Startup Accelerator

Generate fantastic ideas

An ideation handbook

Check-out our accompanying online
course "Ideation"

Contents

1

Introduction & goals

2

Understanding ideation

- Typical challenges of ideation
- The ideation funnel
- Ideation boosters and killers
- The origins of great ideas
- Where to start with business ideas

3

Ideation methods

- Brainstorming
- 6-3-5
- Osborn Checklist
- Morphological Analysis
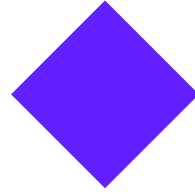- Reminder: start with the problem
- Mindset warning

4

Our 3-step ideation process

- Formulate idea 💡
- Plan 📋
- Test ⚙️

1

INTRODUCTION AND GOALS

Introduction

What is more difficult: coming up with a great idea or putting it into reality?

We don't have the answer either. But we do have a few suggestions for how you can develop great ideas and put them to the test.

The key is to employ systematic ideation, which is what this course is about. You can apply systematic ideation to any kind of business challenge where fresh ideas are needed. It's not just about crafting your initial business idea. You can also use it, for example, to develop your next marketing campaign, define an HR strategy or launch a new product line.

In what situations is systematic ideation particularly important?

The set of approaches in this course are particularly well suited to highly unstructured problems, when you are operating under high uncertainty. You have no role models to fall back on: you've never mastered such a challenge with your company before, and there's no clearly applicable best practice in the market.

We also acknowledge that you may act with very limited resources (money as well as people) and accordingly need to solve your issue or test your idea in a highly efficient manner.

Goals of the course

In this course, we introduce you to a set of suggestions for how to develop ideas and provide you with a simple technique to rapidly test the efficacy of your ideas.

The technique is structured in a way that minimizes the time and money lost dabbling with new ideas, but without prematurely shutting the door on certain ideas either.

A word on methodology

This course gives you a simple, logical succession of steps through the ideation process. But it won't give you "the one" methodology to develop ideas. As an entrepreneur, you'll ultimately have to decide for yourself what approach will best solve your specific and unique challenge.

Wherever we believe there's a danger of relying too much on frameworks and forgetting to keep your eye on what is actually, we issue a small warning. After all, you won't earn any money for beautifully and perfectly completing business canvases!

2

UNDERSTANDING IDEATION

There are a few typical challenges around ideation

Fostering great ideas isn't easy. First, you need to give yourself and your team space to actually generate good ideas.

Then, you need to follow up on them properly and be methodical enough to separate good ideas from less suitable ones.

There are a few things a lot of teams struggle with when it comes to ideating. We list them here – and also how we want to help you tackle them.

Forgetting the big picture and thinking in terms of process instead of outcome

⤷ We'll draw your attention to typical mindset challenges along the way

Insufficient psychological safety for people to voice creative ideas – they risk to be ignored or mocked

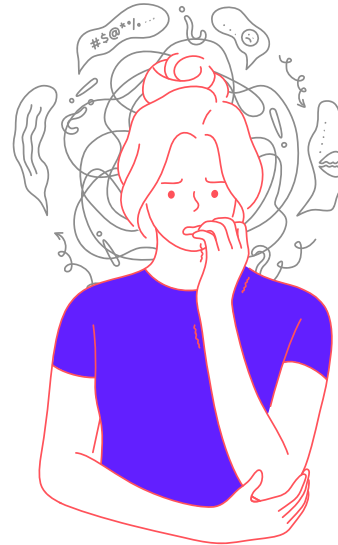⤷ We'll draw your attention to a few typical pitfalls to avoid on page 9

Not enough time and space for creativity due to a high pressure environment

⤷ We'll show you some best practices and techniques to foster creativity

Starting out with the solution already, without really having understood the problem

⤷ In our method, there are a few steps where you'll have issues proceeding if you haven't properly identified the problem

No conscious decision-making which ideas to prioritise and pursue further

⤷ We'll give you methodological guidance for how to split ideation into different steps and workout when to take the next one

Ideation is about solving a problem by going through the divergent-convergent idea model in a structured way
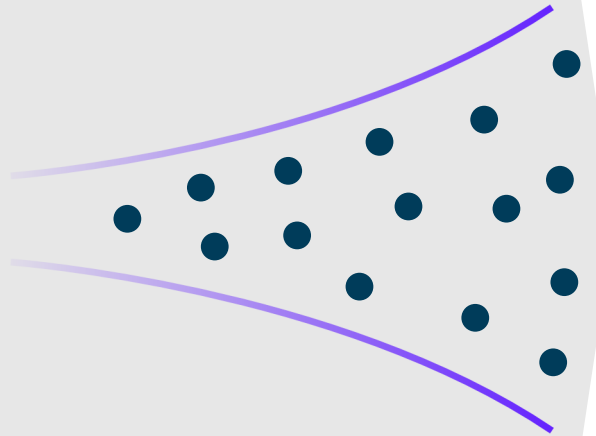
Steps

We have a problem that needs solving

For example: "Our sales are stagnating" or "Our customers keep calling our hotline despite all the info on our website"

