



# What We Can Learn From Older Entrepreneurs

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These innovators, who started businesses and introduced new products after passing 50, are evidence that there's no age limit on good ideas.

**Photo:** Ravi Sawhney, founder of RKS Design.

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There's a widely held belief that entrepreneurs are all in their 20s, but that's simply not the case. [Harvard Business Review](https://hbr.org/2018/07/research-the-average-age-of-a-successful-startup-founder-is-45) has reported (<https://hbr.org/2018/07/research-the-average-age-of-a-successful-startup-founder-is-45>) that the average age of entrepreneurs was 42 (and that was back in 2018). With so many retirees and soon-to-be retirees wanting to continue to make an impact and pursue their passions, some are inventing new products and services.

Tom Sturdevant is a case in point. Sturdevant, who is 82, invented the game [Q-Less](https://qlessgame.com/pages/how-to-play) (<https://qlessgame.com/pages/how-to-play>) when he was 75. It began as a board game, and now also is available in a digital format. He had no idea that his simple dice game, which he had enjoyed playing with friends and family, would become a viral [TikTok sensation](https://www.tiktok.com/@qlessgame/video/7496614754308377887?lang=en) (<https://www.tiktok.com/@qlessgame/video/7496614754308377887?lang=en>).

"I'm a great believer in reinvention. I have done it so many times," says Sturdevant. Before he launched Q-Less he spent decades as a foreign service officer, [Peace Corps](https://www.nextavenue.org/older-peace-corps-volunteer/) (<https://www.nextavenue.org/older-peace-corps-volunteer/>) trainer, farmer and filmmaker. His diverse background illustrates exactly why older

entrepreneurs often succeed: they have accumulated knowledge, connections and skills across multiple domains.

## The Wisdom of Experience

That may help to explain why [research](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3158929) ([https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3158929](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3158929)) found that 50-year-old company founders are twice as likely to succeed as their 30-year-old counterparts, based on an analysis of 2.7 million business founders.

"I think a lot of it is faith in yourself to do stuff," Sturdevant explains. He credits an early experience in Vietnam for building his self-assurance. The U.S. government tasked him, aged 21, with building an agricultural training center with minimal guidance. "That really helped me develop a sense of confidence, because I was having to deal with things that I knew nothing about," he recalls.

This pattern of tackling unfamiliar challenges serves seasoned entrepreneurs well. Members of the baby boom and Generation X (people aged 45 to 79) [together represent 79%](https://www.guidantfinancial.com/small-business-trends/#:~:text=Gen%20X%2C%20now,now%20represent%2030%25.) (<https://www.guidantfinancial.com/small-business-trends/#:~:text=Gen%20X%2C%20now,now%20represent%2030%25.>) of all small business owners, bringing decades of problem-solving experience to their ventures.

Ravi Sawhney, founder of [RKS Design](https://rksdesign.com/) (<https://rksdesign.com/>) (*in photo, above*), is a prime example of this. He started his career with Xerox, where he was involved in the development of touchscreens. But corporate life wasn't for him, so he left Xerox and started RKS Design in 1980. He and RKS have been responsible for hundreds of innovations, in fields ranging from medical devices and musical instruments to infrared cameras and electric toothbrushes. Now in his late 60s, Sawhney is still inventing; current projects include energy drinks and a modernized hookah, a



water pipe that dates back to the 16th century.

## Beyond Silicon Valley Stereotypes

The perception that innovation requires youth stems largely from high-profile tech success stories. "We all know about Bill Gates and Steve Jobs and [Steve] Wozniak being these young guys in the garage coming up with a great idea," notes Sawhney, referring to the founders of Microsoft and Apple. But he points out that "great ideas come from everywhere" — and they can come at any age.

Inventor Ken Forsee "was already well into his 50s," when he developed the best-selling animatronic toy bear Teddy Ruxpin in the 1980s, Sawhney recalls. "It takes a lot of wisdom, a lot of knowledge, to make it happen," he adds, referring to making a product stand out in a crowded market.

