

Validation Questions

You have an idea for a startup. Now what?

Now you need to think about the details of your idea, to get from a vision to a well-defined product that has a market demand.

26 questions that guide you to figure out all the important details without asking about them directly — your niche and ideal customer profile, the unique value proposition of your idea, your business model, and your go to market strategy.



KNOW BEFORE YOU BUILD

Uncover what's real about your idea — what's working and what's wishful thinking.



SHORTCUT YOUR RESEARCH

Invest your effort where it moves the needle, not in learning what to learn.



FROM IDEA TO PROFITS

Turn your raw idea into a clear story, a concrete plan, and the confidence to build.

This workbook gives you the practical, no-nonsense process I'm using with the founders I mentor: 26 deep questions to help you understand how your idea can become a profitable startup.

You'll uncover what works, how to make it work for you, and what isn't worth your time, before you invest months (and lots of money) going in circles.

If you want clarity and confidence for your next move, this is where you start.

The final step of the validation is talking to potential customers and verifying their interest in a product like yours. To get to that step, you need to know who those potential customers are, how to present the idea to them, and what to ask them about. Otherwise, you risk over-explaining, confusing, and generally getting all the wrong answers.

The ability to ask a clear question and get a relevant answer comes from being able to explain the idea in a short and simple manner. That ability comes from a deep and complete understanding of all the nooks and crannies of the subject.

This is a writing exercise, so get your favourite equipment ready.

It's also kind of a prerequisite for crafting a pitch-deck.

Once you have answers to the 26 questions — telling a compelling story becomes easy.

This is a working draft, not a test.

Be honest and don't worry about brevity.

You will clean it up later, when crafting the pitch deck.

If you aren't sure about something, research it — that's part of the process.

1. What is the problem that you want to solve properly?

Describe the problem in as many words as you like.

This isn't the "Problem" slide of the pitch deck, so brevity isn't necessary. Clarity and exactness are.

You don't need to exaggerate the urgency nor the severity of the problem. Be factual and impartial.

2. Why is it a problem?

Who is missing out on what because of this problem?

Wasted resources due to ineffective processes, mistakes made due to lack of easy access to required information, obstacles that could've been avoided — all are examples of how something is a problem.

All of it boils down to money — either money wasted or profits missed. The more money is missed out due to a problem, the more desired is the solution.

Time is money, of course.

Money is also money.

Health is money.

Happiness is money.

Peace of mind and clarity are money, because stress and confusion waste money.

3. What are the current solutions and workarounds?

Who are your competitors and how do they tackle the problem?

If you say that you don't have any, it means that you found a problem that nobody cares to solve. In that case, is it really a problem?

Maybe it *is* a problem, but solving it would create more problems.

Consider the checkout queues in supermarkets. Estimate the collective time wasted by people who are just waiting to pay. How nice would be a world where one can scan items as they put them in their cart, pay with a click, and never wait in line...

You might even imagine other benefits, such as easier upsell of related items and freeing the staff to help shoppers who need help.

One of the problems such a self-checkout app could create is increasing the risk of theft. A hidden benefit of the organized checkout is monitoring that customers don't "forget" to pay for the items they took.

When WhatsApp started, their competitors were email providers and the regular SMS messages. When AirBnB started, their competitors were hotels and message boards like Craigslist.

4. How do the current solutions and workarounds solve the problem?

Of course, the existing approaches are less than perfect — otherwise, you wouldn't need to come up with your idea.

That being said, the current solutions and workarounds aren't completely useless.

Which parts of the problem do they solve and how do they do it?

5. What functionality the current solutions and workarounds have in common?

Make a list of the functionality that all (or most) of your competitors offer in their solutions.

Users of this type of software are taught to expect those features — note them for when you'll be planning your MVP.

6. What are the shortcomings of the current solutions and workarounds?

This could be the same thing that all of the current solutions lack.

This could be a different thing that each of the current solutions lack.

It could be a mix of the two.

Your idea was born because a problem wasn't fully solved.

Is their approach too generalist?

Maybe they're too focused on details and miss the big picture?

Do they use outdated tech?

Be critical and descriptive. Trash your competitors.

7. What is lost because of the shortcomings of the current solutions and workarounds?

Imperfect solutions leave problems on the table and those problems cause losses.

The process isn't perfectly streamlined?

Time is lost, costly mistakes are made.

What falls through the cracks in the current solutions?

8. How many people use the current solutions and workarounds?

Calculated guess time!

This question is rephrasing the "how big is your target market" question.

If a wizard made all the other solutions disappear — this is the crowd that would knock on your door a moment after.

This question is about big numbers, not about specific groups.

9. How many people encounter the shortcomings of the current solutions and workarounds?

Some people are satisfied by the existing approaches to the problem.
Some are very much not.