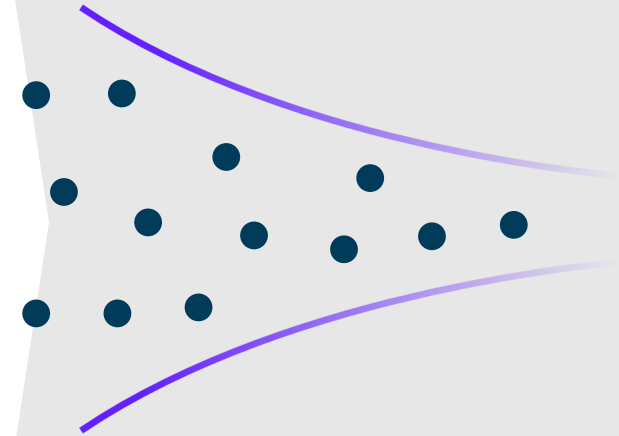**We generate ideas**
Divergent phase

We filter our ideas
Convergent phase

Objectives

Properly identify the problem and state it explicitly (ideally back it up with facts/ data)
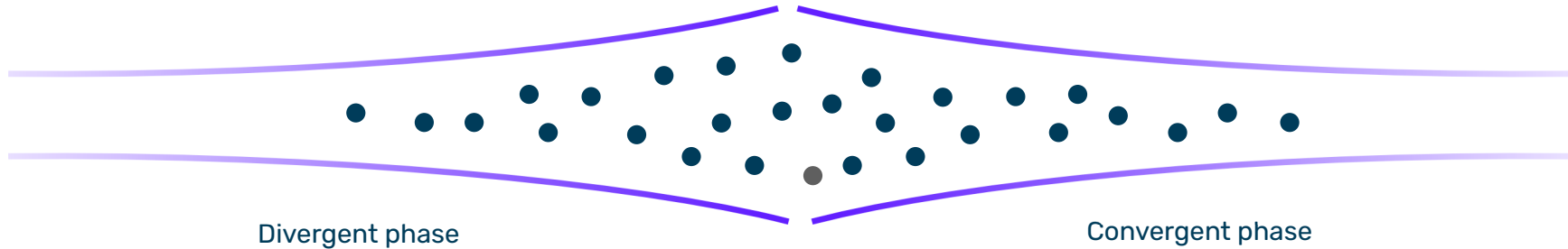
Fly high, create room to generate ideas and increase chances of a true "eureka!" moment

Descend from the clouds, pick the best idea(s) and generate true value-add for your business

When ideating, be aware of some idea boosters and killers – regardless of your method

Divergent phase

Convergent phase

Boosters

✓ Focus on how well the idea solves your problem

✓ Give time and space, create a break from daily routines

✓ Talk to the ones who say "I'm just not a creative person" individually and show appreciation for their input

✓ Allow for crazy thoughts, laughter – this can be not only about ideas, but also bringing your team together more closely

✓ Select ideas based on method, facts and hard data (anecdotal evidence does the trick too, if nothing else is available)

✓ Keep in mind your capacity to actually pursue these ideas – you might just not have enough people, time or money

✓ Manage the process actively, writing down objectives, people to be involved, tools/ methods and time plan transparently for all

Killers

✗ Focus on risks, dangers or feasibility

✗ Cram everything into a 1-hour team session in your everyday meeting room in the middle of a hectic work day

✗ Shut down ideas (especially from junior or rather timid colleagues) – or even worse, mock people

✗ Select ideas based on opinions and hearsay – or those of who is the loudest in the team

✗ Lose sight of objectives and what you intend to achieve

Where do great ideas come from?

Importance of chance →

What you as a manager can do to foster idea generation (generally, not just as a one-off)

We have a problem that needs solving
"Syncing our two databases manually typically creates ~20% erroneous data fields"

- Gather qualitative and quantitative data on everything you do and foster a facts-driven culture

- Make data accessible and have everyone look out for anomalies, recurring patterns etc.

Conscious creativity methods
"We brainstorm together how we could improve database quality"

- Continuously apply and test new creativity and problem-solving techniques

- See how and when they perform for you

Let's look at some of these creativity methods on the next pages

Under-the-shower type "eureka!" moments
"I just thought of a way for us to do everything with one database instead of two"

- Talk openly about issues and challenges in the team, so that everyone knows what is worth thinking about

- Don't feel the urge to come up with a solution immediately – leave time and space

- Foster a culture of speaking up and listening

I'm looking for a business idea – where do I start?

We mentioned that this course is for any type of ideation, also for ongoing business challenges. But finding the initial business idea is a challenge for many. We think there are two big opposing origins for ideas.

Observation of real-world problems, gaps or trends

You start with an observation of a market gap or a true pain point.

Starting out with a concrete, substantial problem in mind is a great place to start, but ensure you're not thinking too incrementally – create something truly differentiated.

"Eureka" style visions

You start with an idea that you feel the world is ready for (think of Tesla).

This might be the start of something truly world-changing, but you better be very methodical in testing and quantifying your idea so as not to pursue a castle in the clouds.

Creativity methods for support

You can use creativity methods to get to either starting point. Brainstorm together with potential customers. Assemble creative minds and re-think existing solutions. Develop ideas with other players in your industry (See next section).

