STARTUP IRELAND
BY ENTERPRISE IRELAND

THE FOUNDER PLAYBOOK SERIES · 01

How to validate your idea

A practical guide to testing demand before you build



startupireland.com

00

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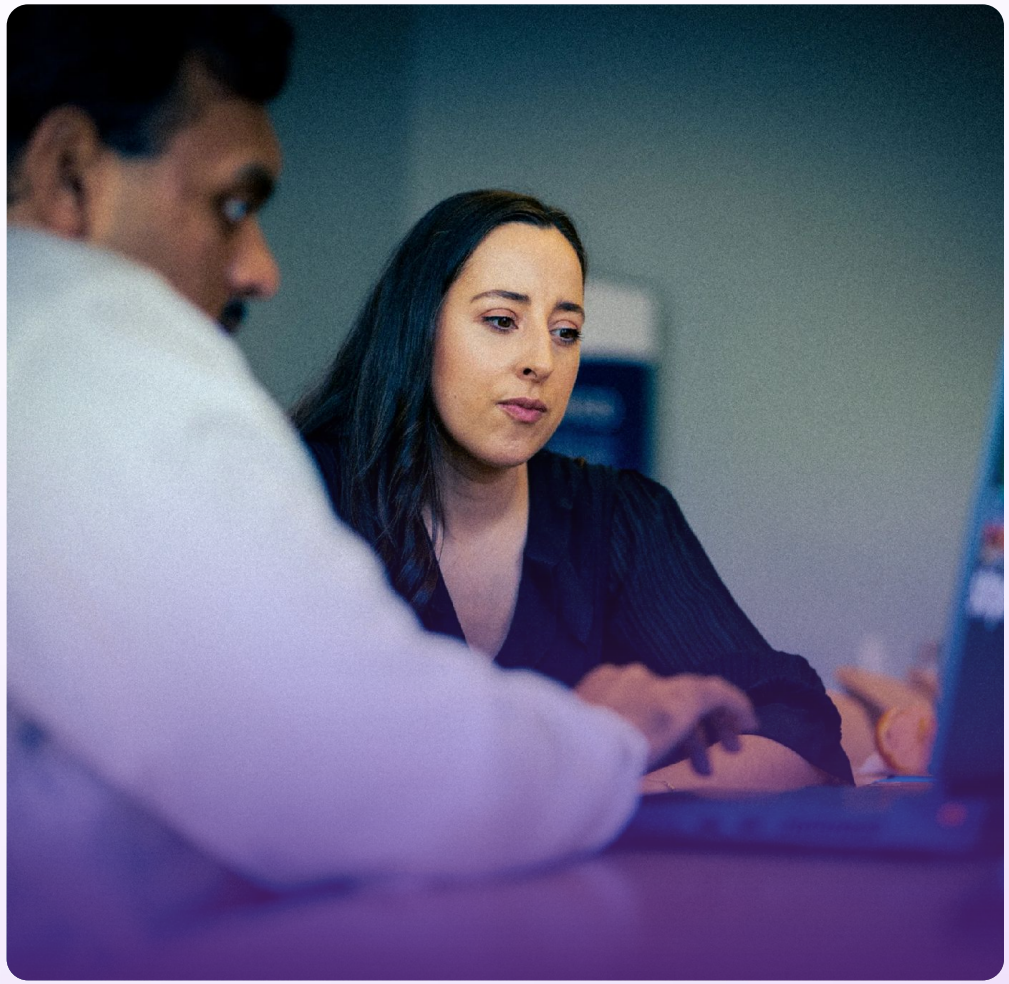
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ABOUT THIS PLAYBOOK

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Before you invest heavily in building, test whether there is genuine demand for your idea.



This playbook shows you how to test your idea with real customers, so you invest your time and money in something the market genuinely needs.

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WHY VALIDATION MATTERS

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01

Reduce the risk early

A common early-stage risk is investing time and money in a solution before you understand whether customers really need it. Validation can help you reduce that risk early, before you've spent months developing the wrong thing. But validation isn't just about avoiding failure.

