

Chapter 1

So You Want More

*Get Off the Fence, Start a Business,
and Create the Life You Want*

What you'll take away from this chapter:

In this chapter, we'll explore the reasons to start your own company, and why it's never too late or too soon to get started. You'll also find a set of resources designed to help you track some of the most basic things you'll need if you decide to get started.

The Monthly Mentor Gathering

Hannah pulled into the driveway, which was already packed with the other guests' cars, and double-checked herself in the rearview mirror before stepping out to walk up to the front door. Jill Saunderson had offered to host the monthly social club for women in the community, and everyone was buzzing about it. Jill was known to be incredibly accomplished, and Hannah recalled how flattered she had been to receive an invitation to the gathering. Hannah smiled as she saw the care that Jill had put into the event. Paper luminary candles lined the walkway, creating a festive atmosphere for the evening ahead. This was just the kind of detail that Hannah admired, but rarely implemented. Hannah had moved to Fisher's Landing a year earlier and was still getting used to the organized social activities of the tight-knit community. As Hannah reached to press the buzzer, Jill swung open the front door, revealing the warmly lit foyer. "Oh fantastic,

you're here!" Jill had a way of making everyone feel welcome. "We've been waiting for you! Let me take your coat, and go make yourself comfortable in the living room."

Hannah unbuttoned her jacket and passed it to Jill before scanning the room to her right. The gas fireplace was on, lighting the room softly. Wine glasses and water tumblers were strategically placed on the coffee table, along with platters of cheese and crackers. About 10 other women were sitting comfortably and chatting. Many of them looked up, smiling warmly, as Jill announced Hannah's arrival. Sophie, a stay-at-home parent, patted the open spot next to hers on the plush sofa and called out quickly, "Hannah, come sit over here, I've been dying to catch up." Hannah had met Sophie a few times at other events, and felt relieved to see her.

"How's everything going? Job okay?" It never felt like niceties when Sophie started her questions. She always seemed genuinely interested, which made it easy to quickly open up.

"Yeah, everything's great," Hannah said. "I just got a good review at work—but I have to admit, I feel like I'm not rising fast enough."

"Good reviews are wonderful, but I'm sure you were ready for a promotion, right?" Sophie asked. "You've been there for what, four years now?"

"Yeah—that's basically it. I just thought that for sure this would be the year, and I know I shouldn't be annoyed, but I was when I saw that Stan got a title bump and I didn't." Hannah took a deep breath as she recalled hearing the news about Stan.

Sophie rolled her eyes and said, "Ugh, that's so frustrating. I remember those days. I'm loving life right now with the kids, and part of me can't imagine going back to the corporate world, but believe me, sometimes I wish I could."

"The grass is always greener, right?" Hannah said this, but actually questioned a little what she meant by it.

Hannah reached over to pour a glass of water, and Maria squeezed in between them. "Hi, ladies! I couldn't help but overhear the conversation. Have either of you ever thought about just starting your own company?"

"Sure, a few times, but I just don't see how I could make it work." Sophie was already thinking of childcare challenges and the relatively lean bank account in her home.

Hannah nodded. “I don’t have the childcare pressures that Sophie has, but I don’t think I’m far enough along in my career for anyone to take me seriously as an entrepreneur. I’m not even sure what I would do.”

Jill, who had been making her way around the room, made her way into the conversation as well. “Maria—I’m sure we’re all capable of doing it, but it seems like such an exhausting uphill battle, doesn’t it? Even if I had a fabulous new business idea, I’m pretty sure no one would fund any of us. I mean, I read the other day that of all companies that try to get funding, only 2% do, and of those 2% only 2% are led by women.”

Hannah and Sophie nodded in unison. “Exactly, 2% of the 2%.”

“But guess what? I’m starting a business right now,” Maria said. “I recognized where there was a huge gap in the customer experience service market, and I’m working on a SaaS solution that I think is really going to transform businesses.”

“What? That’s so ambitious of you, Maria,” Hannah said. “I had no idea you were working on that.” Hannah thought about all the times that her customer experience software at work had frustrated customers and employees.

“Wow. I couldn’t help but overhear that one! A software company. Maria—I’m impressed.” Carolyn turned around abruptly from another conversation and casually leaned over the back edge of the sofa.

