

STARTUP YOUR LIFE

Hustle and hack
your way
to **Happiness**

Anna Akbari, Ph.D.

1.

The Imperfect Prototype

BECOME AN MVP

A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.

—ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPERY, *Wind, Sand and Stars*

Kevin was a young ex-Googler working at Nextstop, a travel recommendation startup later acquired by Facebook, but despite his relative success, he had an entrepreneurial itch to scratch. So he started working on his amateur coding skills. One of his ideas was to create a hybrid of Foursquare and Mafia Wars, so he hacked together a prototype in HTML5 and named it Burbn. It wasn't fancy, didn't incorporate any aesthetic design elements, and lacked multiple features. Nonetheless, at a party, he showed the prototype to some high-rolling investors who agreed to a follow-up meeting

with him. Two weeks later he secured \$500k in seed funding, quit his job, and started to build out his larger vision.¹

By the time he showed it to Mike, his eventual co-founder, the mobile web app was already bursting with features: current and future location check-ins, photo posting, points for meeting up with friends, and more. Together, they made it into an iPhone app.

It felt too cluttered, so they decided to streamline and slim down. They stripped away all the features with the exception of photo posting, comments, and—of course—the ability to “like” photos. They named it “Instagram,” and eight weeks later they launched. Within a matter of hours, it jumped from a prototype with a handful of users to the number one photography app in the iTunes App Store.

In one and a half years, Instagram acquired 100 million users, and Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger sold the app to Facebook for \$1 billion.

Kevin and Mike didn’t have a magic formula. But they did embrace a few key principles: They understood that in order to be successful, you need to focus on and master just one thing. They also recognized that perfection was not the answer. Kevin showed his prototype to investors when it was far from finished—in a state, in fact, that others might have considered embarrassing. It wasn’t the final product, but he trusted it was good enough to spark interest.

Your life, no matter who you are, is not unlike the early Instagram prototype. Whatever stage you’re at, you should be thinking of yourself as a prototype. But not the kind that must be incubated to perfection before it sees the light of day. If you’ve ever worked inside a large company, you know that from conception to roll-out, product development is a long, costly process that frequently stomps out innovation along the way, to the point where the final product is sometimes irrelevant by the time it finally hits

the market. You are not that. You are a different kind of prototype: a super-early version called an MVP, or minimum viable product. MVPs are bare bones. They include just the most essential features needed to launch the product and get feedback. They allow for minimal risk, minimal investment, and maximum insights. As an MVP, you're able to explore an idea or a hypothesis and quickly and painlessly figure out if it'll work. You're able to go to market almost immediately and test your reception among a small, targeted group of consumers. Then you can make tweaks and revise as needed before expanding your reach—or scrap the concept altogether. An MVP solves a problem or fulfills a need—even if it's an unknown desire (more on that in a minute). The point of an MVP is to confirm that someone cares about what you're doing before you get in too deep. The key word is validation. You're validating what you think might be a good idea. The MVP phase is the learning phase. Only you're not going through decades of expensive schooling or years of on-the-job training for this education.

Early versions of products are called “beta” versions—a term that acknowledges the product might still have a few bugs—and living your life in beta mode has some significant advantages. Namely, it allows you to stop focusing on the final, perfectly polished outcome and instead explore what you can do in the meantime. I'm not telling you to thoughtlessly try out everything that crosses your mind, but rather I'm giving you a license to experiment and play with possibilities as you refine. Your life is more an abstract expressionist painting than a posed portrait, and once you embrace that mentality, the shape and substance of your life and happiness will transform.

Thinking of your life as a startup will change you in many ways—but first, let's establish what it *won't* do: It won't make you a flawless human being. Instead, you're becoming an MVP—a lean variation of a prototype. You're a work in progress, so our

goal is not perfection. You're looking to become the kind of person that resonates with others, maximizes opportunities and resources, and generally has their shit together. This means fine-tuning the seemingly mundane, teeny-tiny stuff—like what you eat for lunch or your first date uniform—until it accumulates into a feet-on-the-ground, wheels-in-motion, functioning product.

Whatever stage you're at in life, operating like an MVP will benefit you. After all, you'll never be quite the slick, glossy version of yourself that you dream of being (or try to present on social media: Like any Silicon Valley startup, life is not as glamorous as its Instagram account would make it seem). As an MVP, you're constantly gathering feedback, looking for opportunity, and refining your life, at any age. It may sound hard, but in actuality, MVPs have distinct advantages. Whether it's your entire life or a particular aspect of it that is still operating in MVP mode, your unfinishedness can be a competitive advantage. First, MVPs are nimble. In the startup world, it's usually an MVP that showcases the seeds of something truly new and exciting. And rather than expecting flawlessness from day one, consumers are just thrilled to gain early access.