02

Learn from every conversation

Done well, it can help you rule out a weak idea, sharpen a good one and generate evidence that may support future funding conversations. Every customer conversation gives you another data point to learn from and use later.



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01

Six steps to validate your idea

From defining the problem to deciding whether to persevere, pivot or park.



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THE 6 STEPS TO VALIDATING YOUR IDEA

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Define the problem



02
Identify your target customer



03
Talk to real potential customers



04
Look for demand signals



05
Test with a simple experiment



06
Decide: Persevere, pivot or park



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STEP 1 OF 6
DEFINE THE PROBLEM



WHAT

Get clear on the problem you're solving and who experiences it before you become too attached to a particular solution.

HOW

Write it as a single sentence: "[Specific group] struggles to [do something] because [reason]." If that's difficult to articulate clearly, you may need to understand the problem better before moving on.

WATCH OUT FOR

Starting with the solution.

It's easy to begin with a product idea and then look for a problem to fit it. Keep the problem as your starting point; the solution is what you'll test and refine.

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STEP 2 OF 6
IDENTIFY YOUR TARGET CUSTOMER



WHAT

Narrow down exactly whose problem this is. At this stage, a clearly defined customer group is usually more useful than a broad audience such as “everyone”.

HOW

Describe your ideal early customer in real detail: their role, sector, situation and what they do about the problem today. These are the people you’ll speak to in Step 3, so the clearer the picture, the easier it is to find them.

WATCH OUT FOR

Going too broad.

A large market can be encouraging, but it does not necessarily tell you who to speak to or where to start. Begin with a customer group specific enough that you can find and talk to real people now; you can widen your focus later.

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STEP 2 OF 6
SIZE THE OPPORTUNITY

Once you know who they are, get an early sense of the size of the opportunity.

TAM

Total addressable market

Everyone who could potentially need your product or service.

SAM

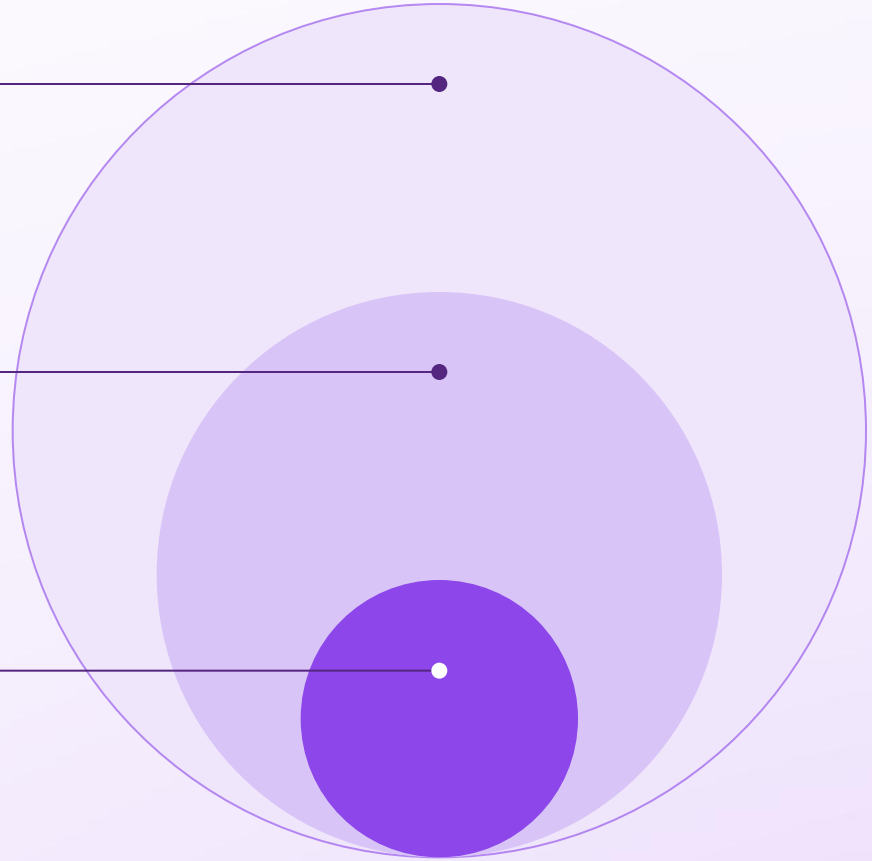
Serviceable available market

The part of that market you can realistically serve.