Maria looked up, smiling, getting animated. “Yes, I started by spending just a few hours a week on it. And I’m obviously being careful not to use my company’s equipment, and double-checked with corporate to make sure they didn’t have a problem with it. But now I’m dedicating many of my off hours to getting things off the ground. My plan is to get a prototype completed, and then test it out in the market. I’m not going to quit my day job until I’ve validated it, but I really think I’m on to something... And, I feel like those numbers you were talking about (the 2%!) would change if even more of us got started. Sophie, you could figure out the life that works for you and your family. Hannah, you could stop worrying about your next promotion and start building something that mattered to you. Carolyn, if I recall, you’ve always got a ton of ideas and could put them to use. Jill, you’ve been promoted a million times in the last few years and are considered a

rock star at your company. Why not put that energy into your own business?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just didn’t think I could . . .”

* * *

Real-World Experiences and Opportunities

Does this conversation sound familiar to you? Have you thought about starting your own business, but struggled to make it a reality because you thought the odds were stacked against you, or you simply didn’t know where to get started?

Do you have a burning desire to build a solution that could transform businesses, communities, or the lives of ordinary people, but you’re not quite sure how you would get it off the ground?

If, like Hannah, Sophie, Carolyn, or Jill, you’ve thought about starting a business, but worried that you couldn’t do it, this book will show you that “yes, you can.” With the right skills, mindset, fortitude, confidence, and support, you can start and build a business, and create the life you want. And what’s just as exciting is the potential this has for everyone.

If you’re like Maria, and you’ve already started working on a game-changing solution, this book will help you on the next steps in your journey. If, like Hannah, you’re at the very beginning of your career, and are just ready to explore entrepreneurship, you’ll discover all the options you have before you now. And, as Maria pointed out, as more women start their own businesses, more women will fill the gender gap in leadership, which in turn will create more opportunities for leaders to empower and invest in more women.

Entrepreneurship as the Path Forward

The statistics that the characters were tossing around in the previous section are getting slightly better, but leave much to be desired. Here are some things to consider:

- More than 70% of high school valedictorians are females and more than 50% of college graduates are women, yet only 5% of Fortune 500 CEOs are.

- While women in the United States are starting businesses at higher rates than ever, of all venture capital (a form of financing provided by firms to small, early-stage, emerging companies with high growth potential) in 2019, only 2.2% went to women. This is up a percentage point from 10 years earlier, but still represents just a very small piece of the venture pie.
- Only 17% of corporate board seats are held by women.
- Women are 21% more likely to be considered top performers in corporations, but those under the age of 40 are less likely to receive a promotion than men.
- 43% of women continue to leave the workforce when they have children and 85% of women become mothers.
- Only 17% of U.S. companies offer paid maternity leave, and even fewer offer any type of paternity leave.

These statistics certainly seem to reinforce the challenges that Hannah, Sophie, and Jill discussed. As Jill described, knowing that only a very small percentage of funding goes to women, why even bother trying? And with only 17% of U.S. companies offering paid maternity leave, which I think is just one component of benefits that parents need, it's not hard to understand why 43% of women step away from careers as they start families. So why is Maria's idea of entrepreneurship one to consider?

Someone who starts her own business immediately steps into a leadership position. And when you're in charge, you get to set your own hours, create your own rules, and build a business in a way that is right for you. If you're excelling at work, have amazing ideas, but are not getting the promotion you want, **you can** start your own business and go sell a solution back to your old boss. This book will also teach you to develop the skills that will get you that promotion, and help you as you work to make bigger asks down the road.

If you find yourself among the 43% who left the workforce to lead at home and care for others, **you can** step back in through entrepreneurship. If you're already in a leadership position, but you have a creative urge to build something with more ownership and impact, **you can** put those skills you use to deliver for everyone else into your own business. Moreover, you won't be alone.

Women are starting businesses at an unprecedented rate, and the mainstream media is just starting to take note.

According to a 2018 study by American Express, the number of women-owned businesses increased by 3,000% since 1972. Such exponential growth is obviously related to the fact that prior to 1974 women couldn't get lines of credit without a male co-signer, and naturally that change has impacted the number of women who have been able to get started. But it also highlights the drive that women have to lead and operationalize.

What's Holding You Back?

If you picked up this book, you may be interested in starting your own business today, or you may simply be frustrated with the options you believe are available to build the life you want. Wherever you are on your journey, statistics like those mentioned earlier often do more to reinforce ideas of what's possible (or not possible).

