SOE Framework

How to find the next Billion Dollar Idea.

By Xaver Lehmann

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE
Starting a new business? Not sure if people like it? Check out my step-by-step process.

The Author.

Over the past decade, I've built two AI startups.

The first, e-bot7, scaled to 130 employees across five European offices and was acquired by LivePerson Inc. (NASDAQ) for $60M. It was an incredible ride but also the one that led to my first burnout.

After taking time to recover, I jumped into my next venture: Vidlab7, an AI avatar company backed by EQT Ventures. It grew fast, but by the end of 2024, I had to step away again. This time, to protect my health.

I spent the next four months in South Africa, working on social projects, helping local families, and reconnecting with the parts of myself I had ignored for years.

That's where The Honest Founder was born.

A desire to help ambitious people build the life they always wanted without losing themselves in the process (I learned that the hard way).

Add me on my channels for exclusive content and updates:
- Linkedin
- Website
- Substack Newsletter (One actionable article every week on startups, mindset and growth)

Enjoy the framework!

Xaver Lehmann

How to find the next billion dollar idea.

Introduction.

THE THREE PILLARS OF SUCCESS

I launched products that were timely, relevant, and growing fast. I've also invested in companies like 1komma5° (now a unicorn) and Neotaste (valued at over €100M).

Whether I am building a new company or deciding on a new investment I use the exact same principles to validate the idea:

👉 **Signal "S"**
👉 **Obsession "O"**
👉 **Edge "E"**

Now I want to share this exact framework with you so you can find your next billion dollar idea.

1. Signal

Signal shows you what the world wants and needs before the rest of the world catches on.
It is the basis of the whole model.

Without a clear signal, it doesn't matter how obsessed or skilled you are.
If nobody wants what you're building, you're just wasting time.

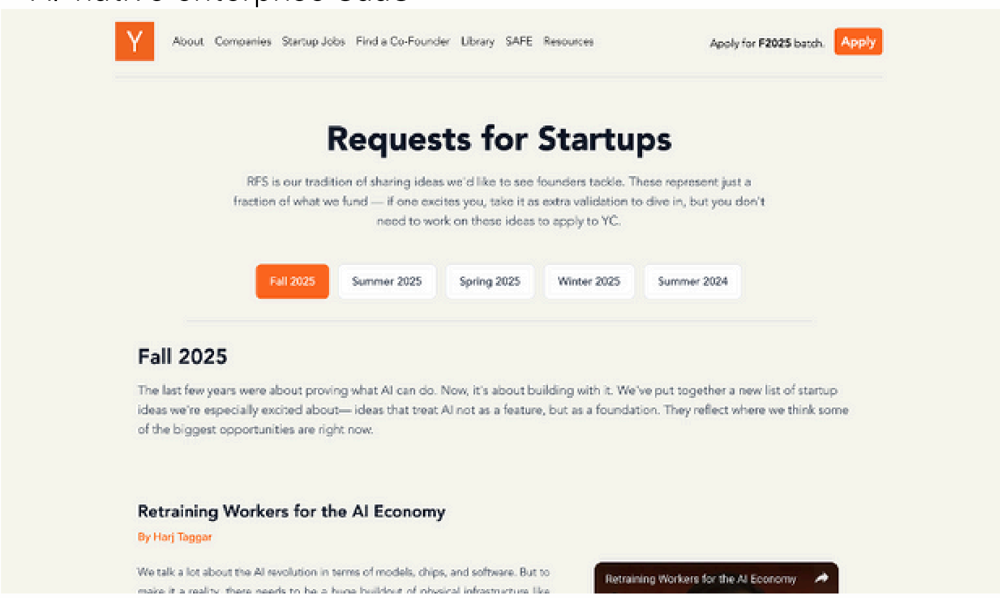
How can you find out what the worlds wants or needs?

 # Where are the worlds best VCs Investing?

The best VCs aren't guessing they're looking for patterns that show what's likely to work.