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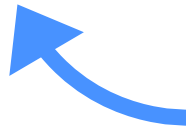
IDEATION METHODS

Here are a few methods to consider for generating ideas

Creativity methods for support

Open, free-floating ← → Systematic

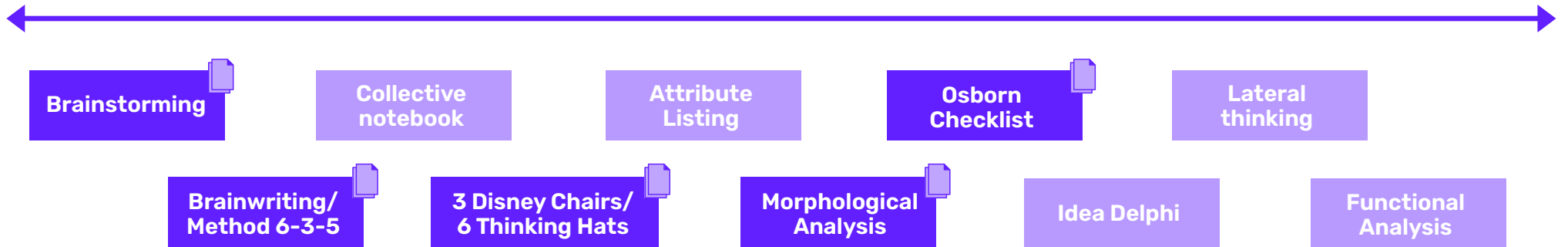**Brainstorming**

Collective notebook

Attribute Listing

Osborn Checklist

Lateral thinking

Brainwriting/ Method 6-3-5

3 Disney Chairs/ 6 Thinking Hats

Morphological Analysis

Idea Delphi

Functional Analysis

See next pages

We've prepared instructions for some methods listed here, you'll find them on the next pages. We encourage you to also do an internet search for yourself. You'll find info on the methods we're not explaining here, and maybe even more inspiration.

Mindset note

- There is no such thing as "the" method – find out which one works best for your team and your specific challenge (in the examples on the next pages we point out which method might work when)

- Be aware that you and your team must "become good at" any method, so keep trying and adapting it to your needs

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Creativity method: **Brainstorming**

Probably the oldest and simplest creativity technique that exists –
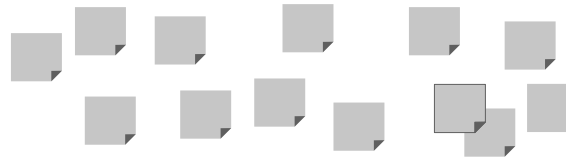and for a reason: it generates plenty of ideas

1. State the question(s) or challenge for the brainstorm explicitly

How can we boost B2B sales?

Ensure everyone in the room knows what is in scope (and what not) – unfocused discussions quickly lead to frustration

2. Generate loads of ideas

How can we boost B2B sales?

- Quantity over quality – encourage wild ideas
- Defer judgement, but have people build on ideas of others
- You can even do multiple rounds, with everyone presenting their ideas in-between
- There are also good online whiteboards in case you can't all be in the same room

3. Group and prioritise ideas

How can we boost B2B sales?

1   2   3   OUT
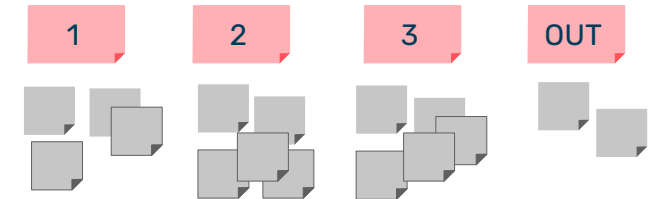
- Group ideas that are roughly the same
- Prioritise ideas together as a group
- Document so you can keep working with your ideas, e.g. by taking a photo of your board

This is a great place to start any discussion – just ensure you involve a diverse set of people (across functions, seniority levels and characters) and that everyone is active

Creativity method: Method 6-3-5

6 people, 3 ideas, 5 rounds – this method originally requires 6 participants, but honestly, you can also play with a few more or less people