SOM

Serviceable obtainable market

The share you could reasonably hope to win in the near term.



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STEP 3 OF 6
TALK TO REAL POTENTIAL CUSTOMERS



GO DEEPER

Customer Development, Steve Blank

Blank's "get out of the building" principle is about testing assumptions directly with customers rather than relying on internal opinions or desk research.

WHAT

There is no fixed number of customer conversations you need. The aim is to speak to enough potential customers to start seeing consistent patterns; for some early ideas, that may be 15–30 conversations.

HOW

Ask about their current behaviour, not your idea: "How do you handle this today? What's frustrating about it? What have you already tried?" Listen more than you talk, and give people space to describe their real experience. See the Customer Interview Scripts for suggested questions and prompts.

WATCH OUT FOR

Leading questions and overly positive feedback.

Asking "Would you use this?" can encourage polite, hypothetical answers. What people have already done, tried or paid for usually gives you a much stronger signal.

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STEP 4 OF 6
LOOK FOR DEMAND SIGNALS



WHAT

Look for evidence of genuine demand, not just positive feedback. Not every “yes” is a strong signal.

HOW

Check what people are already doing, whether that’s paying for a workaround, creating their own solution or asking when they can use yours. Comments like “sounds nice” or “I’d probably use that” are much weaker signals on their own.

WATCH OUT FOR

Confirmation bias.

It’s easy to give more weight to feedback that supports what you already believe. Actively look for evidence that challenges your assumptions as well as evidence that supports them. Spotting weaknesses early can make them easier and less costly to address.

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STEP 5 OF 6
TEST WITH A SIMPLE EXPERIMENT



GO DEEPER

The Lean Startup, Eric Ries

The build, measure, learn approach is a useful way to think about testing assumptions with the smallest useful experiment before investing heavily in development.

WHAT

Put something in front of people that tests your riskiest assumption, without building the full product.

HOW

Use the simplest test that can give you a useful answer: a landing page measuring sign-ups, a prototype or mock-up, a pre-order, a manual “concierge” version of the service, or a small paid pilot. The goal is to gather evidence, not build a polished version of your product.

WATCH OUT FOR

Over-building.

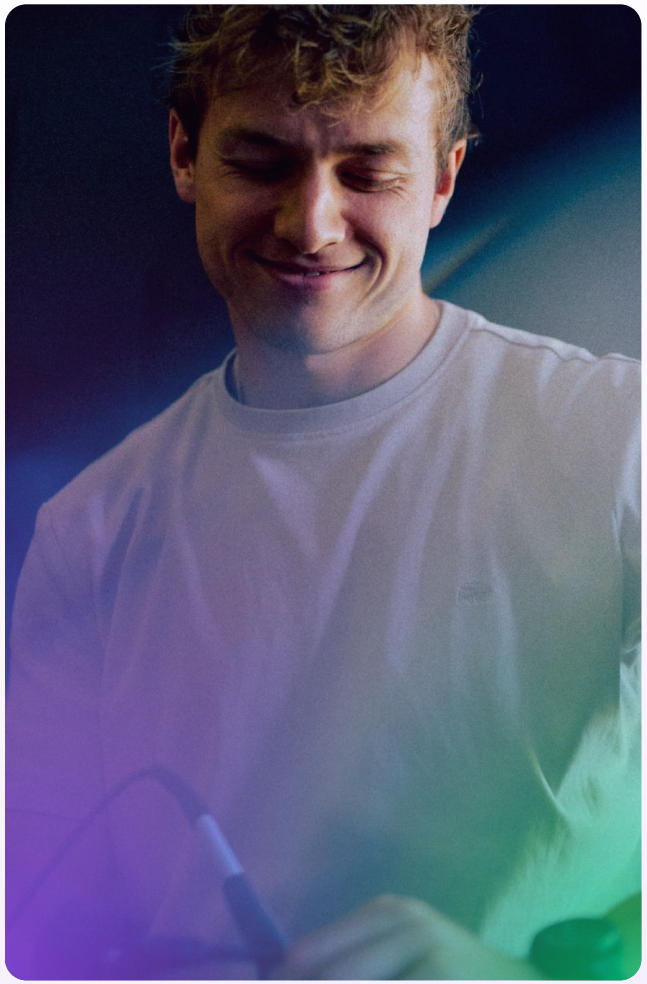
If you find yourself spending months building “just to test it”, you may have moved into development too soon. Try to isolate the riskiest assumption and test that first, rather than trying to prove the whole idea at once.