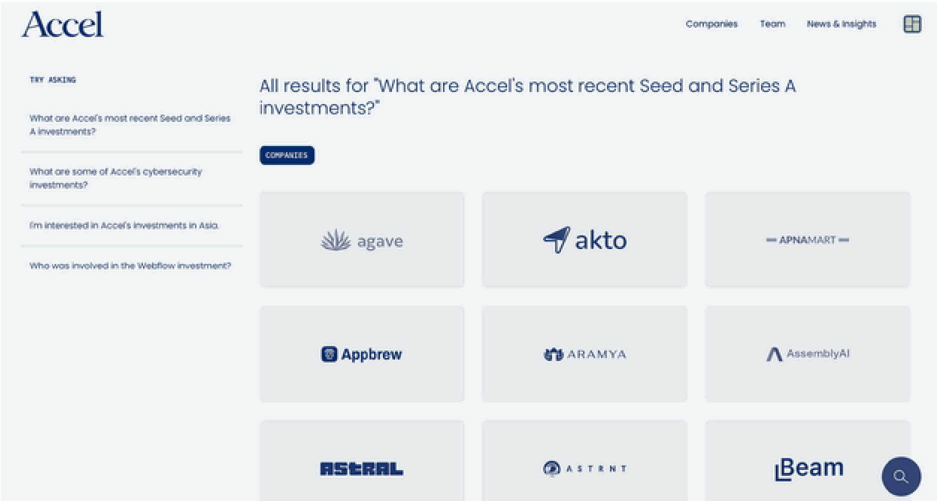
Track what firms like Sequoia, a16z, Accel, Creandum or Y Combinator are funding right now or want to fund in the future:

- Go to the Y Combinator RFS page they literally publish the ideas they want founders to build. It's a huge treasure if you don't know what to build.
  - YC Fall 2025, for example, wants:
    - AI tools for retraining workers
    - Hyper-scalable 10-person, $100B companies
    - Video generation as a native medium
    - Multi-agent infrastructure tools
    - AI-native enterprise SaaS



- Also check portfolio pages of top VC firms like Sequoia, a16z, Accel, Creandum or Index to see where they're investing.

Sometimes these companies have focused pages where you can see the most recent Seed and Series A investments like the page of Accel:

- 

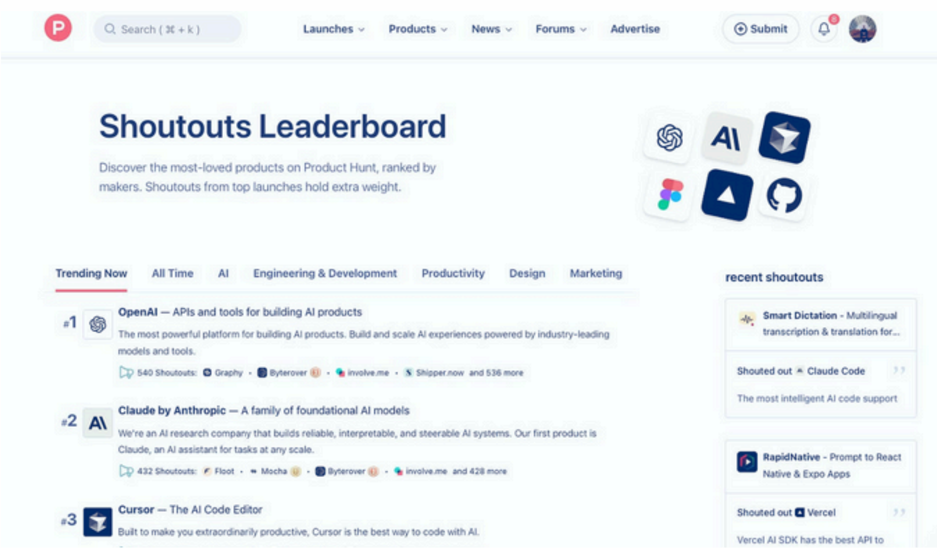
You don't have to copy these ideas but they show you where momentum and funding appetite already exist.

✱ Important! Be careful with old portfolio's - ensure you are looking at recent investments.

 # Use Product Hunt as a radar

Product Hunt is where early-stage builders launch new ideas. It's real-time insight into what's trending before it becomes obvious.

Specifically you can visit the Shootout Leaderboard: It's where the most trending products are based on different industries:



It is not only good to find trending products but also you can see what's getting traction and what's being ignored.

Also learn how others position their products.
It has helped me a lot in finding cool ideas I would have never explored otherwise.

 # Watch what serial founders are quietly building

The best indicator of where things are going?