1. Everyone writes down 3 ideas for how to solve the problem you agreed to look at

2. Everyone forwards their 3 ideas and adds additional ideas or modifications to the ideas received

3. Repeat another 4x, so that everyone's seen and complemented everyone's ideas

4. Assess insights and outcomes as a group

x1

x4
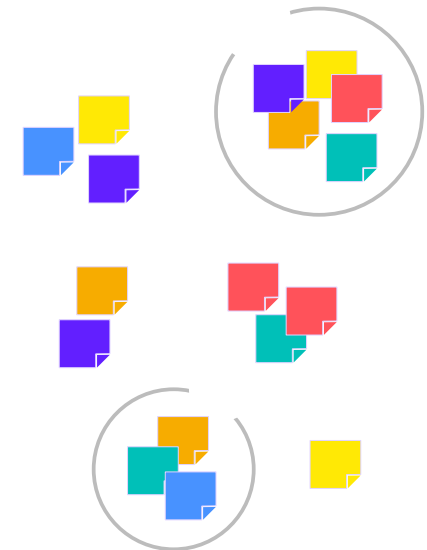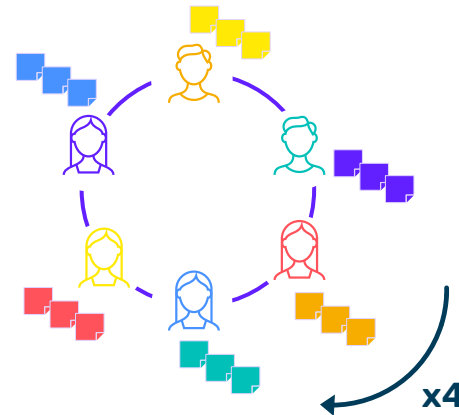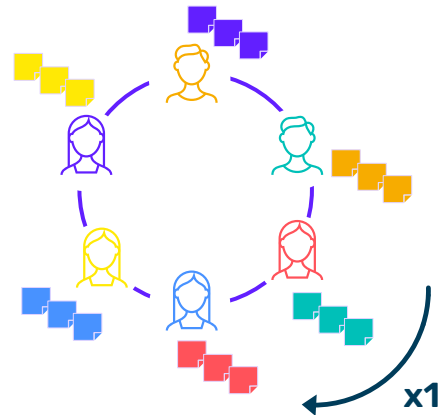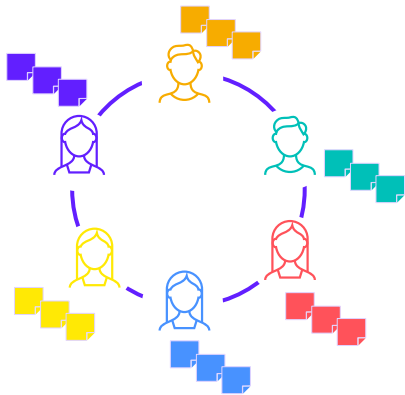
This is a good **alternative to common brainstorming** as it (a) requires those who typically hold back to participate and (b) doesn't generate an overwhelming amount of ideas

Creativity method: 3 Disney Chairs or 6 Thinking Hats

The two methods are very similar, and you can play both with more or less people than there are chairs/ hats – do note however that you already need to have an idea to start with

1. Assume roles and review the idea according to your respective role

3 Disney Chairs

Dreamer   **Realist**   **Critic**

6 Thinking Hats

Big picture   **Facts & info**   **Feelings & emotion**

Negative   **Positive**   **New ideas**

2. Change roles multiple times – ideally everyone has had every role

3. Assess insights and outcomes as a group
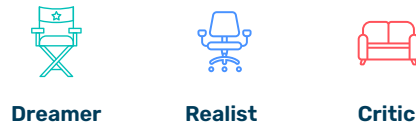
Write all thoughts down

Example with Disney Chairs

	Dreamer	Realist	Critic
Sarah			
Tom			
Jen			
Fritz			
Emma			

This is less of an opportunity to generate ideas but **to test ideas** – it ideally **complements a prior brainstorming** session

Creativity method: Osborn Checklist

With the Osborn Checklist, named after its inventor, you have a method that's less about process, but about asking you questions and forcing you to think about your challenge in different ways

Play with your challenge and transform it

▶ **Put to other uses:** How can this product, idea, plan be used as it stands? What other uses could it be adapted for?

▶ **Adapt:** What else is like this? What other idea does this suggest? Does the past offer a parallel? What or whom could I copy?

▶ **Modify:** Add a new twist. Change meaning, colour, motion, sound, odour, form, shape. What other changes could be made?

▶ **Magnify:** What to add? Add time, increase frequency of use, make stronger, higher, longer, thicker.

▶ **Minimise:** What to subtract? Make smaller, lower, lighter, condense it, split it up, understate it.

▶ **Substitute:** Who else? What else? Other ingredient? Other material? Other process? Other power? Other place? Other tone of voice?

▶ **Rearrange:** Can we interchange components? Can we change pattern, layout or sequence? What happens if we transpose cause and effect?

▶ **Reverse:** Transpose '+/-', do opposites,go backwards, invert, reverse roles, change something, turn tables.

▶ **Combine:** Can we create a blend, an alloy, an assortment, an ensemble? Can we combine units, purposes, appeals or ideas?

This is a good way to **enhance your classical brainstorming session** in case the creative juices don't really get flowing

Creativity method: Morphological analysis

The morphological analysis helps you think through your options in a structured way.

1. Specify your challenge and write down the dimensions along which to think about it

Challenge

We need money – how do we go about funding?

Dimensions

Investor type

Hook of our pitch

Funding period

2. Brainstorm options for each dimension*

Investor type	Angel investors	Venture funds	Own money
Funding period	Short-term 0.5 mn	Mid-term 1.0 mn	Long-term 3.0 mn
Hook of our pitch	Vision	Sucesses so far	Technology

3. Choose per dimension your best option(s)*

Investor type	Angel investors	Venture funds	Own money
Funding period	Short-term 0.5 mn	Mid-term 1.0 mn	Long-term 3.0 mn
Hook of our pitch	Vision	Sucesses so far	Technology

*Ensure that you define your options carefully so that they're mutually exclusive – otherwise you can't compare them and decide properly. You're however free to decide if you can pick multiple options or just one per dimension.