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STEP 6 OF 6
DECIDE: PERSEVERE, PIVOT OR PARK



WHAT

Make an honest decision based on the evidence you've gathered.

HOW

Continue if the signals are strong and consistent. Pivot if the problem is real but your solution or target customer needs to change. Park the idea if there isn't enough evidence of demand. Each outcome gives you information you can use to decide what to do next, and learning early can help you avoid committing more time and money than necessary.

WATCH OUT FOR

Ignoring evidence because you're already invested in the idea.

Validation is most useful when you are willing to reconsider your assumptions if the evidence points in a different direction.

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02

Tools and frameworks

Simple canvases to map your customer and capture your riskiest assumptions.



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TOOL
VALUE PROPOSITION CANVAS

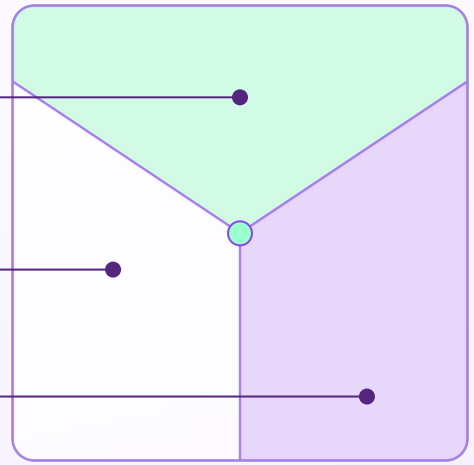
Use this canvas to understand your customer's jobs, pains and gains, and how your offer responds to them.

VALUE MAP

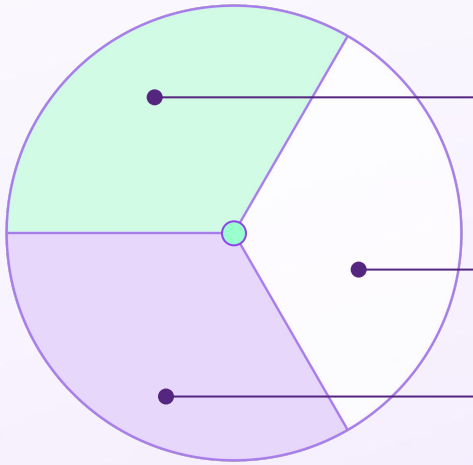
Gain creators
How you create customer gains

Products & services
What you offer

Pain relievers
How you ease customer pains



FIT



CUSTOMER PROFILE

Gains
Outcomes and benefits wanted

Customer jobs
Tasks they are trying to do

Pains
Frustrations, risks, obstacles

Adapted from Osterwalder et al. (2014).

Core check Fit comes when your offer relieves the most important pains and creates the most valued gains.

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TOOL
LEAN CANVAS

Use this to capture your startup's riskiest assumptions on one page so you can test them quickly.

1 Problem
Test first

Top 1–3 problems your customers have.

EXISTING ALTERNATIVES

How these problems are solved today.

2 Customer segments
Test first

Target customers and users.

EARLY ADOPTERS

Characteristics of your ideal first customers.

3 Unique value proposition
Test first

A single, clear message on why you are different and worth buying.

HIGH-LEVEL CONCEPT

Your X-for-Y analogy.