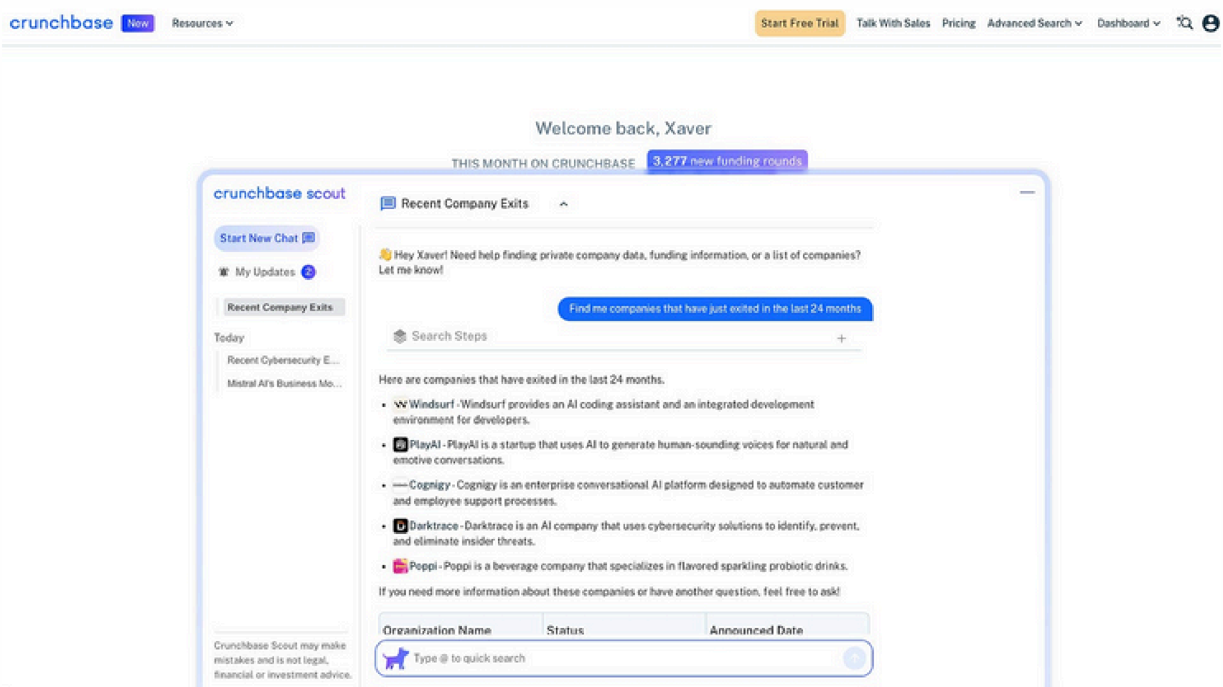
Look at what serial founders are working on.
These people:
Know how to time markets.
Don't waste time. They go deep where it matters.
Often stay stealthy until they've found traction.
So follow exited founders on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Substack.

How to find them?

Either you know them personally or through friends or you go to Crunchbase and just type in their AI search bar:

"exited companies in the last 24 months"

Add these founders on various channels.



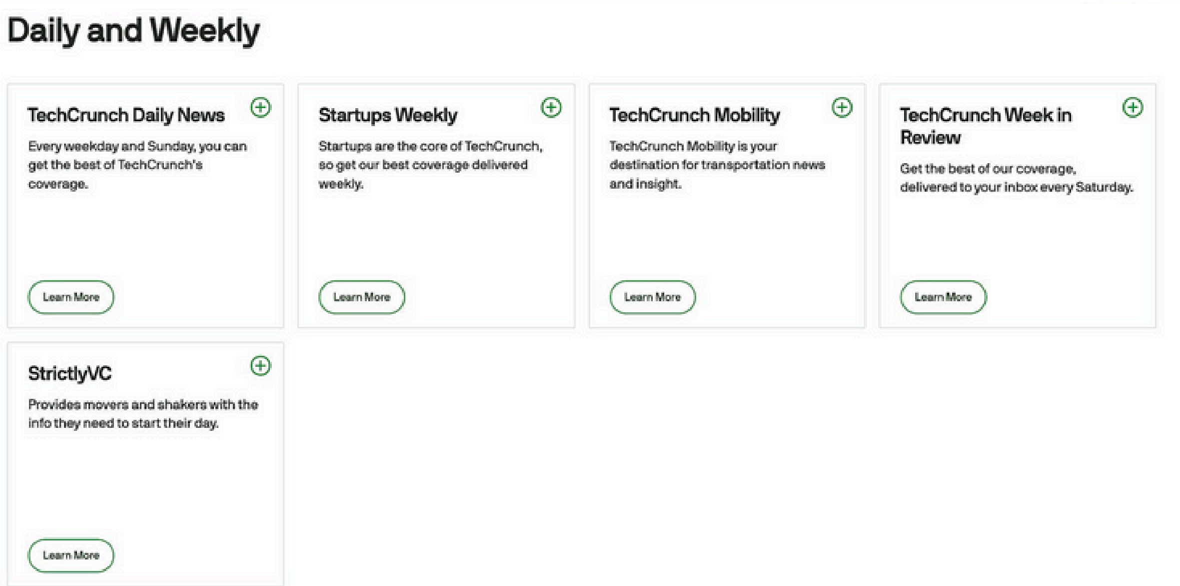
Read TechCrunch or similar founder magazines