This wisdom extends beyond individual insights to understanding markets and systems. [Ray Kroc was 52](https://corporate.mcdonalds.com/corpmcd/our-company/who-we-are/our-history.html#:~:text=Multimixer%20salesman%20Ray,be%20in%20hamburgers.) (https://corporate.mcdonalds.com/corpmcd/our-company/who-we-are/our-history.html#:~:text=Multimixer%20salesman%20Ray,be%20in%20hamburgers.) when he opened his first McDonald's franchise, transforming a small hamburger restaurant concept into a global empire. [Kroc isn't an isolated example](https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/its-never-too-late-lessons-famous-entrepreneurs-who-started-after-50) (https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/its-never-too-late-lessons-famous-entrepreneurs-who-started-after-50) . Other well-known inventors who began their missions when they were 50 or older include Colonel Harland Sanders, who was 62 when he began franchising Kentucky Fried Chicken (now KFC); Arianna Huffington, who was 55 when she launched The Huffington Post; and Bernie Marcus, who was 50 when he co-founded The Home Depot.

There's a practical reason for the success of these entrepreneurs.

## The Practical Advantages

Older entrepreneurs often possess resources their younger counterparts lack. "The best advice I could give to someone who is thinking that they've got the world's greatest idea and now they're going to do something with it is to really study the marketplace and the channel," Sawhney advises.

It's the kind of market understanding that comes from experience.

Sawhney emphasizes the importance of preparation: "You've got to know you have a market. You have to know who your customers are and understand how you're going to motivate them." This kind of strategic thinking is honed by experience and can help avoid pitfalls that might sink other startups whose founders lack that depth and breadth of expertise.

Older entrepreneurs are also more likely to have more stable finances and access to more capital than younger generations. This allows them to take more calculated risks and overcome early setbacks.

## The Power of Persistence...

Perhaps most importantly, older entrepreneurs understand the value of persistence. "I'm very persistent," Sturdevant emphasizes. When Q-Less sales were minimal after a year, he didn't give up. Instead, when a friend's 25-year-old son suggested promoting the game on [TikTok](https://www.tiktok.com/@qlessgame?lang=en) (https://www.tiktok.com/@qlessgame?lang=en) , Sturdevant embraced the platform despite initially thinking it was for "a bunch of teenagers."

A few days after posting his first video, Sturdevant says he found he was close to 1,400 views. After another three or four weeks, "it just blew up." In one day, he says, he added about 60,000 views.

His process and content strategy aren't overly complex. "I post every day," he says. "I post a solution. I just roll the dice. You don't see me — you see my hand — and I narrate." He now has more than 120,000 followers at @qlessgame on TikTok, a platform associated with much younger users.

Entrepreneurs like Sturdevant have learned to leverage their professional expertise while addressing problems they understand deeply through lived experience. That was certainly true for Julie Whitney.

## ... and Necessity

They say that necessity is the mother of invention, and that was exactly the case for Whitney, who got her

inspiration during the pandemic, when she turned 60. After her husband unexpectedly lost his job as a corporate pilot when his company eliminated its flight department, Whitney found herself sitting in his beloved Gulfstream jet, day after day, wondering what would happen to the aircraft.

That emotional moment sparked something powerful, she says. "I started writing '[Astra the Lonely Airplane](https://astrathelonelyairplane.com/)' ' that very night," Whitney recalls. Drawing on her 40 years of public relations experience, she submitted the manuscript to dozens of publishers throughout the summer, "knowing that it would only take just one yes after many rejections." Each rejection, she says, just made her push that much harder. She finally received a "yes" on National Aviation Day in August 2020 — the same day her husband found a new flying job.

Whitney's children's book series has become a remarkable success, winning awards, selling in airport bookstores nationwide, and leading to partnerships with aviation museums and schools.

Now she's developing an animated streaming series, proving that a moment of adversity at 60 can become the launchpad for an entirely new career.

## Practical Steps Forward

For those considering entrepreneurship after 50, these entrepreneurs offer practical advice. Start with what excites you, but do your homework first. "You need that energy of something that excites you," Sturdevant explains.

That's exactly what Whitney did, leveraging her knowledge of the PR field and the publishing industry to create a systematic submission process that helped her find success in a new area.

Sawhney advocates thorough market research before investing heavily: "I would always suggest [doing] as much groundwork as you can before you start spending money on design and engineering firms," he says. Sawhney stresses the importance of "proof of principle," by which he means testing their ideas to make certain they work and can be produced at scale.

But don't let perfectionism paralyze you, Sturdevant

cautions. You can learn a lot by just doing. "I never have a plan," the game creator says. "You just start, and then it takes over whatever it is you're doing."

For the millions of Americans approaching or past 50, the message is clear: Your most innovative years may still be ahead of you. As Whitney shows with her publishing success, Sawhney demonstrates with five decades of design innovation, and Sturdevant illustrates with his viral game sensation, age can bring advantages that far outweigh any perceived limitations.

The only question left is: Where will you let your passion and experience take you next?