This is a **great way to reach joint decisions** on how to resolve your challenge – obviously, you might need to brainstorm beforehand to define your options.

Identify the problem before you come up with a solution

We often observe that people push for ideas they find great – but if you look behind them, there's no proper case for action:

- There's no problem or pain point to be resolved
- There is a problem, but the idea's not the answer to it
- There is a problem and the idea might even help, but it's not big enough to justify the effort

And so on. So the imperative is, never start with the solution. Always start with the problem. If you can't name it, there's a good chance there isn't any. For extra benefit, try to assess the problem's impact based on numbers.

This is not a problem
It's a (potential) solution

Start here
These are actual, measurable problems

We should buy a new sales software ——— We're missing out on opportunities because of our messy Excel leads list

We need to keep up with tech, let's invest in AR technology ——— Our product quality is suffering from too many human production errors

It's time to partner up with a larger company ——— Our potential clients don't consider us trustworthy enough

Might be the solution – but there might also be better ones

Mindset note
Sometimes it's not easy to put your finger on what the actual problem is – consider using creativity methods!

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19

Be sure to apply the right mindset

In this course, we're showing you quite **a few methods, processes and frameworks**. Be aware that you can follow and complete them all – **if you haven't thought** through how (and if) they can work for your specific situation, there's a good chance **any time spent on them will be wasted.**

So try to understand what the **intention behind each concept** is and under what circumstances it could be helpful for you. This is particularly important for the second part of this course, the ideation process. You might follow the steps laid out, but use a different framework e.g. for scoring ideas that you found on the internet. That would be perfectly fine. Be bold and find your own way to profit from this course!

4

●●●

OUR 3-STEP IDEATION PROCESS

Our ideation process follows 3 steps

This is where creativity methods help

Step	Check	1 Formulate idea	2 Plan	3 Test
Task	See if the situation actually asks for ideation	Define the problem and sketch your solution	Think about how to test if and how your solution works	Execute the test and see if this is a solution to scale
Gateway question to ask before proceeding	Is this a highly unstructured, new challenge, without any type of blueprint you could resort to?	Do we understand what we want to achieve and do we actually believe this will add value?	Do we believe it's worth investing resources into this? Could we even imagine scaling this if it's successful?	Does our idea work at all, do we need to re-test and circle back to (2) or even (1)?

On the next pages we show you in more detail how to navigate through the three ideation phases

Step 1: How to formulate your idea

Check | **1 Formulate idea** | **2 Plan** | **3 Test**

Activities for Step 1

Problem → **Solution** → **Prioritization** → **Key hypotheses** → **Decision time**

Problem

Substantiate the problem or challenge to be solved

Solution

Describe the solution and create an elevator pitch

Prioritization

If you have multiple solutions, do a structured prioritization analysis

Key hypotheses

Make your assumptions behind your solution explicit by formulating hypotheses

Decision time

Decide whether or not to proceed to the next step

See next pages for detailed explanations and examples

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Deep dive: Identifying the problem...

Mindset note

We mentioned it before: identifying what the problem is, is not always easy – we often immediately think in solutions. What can you do to really narrow down the problem?

- Use hard facts and figures wherever possible – if you can't get any, it might be a hint that the problem doesn't actually exist as you see it
- Make sure you've identified a proper pain point (e.g. losing time on filing expenses) as well as who exactly feels the pain (e.g. employees incurring lots of work-related expenses)

We've listed a couple of examples to visualize what a proper problem statement could look like.

BUSINESS IDEA

Employees at many companies are fed up with spending up to 4 hours per month on logging their expenses.

SOCIAL BUSINESS IDEA

60% of all those released from prison are back within 2 years, destroying lives and consuming public money. This percentage needs to be reduced.

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

Our sales are flat at 75k USD per month, despite all of our growth efforts.

OPERATIONS CHALLENGE

Per open position, we get on average 4 applications. This isn't enough to find skilled team members.
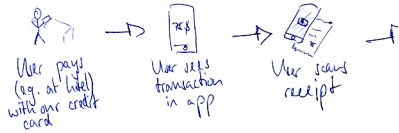
Deep dive: … before coming up with a solution

This is where creativity methods come in handy!

BUSINESS IDEA

We'll launch a credit card combined with an app that scans, matches and logs receipts automatically based on AI.

SOCIAL BUSINESS IDEA

We'll run tested 1:1 coaching programs that will cost less than re-imprisonment, saving tax money.

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

We'll do our first refer-a-client sales campaign, offering limited upgrades for all who've successfully referred us.

OPERATIONS CHALLENGE

We'll pursue a program with which our current employees are incentivized to advertise each job in their area individually on LinkedIn.

Mindset note

When you start trailblazing new territory, it helps to be extra-concrete and systematic.