We have had no shortage of images of studious young women in books and media. (Think Anne Shirley from *Anne of Green Gables*, Hermione from *Harry Potter*). But how many strong, female CEOs can you think of? While a few actual CEOs may have popped into your head, like Meg Whitman of HP or Mary Barra of General Motors, it's much easier to rattle off the names of hundreds of men, and it's not easy to think of fictional female CEOs. And if someone were to ask you to think of what a startup CEO looks like, what would come to mind? Many people still think of a young guy in a hoodie as a startup CEO and a middle-aged guy in a Patagonia vest as his investor. While studies that uncover the statistics on women in leadership are important, they can also serve to make women feel even more certain that the odds are stacked against them. That is why I am also excited to highlight in this book some of the stories of women who have become CEOs. While seldom discussed, and rarely highlighted in texts on innovation or business, there are examples of women who have done it, and you'll learn more about some of them throughout this book.

The reasons women are not achieving certain career milestones or stepping out of the workforce are conditioned, learned,

and systematized. In a consumer society, where marketing is thrust on all of us from an early age, believe it or not, we're regularly confronted with imagery of people in different roles, based on what that company is trying to peddle. We're brought up seeing images of the mom in the nice kitchen, or the character on a TV show acquiescing to the male boss, or the words repeated over to us like, "just be nice." That's societal conditioning.

We learn things through reward systems. So if we continue to reward girls for being submissive, polite, and coloring within the lines, and we reward boys for being adventurous, we will continue to see people taking actions that reinforce those traits. It's not that girls are less adventurous, or have any less of a natural desire to lead, but they are often rewarded for exhibiting different behaviors—and we typically see more of what we reinforce with rewards.

So the statistics are daunting, and we've set up a society that does actually encourage women to step down from jobs following childbirth. With fewer than 17% of U.S. companies offering paid maternity leave, and childcare costs that can be as high as university fees, there is literally no reward for staying on a professional career journey. Rather, we've created a motherhood penalty. Many parents are left to piece together some vacation days and sick days to simply be able to take a maternity leave, and then watch in dismay as a large percentage of their take-home pay goes to cover daycare costs once they go back to work.

The systems that exist today were designed for and by men and, moreover, for men with women behind the scenes supporting them, and as women have made advances in the workforce, they've often done so by figuring out how to fit into those systems and constructs.

It's no wonder that we often see women who are in leadership positions working to fit into the environments that hold so many men in positions of power by setting their personal lives and stories aside. For example, when you see candidates running for office, we often see pantsuits and shoulder pads. The image shared through visual rhetoric is that in order to succeed in leadership you need to dress like a man, which of course implies that the role was actually designed for men. That's systematized. And

that’s just one of the subconscious patterns I’m hoping to help break down with this book.

If you picked up this book, you are likely considering what your next steps may look like. You may be ready to jump in and get started, or you may be at the early stages of exploration and not feel ready. Wherever you are on our journey, you will find resources in the book to help. **You can do this!**

My Journey to Becoming a Startup Entrepreneur

As I am writing this, I have what most people consider a dream job. I work as a managing director at Techstars, the worldwide network designed to help entrepreneurs succeed. I get to invest money into companies working on game-changing emerging technologies and help those companies scale as they participate in Techstars’ highly regarded accelerator program. If you take a peek at my LinkedIn profile, you’ll see some titles that reflect what my friends and I call my “big kid jobs” (senior vice president, head of labs, CEO for venture backed startup, board director, etc.), along with some industry awards like “BBJ Women to Watch in Tech” and “HubWeek ChangeMaker”). But if you look more closely, you’ll notice something else: There’s a three-year gap between my tech job at an investment bank and my position as CEO.

Guess what I was doing in that time? I was leaning out. I had a baby, who’s now 16, then another one, who’s now 14, and as a result of many of the statistics I cited earlier in this chapter, I stepped out of the workforce. I’m by no means advocating that women step out of the workforce, but I think it’s important to note that I was passionate about my career and still couldn’t figure out how to integrate it with my changed family life. At the end of the day, I wanted to be with my young children more and didn’t see any ways to give my best to my job at the same time. So how did I get to a point where I was running digital services and a labs innovation team with a multimillion-dollar budget to manage existing services and build new products for a billion-dollar company?

I started up.

What Starting Up as a Stay-at-Home Parent Looked Like

By the time my boys were toddlers, I knew I needed to make an additional income for my family at some point, and I had researched a number of options with my husband's support. Believe it or not, starting my own business actually looked more promising than trying to explain my gap years to a new potential employer. Starting a business was also a way to continue to own my daily routine, and allowed me the flexibility I wanted to spend my day with my children. I could work on contracts and negotiations during their naptimes and stay up late into the evenings working on the business. But during the day, I could also manage to focus my attention on these little humans I truly enjoyed. Of course, that didn't come without challenges as I later sought to raise investment capital to grow the business.