I know this sounds old fashioned.
But TechCrunch from time to time published interesting articles and venture rounds that have just taken place.
It's a good place to get inspiration.

I would suggest to:

- Subscribe to the daily newsletter and startups weekly
- Follow TechCrunch writers on X/Twitter. They often spot stuff before it's published

It helps you pattern-match. And that helps you not miss the wave.



Use Crunchbase

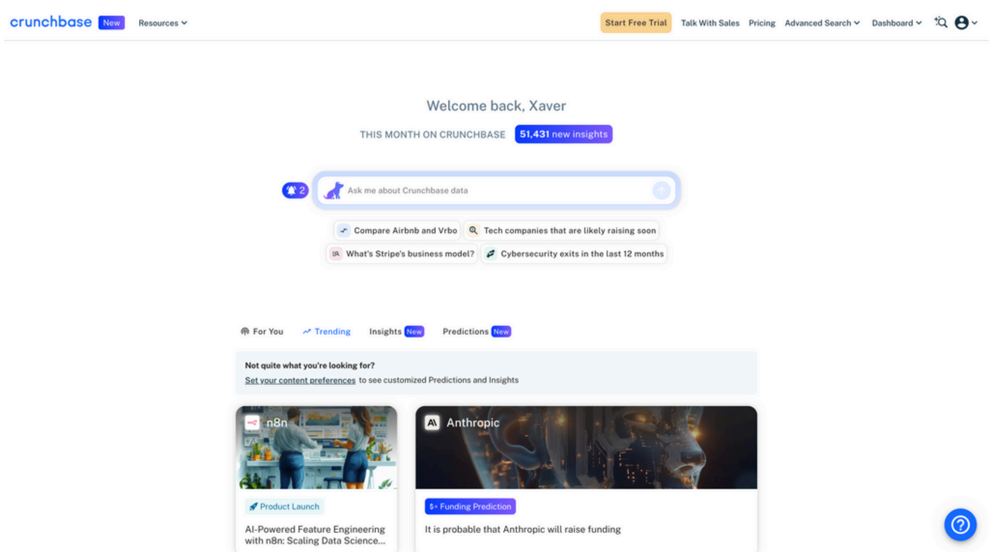
Crunchbase is one of the most powerful tools for founders and investors. It's a massive, constantly updated database of companies, funding rounds, and key people.

Think of it as your *treasure map* to what's happening in the startup world right now. You can track which sectors are heating up, who's investing where, and which founders are raising capital.

With the new AI-assisted search, it's easier than ever.
You can literally type:
"Which companies just closed their seed rounds?"
and get an instant, curated list.

Why this matters:

- Spot trends early: Identify industries and ideas gaining momentum.
- Find great companies: See who just raised and might be hiring.
- Validate markets: Check how much capital is flowing into a target space.



ChatGPT or similar LLM

Of course, feel free to use ChatGPT or other relevant LLMs in your process. They're great for idea generation and can spark ideas in new directions you might not have previously considered.

But keep in mind: the output can often be generic and detached from real market demand. I wouldn't rely on it as my primary source for startup ideas, but it can be a useful creativity boost. If you do use it, always cross-check the suggestions with your other research methods to make sure the idea aligns with what the market actually needs right now, not just what sounds clever.