If a button that you never press fails to function once in a while — you wouldn't care.
Somebody who uses that button regularly — would hate every bit of that button.
These people are not necessarily eager to try something new (yet), but they are already dissatisfied with the current options.

Looking at the problems that current solutions leave on the table, estimate the percentage of the users who encounter them.

10. How many people suffer from the shortcomings of the current solutions and workarounds?

A problem rarely affects only those who directly experience it.
It creates a ripple effect, affecting people who aren't the users nor the payers, but who interact with the users.

When a business provides a slow service due to manual processes (that could be automated), not only its employees and owners suffer — the clients also lose time while waiting for the service.
A bad day at work can ruin the mood at home.
A bad day at home can ruin the mood at work.

Create a list of first, second, and third circles of suffering.
Estimate the amount of people in each group.

11. What is the (estimated) effort of adopting a new solution?

Not a trick question.

Sometimes the effort is truly minimal — download the app and done. Usually, there's more to it.
Learning the controls of the software is an adoption effort.

If it has only one button like Shazam, that is a non-issue.
If it has more buttons than Photoshop — you're gonna have a hard time.

Changing the way things are usually done is an adoption effort, even when the current way of doing things is cumbersome and annoying.
Which new habits would your users need to develop to make the most of your product?

12. How does your solution solve the shortcomings of the current solutions and workarounds?

You don't have to be solving all of them, but if you solve none of them — what are you even doing?

For each of the problems that you identified in the existing solutions, if your solution does it better and solves it — explain how it does that.

13. What changed recently to make your solution possible?

Each newly emergent technology opens new markets and new possibilities in existing markets. The most prominent one nowadays being AI — specifically, Large Language Models.

Functionality, which until not so long ago required developing complex algorithms, can now be implemented using prompts.

Other important factors are changes in legislation, changes in regulations, and major shifts in public opinion.

The focus here is on the shift from “impossible” (or so hard to do that it’s not worth the effort) to “possible” (or easy enough to do so it’s worth the effort).

14. What changed recently to make your solution relevant in the market?

Which need had emerged recently in a way that made existing solutions insufficient?

Did something become trendy recently? It justifies new products in that market.

Did something recently fall from grace? It justifies new products in that market.

Relevance is not about technological, moral or legal possibility — it’s about recognizing existing foundations and building on them.

Apps that monitor child’s usage of their mobile phone became relevant when mobile phones for children became ubiquitous. They didn’t require special new tech — they were built on a newly emergent need of parents to watch their children on a virtual playground.

15. What makes you uniquely suitable for implementing this solution?

Which combination of talents, skills, experience, and abilities that you have makes you suitable for this task?

If you have a team, this question is about the team as a whole, since your skills are complementary. Ask yourself, with a positively curious tone — “why me?”

Each of the skills by itself usually isn’t uncommon, but their combinations are unique.

If your impostor syndrome is flaring, ignore the uniqueness requirement and just list the skills that you have that are relevant to implementing your idea.

The truest answer to “why me” is — because I can.

16. Is there a published research confirming the benefits of your idea or parts of it?

Instant validation from a peer reviewed study, even if it’s only broadly related.

Phrase your idea like a premise for a research and try searching for it — invoking a variation of Rule 34 (if you don't know what it is, Google at your own risk), there's probably at least several such researches.

Premises for research are usually phrased like this:

Thing A causes thing B

Where “thing A” is the outcome of using your solution and “thing B” is the benefits or side-benefits of using your solution.

“Monitoring mental health improves mental health”

If nothing fits, you can create a longer chain:

Thing A causes thing B, thing B causes thing C — thing A causes thing C

“Efficiency reduces stress; reducing stress is good for health” — “Efficiency is good for health”

17. The payer and the user – are they the same person?

Sometimes the answer is “yes” because the product is an app for personal use.

Sometimes the answer is “no” because the product is intended for organisational use, so the person using the software is not the same person who pays the bill.

Sometimes times, the answer is “maybe” because the software is intended for a group (like a family) and only one of the users in the group is the payer.

Maybe it's a kind of market, so only the sellers (or the buyers) pay a commission.

Knowing the persona that opens their wallet to pay is as important as knowing the persona that would use the software.

Don't be quick to assume that it's always easier to have only one persona, when the user is the payer. Sometimes it's easier to have them separate, which allows to onboard the users as ambassadors that help pressure the payer into the purchase.

18. Who would directly benefit from a wide adoption of your solution?

Direct beneficiaries are those who get value from your product, even if they are not the ones who actively use it.

For example, a business owner is a direct beneficiary, when a software used by their employees improves the profit margins. The employees are also direct beneficiaries, because they enjoy a more streamlined work process.