But to look around you, you'd never know that anything short of perfection is acceptable. Everyday we're bombarded with air-brushed images, heavily curated social media personas, and viral stories of people doing amazing things—seemingly effortlessly. But just like you, they were once MVPs (and many of them still are, just with great PR). We can all take risks, be bold, “fail” (repeatedly), and invert all the assumptions we've carried forever, especially if they're not serving our needs anymore. Don't think of it as starting from scratch but as creating a new iteration of what already existed, with the aid of strategic experimentation and audience feedback. This, not the lightning bolt from the blue, is the essence of innovation.

Sometimes building your “product” requires only some expert storytelling and attractive illusion. In plumbing, smoke tests are used to find leaks or weaknesses to the infrastructure by pushing artificially generated smoke through pipes. In the startup world, smoke tests are also a sort of strength test, only without a physical product. With little more than a website landing page, startups can test out their idea and see if it’s worth investing more time and resources into building it out. Potential users may simply submit their email address if the site’s description appeals and get notified if and when it launches. Generally, if the sign-up rate is high, it’s a go. If not, it may indicate either that the product is off—or that the company’s way of describing it doesn’t yet resonate correctly. Regardless, the feedback fuels the direction of the product. It’s a way to learn a lot, fast, with minimal investment.

Before raising a \$14.5 million funding round, Canadian startup Thalmic Labs executed a highly successful smoke test. The company developed Myo, a wireless armband that allows users to control technology through arm motion and gestures. Many advised against the product, arguing that investors weren’t interested in hardware products and instead favored mobile/social software. So to prove their concept had merit, the team at Thalmic Labs released explanatory videos demonstrating how the armband worked. Online views multiplied, and so did pre-orders: over 30,000 of them, totaling \$4.5 million in pre-sales.² (There was little risk for the would-be buyers, as they weren’t charged until the product shipped.)

This video smoke test proved the demand to investors and also generated an excited, early user base eager to test out the product. It wasn’t ready to ship when they watched the video and placed their orders, but the users didn’t care. Nor did they expect it to be perfect when it first launched. They were excited about trying out something new—probably more excited than they’d

ever been about an overly manicured product that had undergone years of testing.

I've also embraced the quick-and-dirty utility of the smoke test. I began receiving a lot of traffic to my website, but I wanted a way to capture more people who might be interested in my services. I had a "keep in touch" sign-up prompt and people could contact me directly to learn more about how we could work together, but I needed something less committal—something that would allow me to interact with more people in a brief but meaningful way. So I created and posted a quiz on the homepage, offering personal feedback directly from me for respondents. I initially offered it for free, but when the demand was too high to maintain, I started charging \$5—a number low enough to make it accessible to most people, but high enough to weed out people who would have no interest in paying for the real product. The smoke test demonstrated both that there was a demand for my approach and that people were willing to pay something for it. That was the validation I needed to invest time and money in a paid video series.

Perhaps the most famous smoke-testing method is Kickstarter. It's basically a platform for largely untested MVPs. Before these projects go into full production mode, they reach out to the online community with a description of their idea and an invitation to pledge a small contribution toward its development, in return for some kind of gift/reward if the launch is successful. Depending on your donation, you may receive anything from inclusion on their email list, to a personal shout-out in the credits, to a free product once they hit their target funding. If they don't reach their funding goal, they don't receive a cent, meaning it's risk-free for both parties. And naturally, when they do launch, they are anything but perfect, but users don't seem to mind.

You may recall the now-infamous potato salad project launched

by software developer Zack “Danger” Brown. Zack set an ambitious goal of \$10 on his initial campaign, and yet managed to lure in \$55,000 of backing with an oh-so-clever title (“Potato Salad”), a lackluster pitch (“Basically I’m making potato salad. I haven’t decided what kind yet.”), and the promise of saying each \$1 backer’s name out loud while making the potato salad (how he’d prove that utterance, he didn’t say) or allowing them to hang out in the kitchen with him while he cooked. It was a tongue-in-cheek campaign that went viral, and people responded.