4 Solution

Outline a possible solution for each problem.

5 Channels

Your paths to customers.

6 Revenue streams

Revenue model, lifetime value, revenue and gross margin.

7 Cost structure

Customer acquisition, distribution, hosting, people and other costs.

8 Key metrics

Key numbers that show how the business is doing.

9 Unfair advantage

Something that cannot easily be copied or bought.

Adapted from Maurya (2012). The Lean Canvas is licensed under Creative Commons (CC BY-SA).

Core check

Test the riskiest boxes first: problem, customer segments and unique value proposition.

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TOOLS TO HELP YOU VALIDATE

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01

Value Proposition Canvas

Map your customer's jobs, pains and gains against the value of your solution.

02

Lean Canvas

Capture your business model on one page and identify the assumptions you need to test first.

03

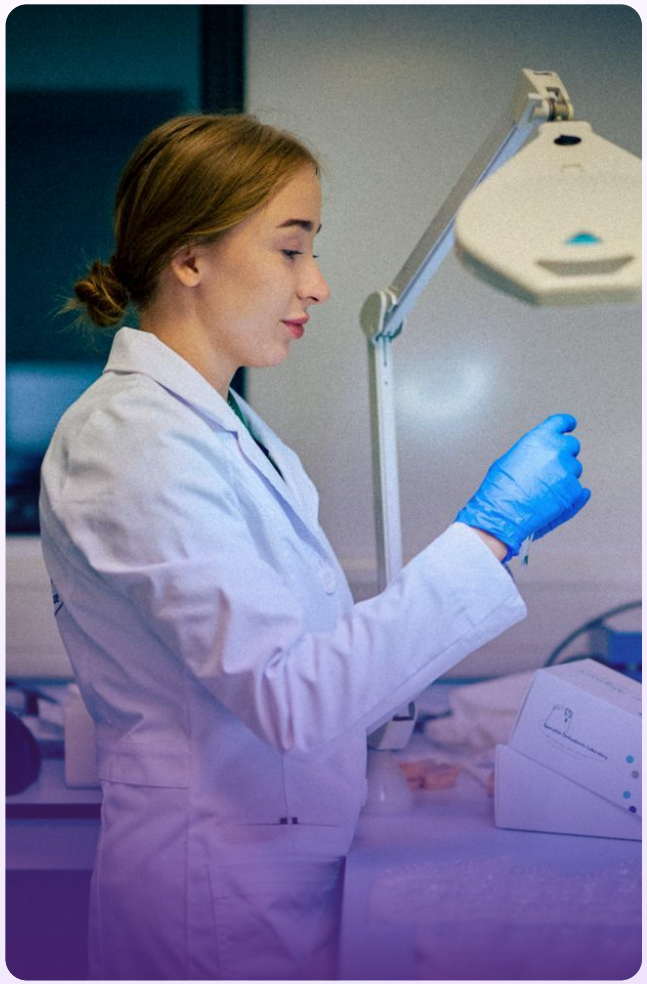
Problem–solution fit

Check that the problem is real and important before focusing on product–market fit.

04

Customer interview scripts

Use structured, non-leading questions to guide your conversations.



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SEE IT IN PRACTICE

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Imagine a founder who believes small Irish cafés are losing money through food waste.

Rather than building an app straight away, they define the problem, speak to café owners and ask how they currently manage stock and what happens when they get it wrong.

If most say it is not a significant issue, that may be a sign to rethink the idea or explore a different problem. If several are losing significant money and are actively looking for a better solution, that's a stronger signal worth testing with a simple pilot.



Either way, the founder has learned something valuable before investing heavily in building.

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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By the end of a first round of validation, you should be able to say:

- I can clearly describe the customer and the problem I'm trying to solve.
- I've heard the problem consistently from multiple potential customers.
- I have evidence of genuine demand, not just positive feedback.
- I know my riskiest assumption and have tested it.
- I know whether to continue, adapt the idea or stop for now.

How long should it take?