- Place your focus on the mechanism that will relieve the pain point (e.g. a credit card-app combination based on AI) and explain it well

- Mock-ups, drawings, rough customer journeys etc. are very helpful to support your written-out solution description – especially for ideas that are less straightforward

- If you have multiple ideas (which is generally a good thing) think about how to prioritize – on the next page we're suggesting a few scoring tools

Side note: elevator pitch

Consider writing down your idea like a proper elevator pitch, in max. 1-2 short sentences. Ideally you include:

- Problem/ challenge/ pain point
- Beneficiary/ customer
- Solution
- Goal/ ambition

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Deep dive: Prioritizing ideas

Note

Ideally you have multiple ideas you want to pursue, and more often than not you have stakeholders (your team, the executive leadership or maybe even the board) who need to consent to which idea(s) to pursue further.

You'll find it much easier to moderate such discussions if you look at the ideas with a scoring roster that is aligned with what you'd like to achieve.

• Always start with objectives you want to achieve and design the roster accordingly

• If an idea doesn't meet the objectives, no point in looking at it any further – even if it's e.g. easily implementable

• Don't prematurely ditch ideas for feasibility reasons – once you're really convinced of an idea, you might find surprising ways to get it done

Let's use our operations challenge to look at some example scoring methods

Alternative criteria:
• Impact/ efficacy to reach objectives
• Time
• Cost
• Operational/ technological complexity
• Availability of necessary skills/ experience in team
• Alignment with brand values
• …
• Overall

	Impact How well does it solve the problem?	**Confidence** What are the chances for it to work?	**Ease** How hard is it to implement?
Incentivize current employees to advertise each jobs individually on LinkedIn			
Hire headhunters (for more senior positions only)			
Work with job posting multiplier site			
Post each job on min. 10 platforms individually			

Sort your ideas e.g. by:
• Score
• Clusters (e.g. realistic, for further discussion, moon shot)
• Team preferences
• …

Alternative measures:
• Score, e.g. 7/10
• Actual value, e.g. number of people reached
• …

Deep dive: **Creating hypotheses**

Why?

You might not even be aware of it, but your idea rests on solving your most pressing issue and comes with certain assumptions. If these assumptions are wrong, your whole idea might be jeopardized. That's why it's so important to make the assumptions that will make or break your case explicit so that you can test them.

How?

Think hard about where your idea could go wrong and pick 2-5 assumptions which:

- Can be confirmed or rejected based on measurable facts or observations
- If confirmed, give you a fairly high confidence that your idea will actually work out

Don't hypothesize on stuff that:

- Isn't relevant to the success of your case
- You know already (e.g. that most people don't like wasting time on filing expenses)
- You can control yourself (e.g. whether the app you're building will function)

Typical areas for hypotheses	*Example* **BUSINESS IDEA**	*Example* **BUSINESS CHALLENGE**
Awareness of pain point	• Those who make purchasing decisions feel the pain of the employees filing expenses and are willing to spend money on making them happier	• Our sales team sees the strategic need for our company to grow more strongly and will put their weight behind the effort
Problem-solution fit	• Our target clients will recognize by how much our product will save time and enhance motivation • The price point at which we need to sell our product won't scare target client companies away	• A high-enough share of our existing clients is in principle willing to recommend us to others • Target clients are open for recommendations from peer companies
Solution quality, customer acceptance	• Our solution will be perceived as superior to what already exists in the market in terms of usability and reliability	• Limited upgrades (e.g. for a year) are a sufficiently big incentive for our referrers

This is essentially what you test in Steps 2 and 3

Decision time: **Is our idea good enough?**

For the first step, it is key to really understand well how this idea is supposed to resolve your problem or challenge at hand. Don't worry too much about feasibility, costs or other potential showstoppers at this point. You'll do that in the next step.
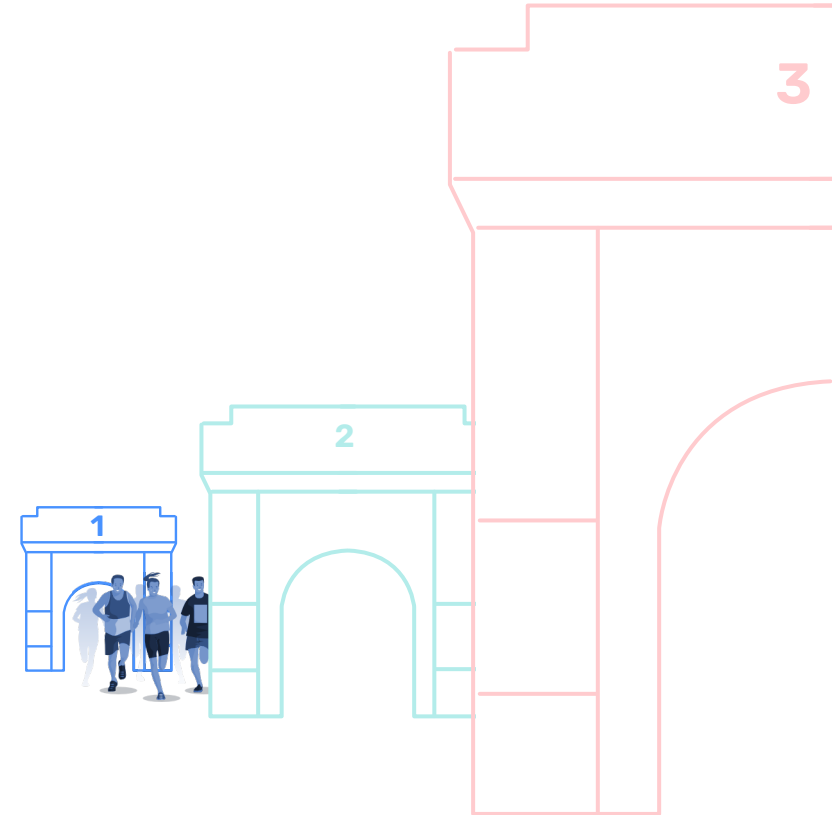
Rather, ask yourself:

	Yes	No
Do we have a common and good understanding of what our solution should look like?	☐	☐
Do we have a clear, even quantifiable view how this solution could add value in reaching our goals and objectives?	☐	☐
Do we understand the critical success factors based on the hypotheses we've formulated?	☐	☐

Step 2: How to test if your idea works

Check	1 Formulate idea	2 Plan	3 Test

Activities for Step 2

Test format

Looping back to your hypotheses, develop a proper format to test them

KPIs & targets

Identify observable facts that would constitute success

Resources

Become aware of the actual and opportunity costs of trying out things

Outlook

Think about whether you'd even consider scaling it if it were successful

Decision time

Decide whether or not to proceed to the next step

See next pages for detailed explanations and examples

Deep dive: Test format design, KPIs and target values

Test format

- Each sales team member will reach out to 10 of their existing clients, with at least 3 touchpoints with each (of these 1 in person or via phone)

- We'll offer each a free one-year upgrade to our highest, most expensive plan

- If no response, we ask in a 4th touchpoint if a 2-year upgrade would change their mind

- If clients are willing to refer peers, we'll ask them how many they're contacting

- The reach-out will be concluded within one month

- After two months, we'll conclude the test and measure our results

Let's circle back to our example of the company facing the business challenge of flat growth.

Example table: KPIs & target values per hypothesis

Hypotheses (from Step 1)	KPIs	Target values
Our sales team sees the strategic need for our company to grow more strongly and will put their weight behind the effort	• 5 sales team members x 10 clients x 3 touchpoints = 150 touchpoints	Min. 90% of touchpoints (i.e. 135) logged in CRM
A high-enough share of our existing clients is in principle willing to recommend us to others	• 5 sales team members x 10 clients = max. 50 clients	40% of clients (i.e. 20) are ready to refer us to at least one peer

Target clients are open for recommendations from peer companies	• Number of peers contacted by clients
	  • With 1-year upgrade promise
	  • With 2-year upgrade promise
	• Numbers of peers contacted converted into new clients
		10% of contacted peers are converted into new clients

Limited upgrades (e.g. for a year) are a sufficiently big incentive for our referrers		Of those existing clients offered a 2-year upgrade, no one changes their mind

Mindset note

Observe how things are logically consistent and interlinked
- The test format just details the original idea – no random "pivot"
- The KPIs are based on the hypotheses from the previous step

Decision time: Is our test format good and worth the effort?

For the second step, it is important to be extremely clear on what you want to achieve and how. Your idea, your hypotheses, your plan and your KPIs really need to be in sync.
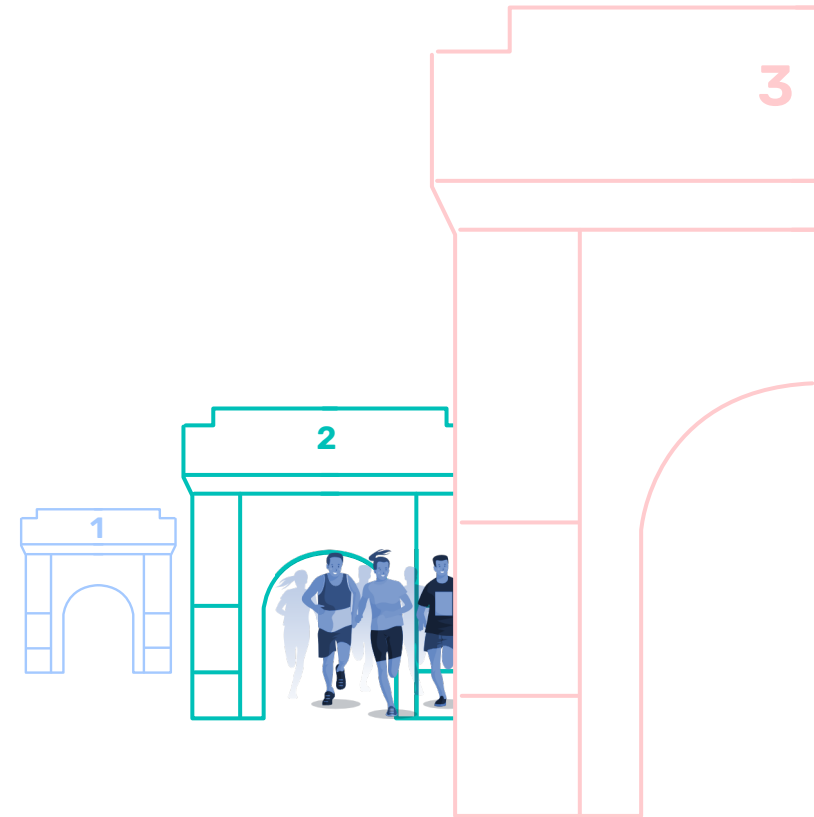
Is that the case?

