

Next 10 Actions: A Starting Guide for Early Entrepreneurs

For anyone with a good idea and no clue what to do next.

You don't need a business degree or a big budget to get started. Some of the most successful entrepreneurs didn't begin with a perfect plan. They began with what they had. The steps below help you do the same - use your knowledge, skills, and network to take small, smart steps forward. Instead of trying to predict the future, you start shaping it. These ten actions are designed to help you do just that. You will test ideas quickly, learn by doing, and talk to real people to see what works.

1. Start With What You Have

Write down three things: Who you are, what you know, and whom you know. These are your means. Most ventures don't start with millions in funding; they start with a person using their existing knowledge, network, and resources. Maybe it's your academic research, your experience in a field, or a friend who knows how to code. Use that as your launchpad.

2. Talk to Real People

New opportunities often start with simple, honest conversations. Talk to five people who have experienced the problem you care about. What do they currently do? What frustrates them? Don't pitch—just ask questions and listen. This will shape your understanding and test whether your idea resonates.

3. Write It Down, Roughly

Capture your idea on paper. It doesn't need to be elegant. Bullet points are fine. Describe the problem, the current alternatives, and how your idea might be better. Use this to share your idea and spark early feedback. Think of it as your first "minimum viable explanation."

4. Invite People In

Many founders co-create with self-selected stakeholders. Reach out to colleagues, mentors, or classmates. Share what you're working on and ask if they'd be interested in collaborating or giving feedback. These early allies can shape your direction and expand your reach.

Ask specific, creative questions. When you're talking with potential collaborators, pay close attention to what tweaks or pivots they suggest, even if they're big. Then ask directly: What would it take for you to build this with me? What's the toughest part from your perspective? What one change would make you feel truly excited about this idea? Don't just chat, invite them to get involved. Ask what they'd actually commit to right now. Their yeses (and their noes) will help you see the path forward a lot more clearly.

5. Embrace Affordable Loss

Instead of chasing huge potential profits, ask yourself: what am I willing to lose? Maybe it's \$100 and 10 hours of your time. Stay within that limit. If things don't work out, you've still gained insights. This is more sustainable than gambling on the perfect plan.

6. Make a Small Bet

Don't try to build a company. Try to run an experiment. Can you prototype a feature in a weekend? Can you create a flyer or landing page? The goal isn't perfection; it's learning. What would it take to get someone to use this, or even better, pay for it? Start there.

At some point, you just have to start. Not just planning, not just researching, doing. That might mean selling something, testing a first version, talking to a real customer. There are things you simply can't learn from the sidelines. You've got to be in it, doing the work, figuring it out in motion. This is about momentum, not perfection.

7. Stay in the Game

Early efforts often come with tough news. An idea may not land, a partner may walk away, a customer may not care. That is part of the process. The key is not putting yourself in a position where one stumble knocks you out completely. Choose a path that lets you test and learn without draining your time, money, or energy all at once. It might feel like you are holding back, especially when you are excited about the idea, but staying conservative with your resources lets you keep moving and evolving. Overinvesting can bring things to a halt. Underinvesting keeps you in motion and invites others to contribute. That is how momentum builds.

8. Shape the Idea Through Real Feedback

By now, you've made small moves. You've talked to people, shared rough versions, and even gotten a few reactions. Now take that learning further. Try out your riskiest guesses in small, creative ways. This is not about proving you're right. It's about seeing how your idea responds to the real world, and how the world responds back.

You're not validating a finished vision. You're sculpting the idea as you go, adjusting based on what people care about, what works, and who's willing to join in. Every conversation, every test is a way to make the idea more real and more useful. Keep it small. Keep it smart. The goal isn't control, it's co-creation.

9. Stay Flexible with What You Use

You do not need to own everything to move forward. What matters is your ability to access the right tools, spaces, and people at the right time. Borrow a lab. Share equipment. Work

from a co-working space. Focus on getting the job done rather than building the perfect setup.

Spending less gives you room to learn more. Even if renting or outsourcing looks more expensive at first glance, the ability to stay nimble often outweighs the savings from locking into fixed assets too early.

Try to time your spending with the value you are getting in return. If something generates real traction, keep investing. If not, shift. Flexibility is your friend in the early days. Once you have a better sense of what works, you can start refining and streamlining. But early on, staying light on your feet will help you go farther.

10. Reflect, Adjust, Keep Moving

Every so often, take a step back. Not everything needs to be full speed ahead. Ask yourself what you have learned. What surprised you? What shifted since you started? Are you still chasing the same problem, or has something new emerged that deserves your attention?

This kind of pause is not about building a perfect plan. It is about staying aware of where you are and where you want to go. Jot things down. Use a whiteboard. Talk it through with someone you trust. Clarity often comes from making the invisible visible.

Early ventures rarely follow straight lines. There will be loops, restarts, and pivots. That is not a sign of failure. It is how progress happens. Reflection gives you a chance to adjust without losing momentum. Recommit to what matters, let go of what does not, and then take your next step with intention.

Finally, Don't Forget This

These ten actions will not give you a perfect roadmap, but they will help you move forward with clarity. They turn a blurry idea into something you can test, shape, and grow. You do not need to have it all figured out. What matters is that you begin. Momentum builds from small steps, and the path often becomes clearer as you go. Let your next move create the foundation for what comes next.

How to Engage:

Need help getting started or stuck along the way? Reach out to the Enterprise Studio—we're here to support you.

Taking Action at UVA: A Faculty-Oriented Checklist

You've explored ten ways to get started. Now here's a UVA-specific companion—practical steps you can take today. This table was adapted by Jim Zuffoletti based on conversations

with faculty founders and startup advisors. It pairs well with the ideas above and offers a more grounded to-do list for moving from insight to impact. Think of it as your local field guide.

Priority	Category	Action	When to Do It
1	Stakeholder Development	Seek mentorship from experienced entrepreneurs or faculty colleagues	Right now
1	Stakeholder Development	Build relationships with UVA's entrepreneurship support ecosystem (e.g., LVG, iLab)	All year
1	Stakeholder Development	Connect with UVA alumni founders relevant to your field	Right now
1	Stakeholder Development	Identify and engage a potential industry or clinical partner	Right now
1	Stakeholder Development	Find a collaborator—another faculty member, postdoc, or grad student	Right now
1	Stakeholder Development	Attend field-specific academic or industry conferences and make new connections	Right now
1	Stakeholder Development	Reach out to a UVA alum or former student working in a relevant industry	Right now
1	Stakeholder Development	Connect with stakeholders outside UVA (cold outreach is fine!)	Right now
1	Stakeholder Development	Present your innovation to a large organization and request feedback or collaboration	Right now
1	Stakeholder Development	Ask a UVA guest speaker, advisor, or visiting executive for feedback or support	During visits
1	Skills Development	Map your available resources and define your “affordable loss”	Right now
1	Skills Development	Practice your pitch with a colleague, student, or innovation advisor	All year
1	Product Development	Collaborate with others to create a prototype or proof of concept	Right now

1	Product Development	Make a small time or resource investment aligned with your risk comfort	Right now
1	Product Development	Read and apply lean startup or effectuation principles (e.g., affordable loss, patchwork quilting)	Right now
2	Stakeholder Development	Attend UVA-affiliated entrepreneurial networking events (e.g., LVG, iLab mixers)	All year
3	Funding	Present your venture to an early-stage investor, grant reviewer, or translational fund	Right now