A first round of validation should help you learn quickly. For many early ideas, that can happen over a few weeks rather than months. The exact timing will depend on the market and how easy it is to reach potential customers. The important thing is to test before investing heavily in development.

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COMMON MYTHS TO IGNORE

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MYTH 01

“I need to keep my idea secret.”

REALITY

You don’t need to share confidential information or sensitive IP, but talking openly enough to understand the problem and customer can give you valuable feedback.

MYTH 02

“A survey is the same as talking to people.”

REALITY

Surveys can be useful, but direct conversations often give you more context about what people actually do, what they’ve tried and why the problem matters.

MYTH 03

“If I build it well enough, customers will come.”

REALITY

A strong product still needs a real customer problem behind it. Validate demand before investing heavily in development.

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Customer interview scripts

A companion resource to step 3:

How to validate your idea



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HOW TO GET MORE USEFUL CUSTOMER INSIGHT

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The goal of a customer interview is to understand how people actually experience the problem you're exploring.

The way you ask matters: leading or hypothetical questions can give you reassuring answers without giving you much useful evidence.

These prompts are designed to help you keep the conversation focused on real behaviour, past experiences and current workarounds.

BEFORE YOU START: THREE SIMPLE RULES

01 **Ask about the past, not the future**

What someone has already done is usually more useful than what they think they might do.

02 **Ask for specifics**

"Tell me about the last time…" usually gives you more useful detail than "Do you usually…?"

03 **Talk less, listen more**

Give people space to explain what happened, what they tried and why it mattered.

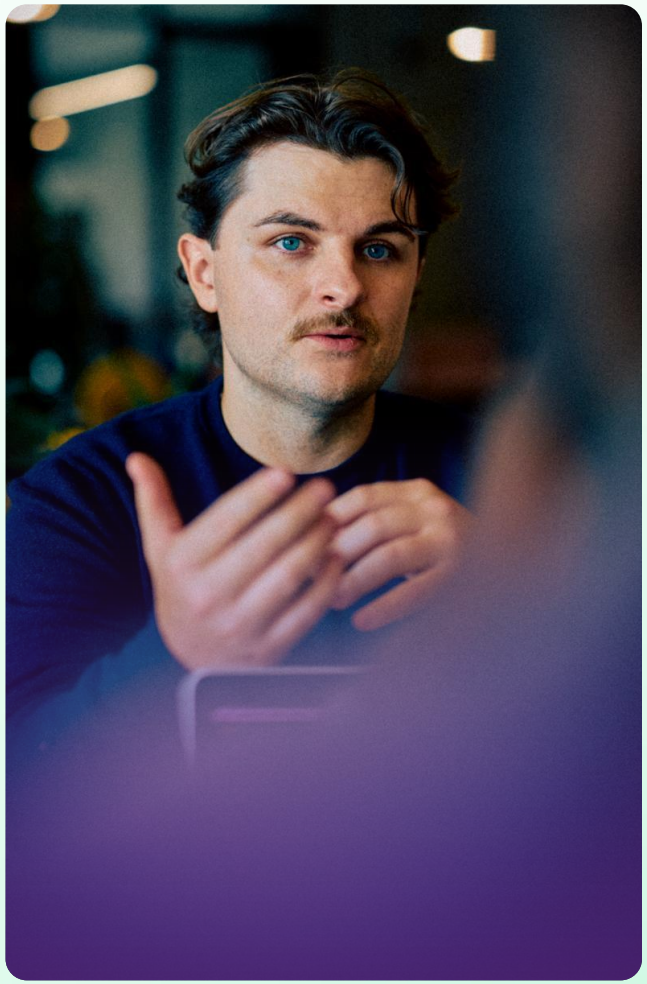
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START THE CONVERSATION

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“

Thanks for taking the time. I’m trying to understand how people in your position deal with [broad problem area]. I’m not selling anything. I’m interested in your actual experience, including what doesn’t work well.”



Open every interview this way, then let the conversation focus on their experience, not your idea.

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RUN THE CONVERSATION

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01

Understand the problem

Tell me about how you currently handle [task/area].

Walk me through the last time this happened.

What was the hardest part?