Be as specific and extensive with you prompt as possible, for example:

"You are an experienced startup founder or VC.
Generate 10 startup ideas that are:
1. Based on current market shifts (regulation changes, new tech adoption, cultural trends).
2. In sectors with fast-growing demand and low saturation.
3. Solving painful, urgent problems for a clearly defined target audience.
4. Monetizable from day one, with potential for global scale.
For each idea, include:

- *The core concept in one sentence.*
- *The market insight it's based on (trend, shift, or pain point).*
- *The ideal first customer profile.*
- *A 1–10 score for: urgency, difficulty, and scalability.*
- *The biggest risk to success."*

By now you should have made a list of 15-20 high potential startups ideas.
You now have a good understanding what the market wants but
now you need to take it to the next level: You need the right idea for you.

Even if some of the worlds best VCs invest in AI Full Stack lawyers right now. I wouldn't build this type of company because I'm just not interested.
But longevity or finance? That's my playground.

This is where the "O" comes into play, for Obsession.

2. Obsession

You have to think deeply about what you actually want to build.
Ask yourself questions like:

- What problem would you keep working on even when it gets hard or boring?
- What topic keeps you up at night not out of stress, but curiosity?
- What would you read about on weekends or while on holiday?
- What doesn't feel like work, even when it is?

Some people already have a strong sense of what that topic is. For others, it's more of a search. It could be art, cooking, gaming, or watching chess streams. Everyone has different curiosities, usually more than one.

When I started out, I wanted to be an investment banker. I was good with numbers and had positioned my life toward finance. But I found an unexpected passion and interest for AI and software, and finance became a hobby. And once I saw the opportunity, I went all-in on building a company in the AI space.

The important thing is if you're not genuinely interested in what you're building, you'll quit when it gets hard. You won't go the extra mile, and that's exactly where breakthroughs happen.

For me, more recently, health and longevity became a deep focus. Not because I planned it, but because of personal experience. After going through a severe burnout, I started asking different questions about life. That shift sparked a new curiosity. I found myself reading about health, recovery, and human performance not out of obligation, but because I wanted to understand more.

Sometimes, your next chapter starts with a breakdown. And if you follow your curiosity, it can lead you somewhere powerful.

The same happened with the way I view building and scaling companies.
Today, I'm far more interested in bootstrapping and solopreneurship than I was a few years ago.

Why?

Because I've been through multiple funding rounds. I raised millions in venture capital. It was the right path at the time and I wouldn't have succeeded without it.
But now, I don't want dependencies.
Not on investors.
Not on employees.
Not on co-founders.

That's why my interests has shifted and I wouldn't have the same *obsession* to create the same company today as I did at the start of my founder journey.

3. Edge

Now we're getting to the top of the pyramid.

Why just the top?

Because in my view, you don't necessarily need a specific skill or edge to build a startup. When I founded my first company, I had no background in AI, no experience in software, and no clue about B2B.

What I did have was curiosity, naivety, and a strong urge to create something meaningful. Also I am someone who is able to focus for hours on one topic without getting distracted at all. And maybe just maybe that was my unfair advantage.

Others might have real technical skills.
Some know how to build beautiful products.
Some can paint, code, design, or sell.

But your edge doesn't have to be obvious. It can be as simple as the drive to figure things out and the courage to start anyway.