In 2010, as I was searching for investment, I found myself sitting on the floor of my older son's closet, surrounded by Legos, a Buzz Lightyear action figure, and a flock of dust bunnies, waiting for a conference call to begin. I had in front of me what so many entrepreneurs hope for, an unsigned term sheet from investors that outlined their offer to provide a few hundred thousand dollars in capital in exchange for equity, or ownership, in my business.

As I picked the lint off my yoga pants, I silently prayed that my young boys would not start screaming in the middle of the call. I wanted to impress the men on the other end of the line—a senior executive advisor, my lawyer, and the two investors who had provided the term sheet. While I hoped the investors would ultimately invest in my fledgling software company, which I had built to help educators manage accreditation and assessment processes, my mentor and lawyer cautioned me that the term sheet was filled with some language that they felt was overreaching. If I recall correctly, one of them even used the term *piggish* to explain it to me.

While I knew I was off to strong start because I had a few key sales and had just completed nine months of negotiation with a national nonprofit organization, I was also an unproven entrepreneur, lacking an Ivy League degree, living far away from Silicon Valley or any tech hub at the time. But I needed capital to grow the business, and this was the only term sheet I had, so I was ready and excited to negotiate. I remember

waiting for these people I hoped to impress to join the call, and imagining what their experiences were like. In contrast to my own surroundings, I was sure my lawyer was in a slick boardroom with his administrative assistant just the snap of a finger away, and the senior executive was probably in a corner office, while the investors were likely riding in the back of a luxury car, fielding numerous requests from other entrepreneurs like me.

As they each joined the call, and we got past the customary greetings, one of the investors cut to the chase. “We’re going to slow this down. We want to get some other investors involved.” This, of course, brought the conversation to an abrupt ending. *Forget negotiating the terms—they weren’t even prepared to sign their own term sheet yet.* Within seconds, all of the men jumped off the line, and I sat there on the floor, stunned at the turn of events. But just as I leaned my head on the wall, ready to take a moment to feel the frustration, I heard the scream I had worked hard to avoid: “*Mommy—where are you?*”

I jumped to my feet and stood for a moment, trying to process what had just happened before running downstairs. I could either forget trying to raise capital or find some new investors. Since I couldn’t afford to get additional childcare support at that point, things did not look so great.

But I went on from that day to find the investors I needed, used the capital to continue to develop the business, and we were eventually acquired by another company. From there, I went on to lead digital services and an innovation team at a large corporation, managing a multimillion-dollar budget within a multibillion-dollar company, joined the board of directors for a private equity-backed startup, and am now, as I mentioned, a managing director at Techstars. On paper, my resume looks like a clear progression. In reality, it was anything but that.

You see, after the birth of my first child in 2003, I did what 43% of highly qualified women do: I dropped out of the traditional workforce. That three-year gap on my resume started when I left my promising career as a senior support analyst in the E-comm division of UBS, an investment bank. I had jumped into technology in the late 1990s when companies were eager for anyone who knew HTML, and I had leveraged my liberal arts education to learn new skills in web development and systems administration.

My impression had been that there were few women in banking at that point, let alone women in tech in banking. I recall that during my pregnancy, the bank was making efforts to be more inclusive of women, adding a nursing room to the women's bathroom, and there were some female executives who I considered mentors at the time who offered support. But once I had my first son, I couldn't figure out how I was going to make it work. During my maternity leave, my direct manager left so I had a new boss to impress. The childcare options I found were going to add an hour to my commute and eat up a large percentage of my take-home salary. On top of it all, as one of the first of my friends to have a baby at 27 years old, I was totally unprepared for the state of my hormones, my stretched, sagging body, and the desperation of sleep deprivation.

To put it simply, I was a mess. I had gained 52 pounds during my pregnancy, which seemed impossible, because I threw up nearly every day. Although I had planned to have a natural childbirth, my labor was induced, and I ended up dealing with a massive episiotomy. I literally had to carry an inflatable plastic donut with me for about three weeks because the stitches made it painful to sit down. I also thought I would breastfeed, but realized within the first few weeks that my body wasn't going to cooperate. As my 12 weeks of maternity leave, which statistically I was extremely lucky to have, were coming to an end, I realized I was just starting to lose weight, my baby was just beginning to really smile at me and sleep for more than an hour or two at time, my plastic donut was finally in the trash, and I was just about able to walk up the stairs in my rented fourth-floor apartment in New York City without discomfort. Things were just getting under control, and the idea of starting a new routine, and leaving this baby at daycare that I would have to pay for, just felt completely overwhelming. So that was it. With my partner's support, I quit. And I felt like I had jumped off the deep end of the pool and didn't know how to swim. I swam in that pool of stay-at-home parenting for many years, and with each year, although I was happy to be with my children, I also grew less confident in my ability to jump back into the business sector again.

