full of people.

It hasn't gone badly.

It's a full three-day event dedicated to cycling. Full of presentations of all kinds. There are professional coaches whose teams are competing in this weekend's Vuelta a Mallorca.

There are companies offering tourism services related to cycling.

Companies presenting new e-bike models.

Influencers who defend the bicycle as the sustainable means of transport of the future.

And I represent the company that organises the event and I have to do my bit.

Last Saturday I had to promote the event on the radio.

And this presentation, which I have just finished, I explained how to attract cyclists in a digital environment.

This week also serves as a meeting point for the participants of our company. We are a team distributed between Mallorca, Barcelona, and other parts of the peninsula.

There are also professionals who spend more time outside Spain, training riders for the big competitions.

Even a Tour de France winner.

When the 3-day event ends tonight, we can all get together and discuss the status of the project.

The training application for cycling competitions is already well advanced.

There are already beta testers testing the current version.

And in the coming months we will have to involve as many people as possible to get feedback and review the roadmap for future development.

Contacts will have to be made.

Also, and especially to make the platform known to as many professionals, runners and renowned trainers as possible.

This will be essential to make it the benchmark application for the sector worldwide.

The idea came from a professional coach who detected a market need.

The teams he worked with had very rudimentary planning and monitoring systems.

But running a project of this scale requires much more than one person.

Attracting industry professionals has been relatively easy for a well-connected person.

Bringing in a partner with a strategic vision to grow a technology start-up has also been a vital step.

From here, the rest of the team has been incorporated.

Being a technology-based project, it is important to have an expert on the team who is responsible for having control of the developed platform. This is my role.

And there are more people involved, both specialists in the sector who are in charge of improving and testing the product and marketing experts who are in charge of disseminating it.

We will soon reach a crossroads.

The launch will be country-by-country. Starting with Europe, where most of the contacts are, and then expanding to other continents depending on the interest in professional cycling.

We have to be present at events, competitions and any occasion where people from the sector meet.

All this is planned, but it also requires money to invest.

And that is the critical part of the project.

Do we start small with the contacts we have and grow organically?

Or do we look for more funds to be able to make a big launch by investing in advertising and organising or having a major presence at events?

Two options.

Two points of view.

Two business philosophies.

A point of disagreement between the two founding partners. While one opts to start in a more "friendly" environment with professionals he already knows, the other believes that it is time to raise capital to obtain the funds to launch in a big way.

Each point of view has its advantages and disadvantages.



Launching on a small-scale means building a loyal user base that will help validate and improve the application and will be the reference for attracting more customers in the future.

But many of these early users will be invitees to the platform and slow growth means it will take longer to generate revenue and potentially turn a profit.

While raising more capital will allow a quantum leap in the number of users and therefore revenue.

On the other hand, this means entering a phase of attracting investors to which significant efforts will have to be devoted and for which there is yet little tangible data to demonstrate the strength of the business model.

And what happens when the two founding partners do not feel comfortable with what they are doing?

You can continue to move forward bit by bit, but at some point, you will reach a breaking point.