So what does any of this have to do with you? Living your life like a startup begins with eliminating as much waste as possible during the MVP phase, while also testing out radically new—or totally off-the-wall—ideas. Run some smoke tests and keep it simple and direct—like potato salad. (Yes, I just told you to become potato salad. Bear with me.) Take your diet, for instance. It’s far more than an outlet for transforming your figure. You can experiment with it to see which combination of ingredients leaves you energized and which leaves you in an afternoon slump. Or maybe you’ll learn that dairy makes your skin break out (something I learned through some dietary smoke tests of my own). Whatever area of your life you’re looking to improve, strip down the relevant variables to just the essentials, then thoughtfully reintroduce each “feature.” You’ll quickly learn what you need, what you want, and what never should’ve been invited to the potato salad party in the first place.

But remember that simple and direct does not mean boring. The list of successful Kickstarter projects continues to grow, and some of the most successful barely seemed like bankable ideas at the beginning. Take this list of actual projects: “I Love You Mom” t-shirts, a 9/11 memorial art project, “Puglet” (the first all-pug production of Hamlet), and Poop: The Game. Now if you were to bet on which projects would likely succeed, you may be inclined to

wager on the first two. But, in fact, Puglet and Poop were the big winners here. We could chalk this outcome up to a commercial appetite for the absurd, or we could recognize that unconventional ideas often capture our imagination in ways that defy logic, earning enthusiasm and support for things we didn't even know we wanted. Like potato salad or a game about poop.

As Steve Jobs famously said, "A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them."³ In other words, market research *before* you launch can only take you so far. Sometimes you just have to put something out there, even if it's just a smoke test, before you can get answers. Know when to follow your intuition and try something new, regardless of how unprecedented or out of character it may seem for you.

Unfortunately, you can't try every idea that pops into your head. There's only so much time in a day. How do you determine where and how to spend your time? Who or what gets your attention? Where do you invest your limited energy and resources? Thinking of your life—the tasks, projects, hobbies, and opportunities, both big and small—from an MVP perspective means you don't get buried in long ramp-up phases before you push yourself out there. Faster learning, better results. What you currently think is really important may prove to be inconsequential once you get some feedback. And what may have seemed completely silly at the outset, may evolve into something popular or meaningful: Zach Brown's potato salad campaign may have started as a joke, but with the money he raised, he not only humored people but also created Potato Stock—an entire day of potato-themed fun—and enabled Brown to donate a chunk of the money to charity.⁴ When your life is an MVP, you refine just enough of what's essential, and then push it out into action. All the important learning will follow from there.

Think of this new MVP mindset as a commitment to eliminat-

ing waste—wasted time, wasted resources, wasted energy. You’re living lean and working smart. This also means you want to test before you invest, to avoid future waste and a bucket of regrets. This is something we fail to do more often than you might think.

For instance, every year, tens of thousands of students enroll in law school—often for all the wrong reasons. Many do so because it seems like a responsible choice with a good salary (most big firm positions start around \$160,000), or simply because of pressure from parents to choose a profession that will allow them to secure a “real job” upon graduation. All of these are attractive reasons to pursue a profession, as long as they aren’t the only reasons. But depending on the state of the economy, and the number of other people choosing the same path, these reasons may not even hold true.

In its purest form, law school is not just a means to an end. For many who love law school, they see it as an opportunity to write, think critically, debate, and operate in a stimulating environment. Unfortunately, law school is largely not reflective of the daily life of most lawyers—and in fact, most law students don’t even fully understand what lawyers do on a daily basis. That huge disconnect—between the three years of training and the many, many years spent working post-graduation—is just one of the reasons that so many optimistically choose to become lawyers and feel their choice is validated during the preparatory stage, only to find that they hate the actual day-to-day practice of law (if they can even get hired to do it). Think I’m exaggerating? “Associate attorney” was ranked the number one unhappiest job in America.⁵

Many of these young, debt-ridden lawyers didn’t operate like MVPs before leaping into the costly, time-consuming journey that is law school. *Would I even enjoy this life? If I don’t enjoy it, could I at least tolerate it for the next several decades, every single day? Would I even*

want to? And at what cost? So they stay at their law firms, thinking life will suck less once they make partner. And while that hard-earned accolade provides a momentary boost of happiness, the pressure and tedium of everyday lawyering soon settles back in, and with it, misery. (I'd estimate that emotional trajectory somewhere around the same spike/deflate/level-out pattern that winning the lottery has on your happiness. It's generally not sustainable.) And once you reach that level of achievement and financial reward, walking away becomes that much harder. There are more than a few 30-something legal partners already counting the days until they will give themselves permission to retire—in 15 to 20 years. Sure, there are some lawyers who love their jobs, but quitting the legal profession (or at least getting out of Big Law) is so widely desired that entire consulting practices have sprouted up, dedicated to helping miserable attorneys get out of the game.