How often does this come up?

What did it cost you in time, money or effort?

Watch for

Recurring frustrations, specific examples and problems that come up frequently.

02

Understand what they do today

What have you already tried?

How well does that work?

Where does it fall short?

Are you using a tool, spreadsheet, service or workaround today?

Have you looked for alternatives?

Watch for

Existing workarounds or effort people are already putting into solving the problem.

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TEST URGENCY AND CLOSE WELL

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03

Understand the effort and value

Are you currently spending money to manage this problem?

Roughly how much time does it take?

What happens if the problem isn't solved?

Who else is involved in deciding how to address it?

Where does this sit among your other priorities?

Watch for

Whether the problem has a real cost, consequence or priority attached to it.

04

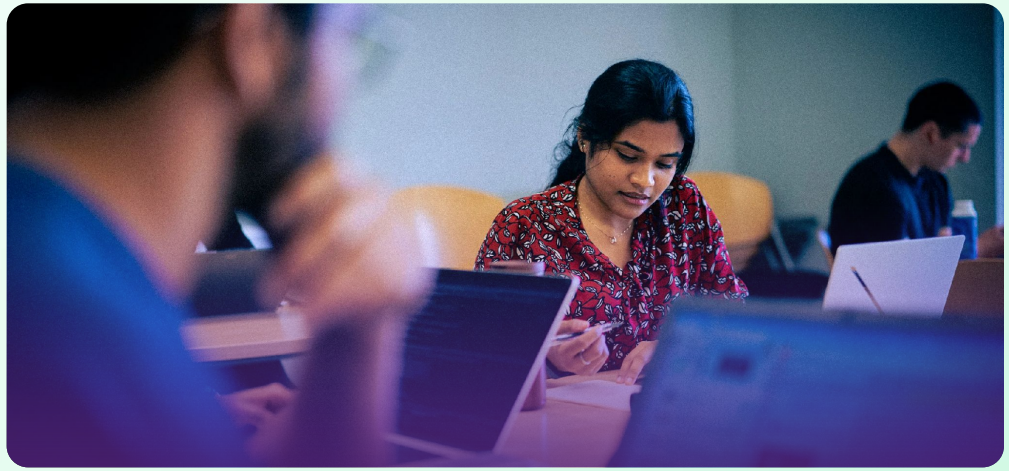
Wrap up

Is there anything I should have asked but didn't?

Who else deals with this problem?

Would you be happy for me to follow up?

Is there anyone else you think I should speak to?



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QUESTIONS TO AVOID

The aim is to move from hypothetical opinions to real examples of what people have already done.

INSTEAD OF ASKING…	TRY ASKING…
“Would you use this?”	“How do you handle this today?”
“Do you think this is a good idea?”	“Walk me through the last time this was a problem.”
“Would you pay €X for this?”	“What are you currently spending to deal with this?”
“Do you have this problem?”	“Tell me about your process for…”
“Wouldn’t it be great if…?”	“What’s the most frustrating part of…?”

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CAPTURE WHAT YOU LEARNED

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After each conversation, take 10 minutes while it's fresh to note:

01	What surprised me?
02	What was the strongest evidence that this problem matters?
03	What challenged my assumptions?
04	What question is still unanswered?
05	What should I test next?



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READ THE SIGNALS

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Not every positive reaction is evidence of demand. Weigh what people do over what they say.

Stronger signals	Weaker signals
They already pay for a workaround	“Sounds interesting.”
They’ve created their own solution	“I’d probably use that.”
They ask when they can try yours	General encouragement
They agree to a pilot or pre-order	Compliments about the idea without any evidence of behaviour
They introduce you to others with the same problem	

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YOUR NEXT STEP

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Once you've validated the opportunity, the next step is to work out how the business will create, deliver and capture value.

Read the playbook: How to build your business model →



NEED SUPPORT?

Your Local Enterprise Office can provide early-stage advice and mentoring, while programmes such as New Frontiers can help you test and develop your idea. Startup Ireland and Enterprise Ireland can also help you find the supports that fit where you are in your journey.

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