	Yes	No
Do we have a solid test plan that all people involved understand and that properly lets us test our hypotheses?	☐	☐
Do we know how to measure success?	☐	☐
Do we have the resources to run this test? And, just in case we're successful, can we imagine running it on a larger scale?	☐	☐

Step 3: How to test if your idea works

| Check | 1 Formulate idea | 2 Plan | **3 Test** |

Activities for Step 3

Test execution ➡ **Results** ➡ **Insights & implications** ➡ **Decision time**

Run your format as per time and effort planned

Compare your rest results to your targets/ KPIs

Formulate your key learnings and conclusions on the test

Decide whether or not to roll out your idea on a larger scale – or circle back to the idea board

See next pages for detailed explanations and examples

Deep dive: Logging results and deriving implications

Let's circle back to our example of the company facing the business challenge of flat growth.

Test results & insights

from Step 1)	KPIs	Target values
sees the strategic mpany to grow more ll put their weight t	• 5 sales team members x 10 clients x 3 touchpoints = 150 touchpoints	Min. 90% of touchpoints (i.e. 135) logged in CRM
share of our existing ciple willing to o others	• 5 sales team members x 10 clients = max. 50 clients	40% of clients (i.e. 20) are ready to refer us to at least one peer
e open for ns from peer	• Number of peers contacted by clients • With 1-year upgrade promise • With 2-year upgrade promise	10% of contacted peers are converted into new clients
s (e.g. for a year) big incentive for	• Numbers of peers contacted converted into new clients	Of those existing clients offered a 2-year upgrade, no one changes their mind

Implications

- Conversion rates are considerabley lower than expected

- However, existing clients seem to be very happy with our product and readier to refer us than we assumed

- Thus, if we find ways to increase our sales team's engagement – which was below the targets set for them – it might still be worth scaling this

- For the existing clients, let's go for a 2-year upgrade offer instead of 1-year – it makes a difference

- New idea: we could also consider giving our referred clients an incentive (e.g. first 3 months for free)

Decision time: How do we proceed?

For the third step, try to conclude your ideation process in a very succinct manner. Make your results visible. Synthesize them and turn them into insights that everyone in your team can understand.

Ask yourself:

3

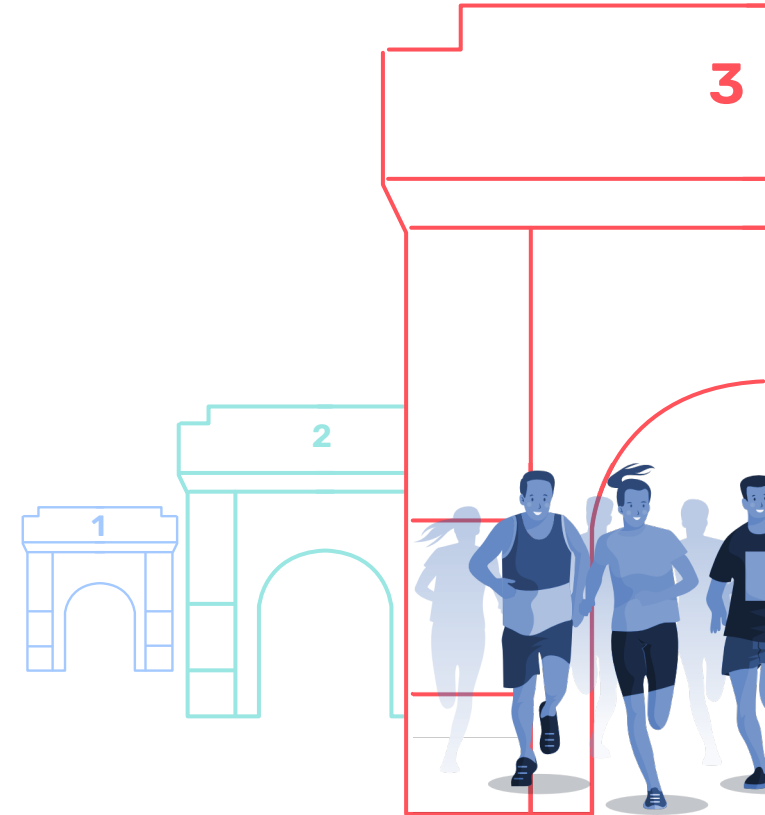|	Yes	No	**No,** but we circle back to Step (1) or (2)
Have we properly confirmed or rejected our hypotheses and do we now have a sound basis for decision-making?	☐	☐	
Do we proceed with our idea and scale it (perhaps with a few tweaks)?	☐	☐	☐

Let's get started

In summary, here's what we would like you to take away from this handbook:

➡ You can apply ideation at any stage of your company – regardless whether you're just starting out or encounter new challenges along the way.

➡ Don't worry about not being creative – anyone can be creative with the right tools and mindset.

➡ Ideation is as much about coming up with great ideas as it is about systematic testing and execution.

Feel free to use and adapt the instructions in this handbook as you see fit for your specific challenges. And have a look at our founder videos to check out how they ideate.