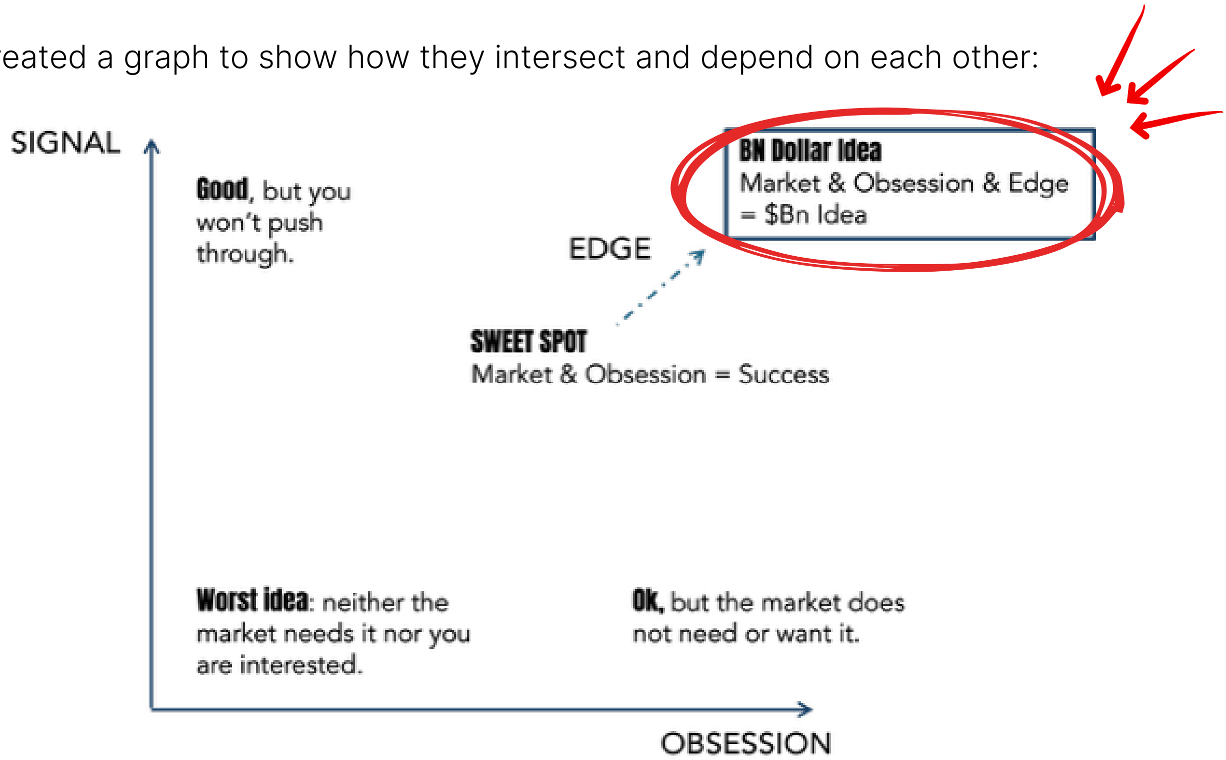
4. S.O.E

We've now covered all three elements of the framework:

Signal – what the market needs and wants.
Obsession – what you're deeply curious about or can't stop thinking about.
Edge – where your unique skills and advantages lie.

When these three align, you're no longer guessing, you're building in the sweet spot where opportunity meets passion and capability.

I've created a graph to show how they intersect and depend on each other:



<u>Signal (vertical axis)</u> is how much the market actually needs/wants your idea.
<u>Obsession (horizontal axis)</u> is how much you care about it and are willing to work on it when things get hard.
<u>Edge (top right quadrant)</u> is your unique skill/advantage, represented as an extra dimension that lifts an idea from "good" to a potential billion-dollar opportunity.

In the bottom left, you have the worst ideas. Things you don't care about and the market doesn't need. In the bottom right, you might be obsessed, but if there's no market demand, it won't go far. In the top left, there's market need, but without your obsession, you won't push through tough times.

In the top right, you hit the Sweet Spot where market need meets your obsession. And when you add Edge: your unique skill, network, or insight that's when you have a shot at creating a billion dollar idea.

5. Workbook

I have created a workbook for you so you can put everything we talked about to practice. You can start either at the bottom or the top of the pyramid.

Step 1 - Identify Signal (S)
What does the market want and need right now?

Instructions:

1. Use the research methods outlined above (Product Hunt, top VC portfolios, YC's RFS list, serial founder watch lists, and trend reports) to spot early market patterns.
2. From this research, write down 10 high-potential ideas you believe have strong momentum.

Ideas:

→ ______________________________

→ ______________________________

→ ______________________________

→ ______________________________

→ ______________________________

→ ______________________________

→ ______________________________

→ ______________________________

→ ______________________________

Step 2 - Define Y our Obsession (O)
What do you care enough about to stick with for years?

Instructions: Answer the following questions, reflect and be completely honest with yourself.