Think of all the things you diligently test out before committing to them. You test-drive a car before you purchase it, and more likely than not you try on clothes to avoid getting stuck with an ill-fitting garment. In fact, it's possible you think about these micro-decisions—which ultimately don't determine your long-term, sustainable happiness—for far longer than you do bigger decisions that just seem “obvious.” Who wouldn't want the chance to make \$160k their first year out of school?

Before we get in too deep, let's clarify what we mean by happiness. I'm talking about subjective well-being, or what is sometimes referred to as “eudaimonia.” Basically, it's human flourishing. It's not a momentary spike of pleasure but a prolonged feeling that you're alive and thriving. True happiness doesn't mean there won't be ups and downs—it's fulfilling to experience a full range of emotions—but we flourish when we're engaged in activities that enrich us. You can't change what you were born into, but you can change how you live your life—and fortunately, that

makes all the difference. Becoming an MVP is the first step in redesigning the happiness potential of your life.

So why am I talking about lawyers? Because choosing a career on auto-pilot is the perfect example of living a *non-MVP* life—and one that makes a lot of people very unhappy. For you, maybe it was choosing medical school. Or becoming an accountant. Or a teacher. All potentially rewarding professions, for the right person. Or maybe you applied this default mindset to finding a mate. I'm not saying you should never make the “obvious” choice (and to be clear, lawyering *is* the right choice for some people), but when you commit to living your life like a startup and transform into an MVP, you're far less likely to invest years and hundreds of thousands of dollars into figuring out that you hate something. You learn it faster, cheaper, and (most of the time) in a more joyful way—primarily because you've (smartly) avoided the years of agony, as well as the accompanying regret. (In the next chapter, we'll work on changing the mindset that would place you in that predicament in the first place.)

Becoming an MVP might sound like a regression. But in actuality, it's just a stripping away of all the murky matter that gets layered on as you age. It's a return to your core functionality. To why you do what you do, and how to do it best.


SCRUM MASTER CHEAT SHEET.

The best possible moment to become an MVP is today. Right now. The timing will always be as imperfect as you are, so choose now. And here's how:

- ☞ **STUMP YOURSELF.** Who are you, and who do you want to become? What are your life priorities? What are your skills and

strengths? What makes you happy? And what makes you miserable? (An important yet often overlooked question.)

Whether you're changing course in your career, considering a geographic move, or just want to feel more alive, asking the obvious-yet-hard questions is the foundational step we often skip, take for granted, or dismiss as fluffy and unimportant. Rethinking your decisions and goals as an MVP allows you to focus on learning all the essential information about yourself—like whether you'll thrive or dread every day—before you find yourself in hard-to-escape predicaments. As an MVP, you're exploring possibilities, not polishing a finished product. The point of an MVP is to validate your idea, to prove that someone cares and that it's worth the investment. And sometimes you're the very person you must prove that to. So think critically about your life and what you want it to look like. What will nourish and sustain you?

 **BE YOUR OWN GURU.** Life evolves in unpredictable ways. And sometimes the goals you thought you wanted no longer apply. But it's not the specific goals that matter (*finish graduate school by 25, get promoted to VP of my company, buy my dream house*). Startups can't predict the vicissitudes of their business or industry over its lifetime, but what they can confidently declare is the way they want to operate and what larger ideals drive them. The same is true for you. Companies often have mission statements—a few lines to explain their goals and define what's important; a sort of statement of purpose that will endure over time. But instead of creating a wordy, jargon-heavy mission statement for your life, I want you to do what Silicon Valley marketing guru Guy Kawasaki suggests to companies: skip the mission statement and instead develop a mantra.⁶ It should be brief (only a few words) and get to the heart of what fuels you. It should an-

chor all the decisions you make—now and in the future. Apple’s mantra is “Think different”; Coca-Cola’s is “Refresh the world”; Google’s is “Don’t be evil.” (Whether or not you think these companies are living up to their mantras is a different conversation.)


Channeling your inner Zen isn’t easy when you’re in startup mode. But your mantra will keep you on track when life tries to derail you. Mentally referring back to it is a fast, easy way to check in with yourself. And when repeated over time, it keeps you focused as you evolve toward a particular goal, whatever that may be. You likely won’t tell anyone your mantra, but you will utter it silently, or just let it hover in the wings of your mind while you go about your day.