Describe each profile in as much details as relevant to your product — age, gender, occupation, hobbies, geographical location, socioeconomic status, marital status, children, pets, etc.

19. What are the value-add outcomes of using your solution?

For each profile of the direct beneficiaries, describe the benefits and value they get from using your product.

All the profiles might be getting the same value or each profile might be getting different values. Do they get something they can't achieve without your solution? Does your solution make it substantially easier to achieve something?

Focus on the results of using your solution, rather than on what your product does.

20. With those benefits, how much money would they save and/or how much (more) money could they earn?

Not 100% applicable to all products, but you can stretch it.

Improvements in efficiency save time — those human-hours can be translated to monetary value. Improvements in health, physical and mental — save money on treatments by preventing exacerbation of health problems, and save time that would otherwise be spent on convalescence.

21. Which specific group of people would benefit the most from using your solution?

Rank the profiles you've listed as direct beneficiaries of the solution, by the amount (and/or quality) of the benefits they'll be getting.

One of those group profiles is the absolute winner — that's your early-adopters niche.

22. Who would side-benefit from a wide adoption of your solution? How?

Side-benefit is the positive influence that transcends the direct benefits of using your product. Using a navigation app that helps avoid traffic does more than create a more enjoyable trip for the driver — it gives them more time with the people at their destination; their friends are the side-beneficiaries of efficient navigation app.

The second and third circles of sufferers from the incomplete existing solutions — these are the people who would enjoy an improved approach.

23. Who would lose what from a wide adoption of your solution?

This one is a trick question, because it has more than one layer. The obvious answer is — your competitors would lose revenue.

What about the non-obvious answer?

An example for a non-obvious answer is liability.

For example, a company would be liable to act if it is aware of a mental distress of its employees.

24. What would become possible after a wide adoption of your solution?

In the business of making the world a better place (at least for some people), what part are you planning to play?

Describe the world where your solution is widely adopted.

How do the lives of your users and those around them improve?

AirBnB wanted to create a world where tourism is an immersive cultural experience.

Skype wanted to create a world where international calls aren't crazy expensive, facilitating human connection.

25. What are the core functionalities of your solution?

Core functionalities are the “special sauce” of your product (implementation of solution). The things that your future software would help users do, the processes it would streamline.

Being able to register and login are not core functionalities.

Being able to send a message or share a photo might be.

Write 1-3 paragraphs describing each of the most important abilities of your ideal implementation of the solution.

Now, give a 1-sentence header to each paragraph. The header should be as descriptive as possible, as if summarising the paragraph below it. You can restate a sentence from the paragraph or write a new one.

Examples:

The paragraph:

The user will open the camera and take a picture. Then, they will choose one of a big list of various colour adjustments presets — to improve the colours of the photo; they can test different filters. Once satisfied, they would share the final result on their profile so their friends could see them.

The header:

Enhance the photos you share with friends

The paragraph:

The user will upload photos of used items they want to sell and advertise them in the app. Other users would search by name or description and contact the sellers in a chat in the app to coordinate the purchase.

The header:

Buy and sell pre-loved items

The headers are the core functionalities of your solution — they concisely describe the benefits for the users without overloading with details or technicalities. This is what people expect to see in the “Product” slide.

It's normal and expected that the headers of different core functionalities would have similar words. This happens because one core functionality of the product can be implemented in more than one user-experience flow.

26. What is the end-goal for the startup?

Another way to ask this question is — what is your exit strategy?

Unless you're doing this just for fun, like a hobby that you might drop any day, there should be a well-defined target that you plan to reach.

Much in the same way that one doesn't go on a hike in a forest without first ensuring their safe return home from the hike — one shouldn't start a startup before deciding on how this startup would end.

We are talking about the best-case scenario, of course.

The startup ends when it stops being a startup, and...

... becomes a regular company with a stable annual recurring revenue, making profits that allow you to live comfortably while hired employees do the work,

or

... is merged into another company that acquired it, making a hefty sum for all shareholders — The Exit.

Institutional investors (like Venture Capital) usually prefer the second option, because it offers them a quicker return on investment.

On the other hand, for a big enough market, the first option also offers plenty revenue.

Sample: Airbnb – Validation Questions Worksheet

These answers are for example only. They are short on purpose — in real life, each sentence could be a paragraph.

1. What is the problem that you want to solve properly?

People struggle to find affordable short-term accommodation, especially during big events when hotels are fully booked or overpriced. Homeowners have extra space but no simple way to rent it out safely.

2. Why is it a problem?

Travelers are forced to pay too much, settle for far-away hotels, or skip trips. Homeowners miss income opportunities. Both sides lack trust and an easy system.

3. What are the current solutions and workarounds?

Hotels, bed & breakfasts, Craigslist listings, and couch-surfing sites. Some people ask friends for a spare room.

4. How do the current solutions and workarounds solve the problem?

Hotels provide reliable, predictable service but are expensive and limited. Craigslist is cheap but not moderated and sometimes sketchy. Couch-surfing is free but not always available or safe.

5. What functionality do the current solutions and workarounds have in common?

Booking a room, viewing photos, listing amenities, showing location, reviews (sometimes).

6. What do the current solutions and workarounds lack?

Trust, transparency, easy payment, curated listings, user-friendly experience, real-time availability.

7. What is lost because of the lack in current solutions and workarounds?

Travelers waste money and time. Homeowners don't monetize spare rooms. Cities miss out on flexible lodging options.

8. How many people use the current solutions and workarounds?

Millions of travelers book hotel rooms daily. Craigslist gets thousands of listings. There are millions of extra rooms in US homes.

9. How many people encounter the lacks of the current solutions and workarounds?

Anyone searching for a place during a big event, on a budget, or at the last minute.

10. How many people suffer from the lacks?

Direct: Travelers and hosts.

Indirect: Event organizers, local businesses, families who can't afford to travel.

11. What is the (estimated) effort of adopting a new solution?

Travelers: Sign up, search, book, pay. Hosts: List room, set price, respond to inquiries. Both: Learn new system, trust the platform.

12. How does your solution solve the lacks?

Airbnb connects hosts with travelers in a trusted marketplace, with reviews, secure payment, and easy communication.

13. What changed recently to make your solution possible?

Widespread internet, rise of online payments, growing acceptance of sharing economy ideas.

14. What changed recently to make your solution relevant in the market?

Events increasingly drive hotel shortages. People more comfortable transacting with strangers online.

15. What makes you uniquely suitable for implementing this solution?

Founders are designers/engineers passionate about travel and community. We've already prototyped and hosted guests ourselves.

16. Is there published research confirming the benefits?

Studies on trust in online marketplaces (eBay, Craigslist), and rising demand for P2P services.

17. The payer and the user—are they the same person?

Hosts receive payment, travelers pay. Platform takes a cut.

18. Who would directly benefit from a wide adoption?

Travelers, hosts, cities (with more tourism).

19. What are the value-add outcomes?

Cheaper, flexible stays for travelers. Extra income for hosts. Better community connections.

20. With those benefits, how much money would they save/earn?

Hosts can earn hundreds per month. Travelers can save 30–50% vs. hotels.

21. Which group benefits the most?

Travelers on a budget and homeowners in high-demand areas.

22. Who would side-benefit? How?

Local businesses (more foot traffic), families (affordable travel), city tax revenue.

23. Who would lose what?

Hotels (revenue), maybe traditional landlords if short-term stays crowd out long-term rentals.

24. What would become possible?

Anyone can travel anywhere, affordably. Empty rooms put to use. New social connections.

25. What are the core functionalities?

- List your space with photos, price, and availability
- Search and book accommodations instantly
- Secure payment, verified reviews, and messaging

26. What is the end-goal for the startup?

Become the go-to platform for short-term stays worldwide, with massive network effects, or be acquired by a travel industry leader.

Want more examples based on known companies?

Copy this prompt and add the company name in the placeholder.

Answer these questions as the founders of *[Name of Company]*, when they just started:

- 1- What is the problem that you want to solve properly?
- 2- Why is it a problem?
- 3- What are the current solutions and workarounds?
- 4- How do the current solutions and workarounds solve the problem?
- 5- What functionality the current solutions and workarounds have in common?
- 6- What are the shortcomings of the current solutions and workarounds?
- 7- What is lost because of the shortcomings of the current solutions and workarounds?
- 8- How many people use the current solutions and workarounds?
- 9- How many people encounter the shortcomings of the current solutions and workarounds?
- 10- How many people suffer from the shortcomings of the current solutions and workarounds?
- 11- What is the (estimated) effort of adopting a new solution?
- 12- How does your solution solve the shortcomings of the current solutions and workarounds?
- 13- What changed recently to make your solution possible?
- 14- What changed recently to make your solution relevant in the market?
- 15- What makes you uniquely suitable for implementing this solution?
- 16- Is there a published research confirming the benefits of your idea or parts of it?
- 17- The payer and the user — are they the same person?
- 18- Who would directly benefit from a wide adoption of your solution?
- 19- What are the value-add outcomes of using your solution?
- 20- With those benefits, how much money would they save and/or how much (more) money could they earn?
- 21- Which specific group of people would benefit the most from using your solution?
- 22- Who would side-benefit from a wide adoption of your solution? How?
- 23- Who would lose what from a wide adoption of your solution?
- 24- What would become possible after a wide adoption of your solution?
- 25- What are the core functionalities of your solution?
- 26- What is the end-goal for the startup?