What I realize now, many years later, is that I wasn't alone. 43% of women step out of the workforce at some point and countless

people have experiences that make it challenging to work within today's current business structures. You may be struggling with childcare issues, caring for elders, or simply be dissatisfied with the way business is currently done. None of these challenges means you can't forge a new path. My journey back in to a fulfilling career was possible by creating a startup. At the time I started in 2006, of all companies that went for venture capital funding, only 2% were successful at fundraising, and of them, only 1% (of the 2%) were founded and run by women. If I was able to create a startup as a non-MBA, living in the suburbs, fielding conference calls from a child's closet, *so can you*. While my journey is unique in many ways, I'm confident the challenges I encountered are common, and I'm hopeful that my hard-earned experiences (which include success and failure) will help make things easier for you.

A Manifesto for Women to Become Entrepreneurs, and a Playbook to Help

If you picked up this book, I imagine there is something compelling you to move forward personally and professionally, and something else that you can't quite put your finger on, that might be holding you back. In *Yes, You Can Do This!*, you'll learn all the soft and hard skills needed to start up and scale your business, and create the life you want. This book is as much a manifesto designed to encourage women (and men) to start new companies as it is a how-to-guide for those who are ready to take the plunge. You'll discover the secrets I wish I had had access to earlier in my journey, and you'll feel empowered to get started.

This book is designed to serve as a playbook for you, as you work to build your business. You can read cover to cover, or skip to the chapters that provide answers to your immediate questions. In each chapter, you'll gain access to a host of resources, and learn specific skills like developing a financial projections sheet, as well as the soft skills you can incorporate into your processes to enhance your thinking and management experience.

And I know with the right resources, perspective, and shared experiences, *you can* build the business and life you want.

You can do this!

A Startup Checklist

Table 1.1 provides a very basic view of many of the initial steps you'll need to be aware of as you get started.

Table 1.1 A Basic Business Checklist

Getting Started

Define your purpose.	Write down why your business should exist. What service are you providing? What problem are you solving?
Do a competitive analysis.	Research the competitive landscape. Make a matrix of other companies out there with similar solutions, and see where you think you fit in or compete. Don't limit yourself to companies working directly on your product idea. Look at the broader landscape as well.
Know your customer.	Really research the market to understand who your potential customers are.
Name of company (trademark).	Visit the U.S. Patent and Trademark site (USPTO.gov) to apply for a trademark on your company's name.
Consider your current employer.	If you are still working for another company, be sure to use only your own equipment on your personal time. Also double-check with your corporate counsel to ensure that what you are working on isn't considered a conflict. You want to be fair to your current employer and also ensure that your current company doesn't claim ownership of your work later.
Set up a Tax EIN number (register your business).	Visit the IRS site (https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/apply-for-an-employer-identification-number-ein-online).
Check your state websites to ensure that you file your business correctly.	Each state has different requirements when starting a business. Even if you incorporate in a state like Delaware, you'll still need to check your state website to make sure you're paying any appropriate fees.
Investigate building a website. Secure a domain name.	Modern sites like wix.com and squarespace.com make it easy for people with no development skills to create a website.
Track your expenses.	You can use tools ranging from Excel to Quickbooks. (You'll likely share these with an accountant later for taxes, so the sooner you start tracking these, the easier it will be.)
If you're starting with a friend, consider creating an operating agreement.	Draft a simple document that outlines the roles of each person in the company, and who owns what percentage of the company. This is an internal document that will help you avoid confusion later.
Create an executive summary, including financial projections and go-to-market plan.	We'll cover this in Section II of this book.

(continued)

Table 1.1 *(Continued)*

Getting Started

Determine if you have any IP on the product you are creating.	If you're developing a unique, innovative product, consider researching whether it is patentable. First visit the USPTO.gov site. Then, if necessary, find a good patent attorney.
Know about sales and use tax.	Again, make sure you visit your local websites, and consult with an accountant once you start buying and selling things to make sure you are handling taxes correctly.
Bootstrap as you can, but be aware of all of your funding choices.	We'll cover this in Section II of this book, but you will want to become aware of all the funding options you have if you need funding. This includes local grants, crowdfunding, venture investment, and business loans.