1. What topics would you still work on if you weren't being paid?

→ ______________________________

2. What problems frustrate you so much that you'd love to solve them?

→ ______________________________

3. What could you read about for hours without getting bored?

→ ______________________________

4. What do you talk about so passionately that people notice?

→ ______________________________

5. Of the market signals you found in Step 1, which overlap with your personal interests?

→ ______________________________

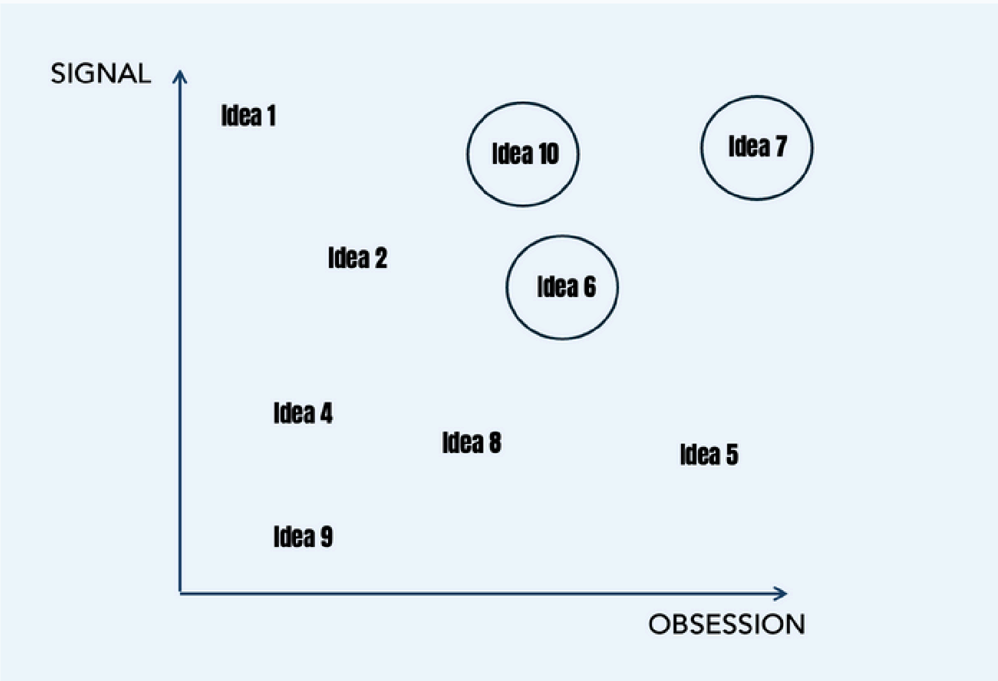
Step 3 - Identify Y our Edge (E)
What’s your unfair advantage?

Instructions: Fill in as many as apply.
Skills (e.g., coding, design, sales, marketing):
→ ______________________________
Network (who you know in key industries):
→ ______________________________
Experiences (unique career or life background):
→ ______________________________
Resources (capital, audience, distribution channels):
→ ______________________________
Traits (personal qualities like focus, resilience, storytelling):
→ ______________________________

Step 4 - The SOE Matrix

Instructions:
1. Draw a simple 2×2 grid like the below.
   Vertical axis: Market Need (Signal) - Low to High
   Horizontal axis: Personal Interest (Obsession) - Low to High
   Third dimension: Your Edge lifts ideas upward into breakout potential.
2. Plot each idea from Step 1 & 2 on the grid.
3. Circle the ones in the Top Right Quadrant (high Signal, high Obsession).

Here is an example how it could look like:



Step 5 - Narrow to Your Top 3 Ideas

From all the ideas you've plotted in the SOE Matrix, choose the three that excite you most and score the highest on your matrix (the circled ones):

→ ____________________

→ ____________________

→ ____________________

Step 6 - Validate Before You Commit

Before you invest months (or years) into building, you need proof that your idea can attract real customers not just likes or compliments.
For each of your top 3 ideas:

1. Find your target audience.
Who exactly has this problem?
Where do they hang out (online & offline)?

2. Talk to them.
Reach out to at least 10–15 people in your target group.
Ask open questions:
"How do you currently solve this problem?"
"What's the hardest part about it?"
"How much would you pay for a better solution?"

3. Run a test.
Build a simple landing page and/or Software piece with a clear value prop.
My go to would be Lovable.
Add a " Join Waitlist" or "Pre-Order" button.
Send it to your network and measure sign-ups.

4. Track response.
Are people leaning in, asking questions, and sharing it?
Or are they going quiet?

5. