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Why Impulsive Founders Sometimes Win Big

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Entrepreneurs who "move fast and break things" thrive in high-uncertainty environments where the money flows freely -- but deliberation prevails when money is tight.

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Stories of founders making bold, spur-of-the-moment decisions are plentiful. David Neeleman built multiple airlines—JetBlue, Azul, Breeze—not through painstaking research but through gut instinct. Richard Branson launched ventures from record labels to Virgin Cola with a willingness to jump first and figure things out later. Elon Musk's tweets alone can move markets, based, in part, on how quickly he acts on unfiltered ideas.

These figures are not simply charismatic outliers. They represent a pattern: entrepreneurs who act impulsively, prioritizing speed over deliberation, can often win big over their more deliberate competitors. They are also neurodivergent, representing: ADHD (Neeleman); dyslexia (Branson); and autism (Musk). While traditional models of entrepreneurship emphasize deliberate decision-making and careful planning, emerging research shows that successful entrepreneurs often display traits commonly associated with neurodiverse conditions, not least ADHD—impulsivity, high energy, novelty-seeking, and a bias toward rapid action (Bort et al., 2024).

This raises an important question: rather than dismissing impulsivity as recklessness, might it sometimes confer a strategic advantage? If so, under what conditions should entrepreneurs, embrace impulsivity—and when should they rein it in?

The Speed-vs-Accuracy Trade-Off

At the heart of entrepreneurial decision-making lies a fundamental tension: speed versus accuracy. In many situations, more time and analysis can often lead to better-informed choices, slowing down execution to make more deliberate and careful choices. In these environments, impulsive action accelerates implementation, but often at the cost of making more mistakes.

However, in entrepreneurship, the opposite is often true: slowing down execution to make more deliberate, careful, and informed choices can create competitive disadvantages for entrepreneurs in fast-moving environments. Consider Sara Blakely's founding of Spanx. Rather than engaging in formal market testing or investor validation, Blakely relied on intuition and rapid, informal experimentation to develop and launch her product. By acting quickly on an unverified insight, she entered the market before established apparel firms could respond. Her approach illustrates how, in entrepreneurial contexts, action-based learning can substitute for deliberate analysis, allowing speed itself to become a source of competitive advantage.

Impulsive entrepreneurs like the ones we highlight in this article typically share three behavioral traits:

- **Action bias**—they act on the first promising option rather than scanning for alternatives.
- **High velocity of action**—they move rapidly from idea to implementation.
- **Lower accuracy per attempt**—their decisions often involve more mistakes.

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Although these behaviors are often cast in a negative light, under certain conditions they translate into formidable strengths.

Our Research

As one might imagine, capturing impulsive actions is extraordinarily difficult because impulsivity, by its very nature, arises unexpectedly and occurs rapidly. For this reason, we investigated impulsivity by developing a computer simulation. This enabled us to study entrepreneurial processes in ways that would be nearly impossible with real-world data alone. Using this tool, we simulated the decisions and actions of 2.7 million virtual entrepreneurs – some impulsive and some deliberate – and watched individuals compete for resources while trying to launch new ventures. By systematically changing environmental conditions like uncertainty levels and resource availability, we observed which entrepreneurs succeeded under various circumstances.

What We Found

Our simulations and analyses showed that two environmental conditions make impulsivity particularly valuable: resource abundance and uncertainty. However, in resource-scare environments it's better to be more deliberate.

Resource-Rich Environments

When capital, talent, or opportunities are abundant, impulsive entrepreneurs can secure an early edge simply by moving quickly. The ability to capture attention, land funding, or claim early customers rewards speed more than precision. Even if many early moves fail, plentiful resources buffer the costs. Trial-and-error becomes affordable.

This is why impulsive entrepreneurs often thrive during boom cycles in venture capital or in emerging markets where opportunities are plentiful. They race to plant flags, leaving more deliberate entrepreneurs to refine and consolidate later. Over time, however, the advantage erodes: deliberate players catch up through more consistent execution.

High-Uncertainty Environments

When conditions are unpredictable, impulsivity becomes even more advantageous. In contexts such as cryptocurrency regulation, pandemic disruptions, or the commercialization of cutting-edge technologies, information is scarce, unreliable, or quickly obsolete. Deliberate entrepreneurs slow down to analyze, but what they learn may no longer hold by the time they act.

Impulsive entrepreneurs, by contrast, keep moving. By the time careful competitors reach a decision, the impulsive actors may already have iterated through multiple experiments. In simulations, impulsive entrepreneurs succeeded 21% of the time under high uncertainty compared to 17% for deliberate entrepreneurs. The difference, while modest, highlights a structural edge.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a concrete case. As lockdowns hit, restaurants scrambled to survive. Some entrepreneurs spent weeks designing polished delivery platforms. Companies such as Milk Bar in New York began shipping "quarantine cookies" and selling pantry items almost immediately. The speed of improvisation—using WhatsApp, Instagram, and home delivery—let some survive while slower competitors folded. Those who acted first captured customer demand and market share during a fleeting window of opportunity.

When Deliberation Wins

Impulsivity is not always an advantage. In resource-scarce environments, where every failure consumes scarce capital, credibility, or time, deliberate strategies often prevail. Accuracy matters more than speed when mistakes are unaffordable.

This is common in mature industries, downturn economies, or high-competition niches. In such contexts, the careful entrepreneur—who conducts deep market research, pilots cautiously, and manages resources meticulously—outperforms the impulsive founder. Here, the premium is on precision, not speed.

The lesson: impulsivity and deliberation are not inherently better or worse. Their relative value depends on environmental fit.

Takeaways

To date, research concerning neurodiversity and entrepreneurship has focused primarily on the entrepreneurs themselves. However, entrepreneurship does not exist in a vacuum; the attributes and actions of founder(s) reverberate throughout a broad ecosystem of stakeholders. Our findings reveal that impulsivity confers advantages or disadvantages depending on

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environmental conditions, which are partly shaped by investors, support organizations, and team members. Moreover, impulsive founders' success or failure often hinges on whether ecosystem actors recognize and appropriately respond to their distinctive decision-making style. Consequently, understanding impulsivity's strategic implications requires examining not only how impulsive entrepreneurs should act, but also how the ecosystem surrounding them can better support—or learn to work alongside—these founders.

For Impulsive Entrepreneurs. If descriptions of impulsive entrepreneurs feel like holding up a mirror, you are not alone. Many founders are wired this way. The key is to recognize strengths and limitations. Seek uncertain environments where bias toward action is a superpower. At the same time, be aware of the risks and limitations of impulsivity. Impulsive individuals tend to be great at tasks they enjoy but very bad at tasks they don't enjoy. Tasks with variety, challenge, and risk tend to be regarded as fun, whereas mundane tasks like bookkeeping, meetings, and filling out forms tend to be done poorly or not at all. Apart from steering towards the interesting and challenging tasks, it is important to consider collaborating with somebody who is better attuned to the more mundane tasks. They are also necessary in a functioning venture. One option is to partner with a deliberate co-founder or a senior team member who can stabilize execution. Resist the urge to shoehorn yourself into planning frameworks that clash with your instincts. While differences in personality can lead to clashes, in particular for those who are easily angered, acceptance of weaknesses and the need for help is particularly important for entrepreneurs high on impulsivity.

For Deliberate Entrepreneurs. If you prefer methodical analysis but often suffer from FOMO, practice techniques for faster decision-making when uncertainty spikes or opportunities abound. Set artificial deadlines to prevent overthinking. Use rapid prototyping and iteration to gather real-world data rather than waiting for certainty. You need not abandon rigor, but you must learn to shift gears when the environment demands speed.

For Investors. Founder style should be matched with context. In uncertain sectors, impulsive founders may look less prepared but outperform through adaptability. Traditional due diligence, which privileges polished plans, risks overlooking high-potential ventures. Consider frameworks that value speed-to-action, rapid iteration, and adaptability alongside market analysis depth.

For Start-Up Employees. Understand the founder's decision style before joining. Impulsive founders foster fast-paced, adaptive environments with frequent pivots. Deliberate founders provide more structured, predictable trajectories. Choose based on your personal tolerance for ambiguity, pace, and long-term development goals.

For Entrepreneurial Support Organizations. Stop treating all entrepreneurs as if they fit the same mold. Impulsive founders benefit more from programs emphasizing prototyping and customer validation than from exhaustive planning exercises. Deliberate founders thrive in structured accelerator tracks that stress financial discipline and strategic roadmaps. Tailoring support not only improves outcomes but also reduces frustration.

The Neurodiversity (dis)Advantage

The discussion of impulsivity also highlights a broader theme: the advantageous facets of neurodiversity. Conditions like ADHD, often seen as liabilities in traditional workplaces, may align well with entrepreneurial environments. Difficulty with routine tasks, craving for novelty, and a bias toward rapid action are weaknesses in some contexts but strengths in others.

This does not mean every impulsive or neurodiverse individual should be an entrepreneur, nor that impulsivity is always helpful. The crucial factor is fit between personal traits and environmental conditions.

Future research should explore how impulsive and deliberate founders combine in teams, how investors can better recognize context-dependent potential, and how neurodiverse employees in start-ups contribute unique forms of creativity and adaptability. Start-ups may provide a natural laboratory for understanding the future of work in a more neurodiverse economy.

Key Things to Remember

- **Context matters:** Impulsivity is advantageous in uncertain, resource-rich environments but disadvantageous when resources are scarce.
- **Speed can beat accuracy:** Quick action on

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imperfect information can outperform perfect analysis that arrives too late.
- **Neurodiversity can be an asset:** Traits linked to ADHD and related conditions may confer competitive advantage in entrepreneurship.
- **Match founders to environments:** Investors and accelerators should align evaluation and support with context and style.
- **Diversity is powerful:** Teams blending impulsive and deliberate decision-makers often achieve the best of both worlds.

Conclusion

The mythology of entrepreneurship often celebrates the bold visionary who acts on instinct, while higher education and self-help books preach deliberation and planning. Yet the reality is more nuanced: impulsivity is not universally good or bad, but situationally strategic. In some contexts, it is reckless; in others, it is the only way to win.

Recognizing impulsivity as a potential advantage—rather than a flaw—requires a shift in how entrepreneurs view themselves, how investors assess opportunities, and how support organizations design programs. The future of entrepreneurship may depend less on eliminating impulsivity than on learning to harness it where it counts most.

Explore the Research

Bort, J., Wiklund, J., Crawford, G. C., Lerner, D. A., & Hunt, R. A. (2024). The strategic advantage of impulsivity in entrepreneurial action: An agent-based modeling approach. (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/10422587231178882) Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, June 2023.

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