Remember how Instagram initially stripped down its offering to push out an MVP with just one core feature? Well the mantra is your “one feature.” It’s that one essential thing that remains consistent, even if everything else is in flux. It drives to the heart of who you are and why you get up in the morning. Be your own guru and let the mantra anchor you.

☞ **COZY UP TO IMPERFECTION.** Kickstarter campaigns can be awkward. The promotional videos are of varying degrees of professionalism, the accompanying landing pages may offer little functionality and few bells and whistles, and the product you’re looking to buy doesn’t even exist yet. But they also open the door to ideas and projects that often get stopped up by all the bureaucratic boundaries of life. Take the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter, for example. A complicated combination of ratings, budgets, and scheduling led the CW network to cancel the cult-favorite television series in its third season. Bereft fans advocated for a film finale, so the show’s team launched a Kickstarter and met its \$2 million goal in just one

day, ultimately ending with a total of \$5.7 million.⁷ This smoke test found a hugely receptive audience, and the film was able to move forward without restrictions.

Walt Disney is credited with saying, “The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing.” So what keeps us from starting and doing? Often all that pre-doing jabber is rooted in a fear of failure, embarrassment, and imperfection. Fortunately, as an MVP, you accept all of those as part of the process. MVPs don’t look fancy and polished, and they often have a lot of “bugs”—the technology equivalent of human quirks. The bugs are eventually worked through, and the product runs more smoothly as a result. But the startup doesn’t stop operating during that time. MVPs trade perfection for ingenuity, slickness for savvy, diversification for flexibility. As an MVP, you’re not lowering your standards, you’re simply moving the end goal.

 **TRIM THE FAT.** Most of us have a lot of blubber slowing us down. Not literal cellulite or even the inevitable life scars we like to refer to as “baggage,” but rather the heavy weight of all the “shoulds” and “musts” we force upon ourselves. *I should like yoga. I must be with someone at least 6 feet tall.* Layer that with the default ways we often mindlessly operate, and it’s easy to realize why we often feel immobile, trapped. This extra weight pushes us further and further from our core mantra. It’s time to slim down and shed everything but the essentials. You can gradually add things back into your life, but perhaps for the first time in a long time (or ever), approach each decision as minimally as possible, from the small—your workout routine—to the big—your choice of mate. Ask yourself what you actually enjoy (the answer may be less accessible than you’d imagine), and commit to just catering to that for a while. No, life isn’t always

simple, but it's impossible to move forward if you're buried under unnecessary complexity. Time to get back to basics.

THE LAZY LOWDOWN: TOP TEN CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS

1. It's never too early or late in life to be an MVP.
2. MVPs are exciting and nimble, giving them a competitive advantage over “perfect” products.
3. Test before you invest (and remember: sometimes smoke tests are best).
4. Eliminate waste before it crushes you.
5. Get rapid feedback—from yourself and your audience.
6. MVP is a learning phase. Make it your permanent phase.
7. Be your own brand of potato salad: sometimes wacky is both wonderful and wise.
8. Challenge the “law school default” mindset.
9. Sometimes happiness and practicality don't coexist—so embrace happiness and redefine “practical.”
10. Return to your core. Or discover it for the first time.

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As an entrepreneur, Anna Akbari learned that one of the best things about startups is their ability to “pivot” quickly—basically a euphemism for failing and starting over. And she quickly found that personal success is no different. It’s not just about developing and following the right process but also having a good idea. And that demands rigour and daily maintenance—far beyond a few positive affirmations. Like any Silicon Valley startup, the business of life is not as glamorous as its Instagram account would make it seem.

What do you do when planning is not an option? When control is out of your reach? You isolate the small stuff, experiment constantly, and use the results to lay a more sustainable foundation for the future. You validate your idealized vision by testing it out in bite-sized increments. You see what sticks, integrate, and move forward. And inevitably, you experience a series of failures along the way. But if you’re savvy, you apply a scientific approach to creating and managing the life you want. And the Lean Startup’s now-famous “build, measure, learn” feedback log is the perfect place to start.

Startup Your Life is about maximizing flexibility and measuring on-going results, not avoiding failure or reaching one particular end goal. It’s about embracing defeat, analyzing it, and failing up. After all, when the finished product is great, no one but you will remember the stumbles.

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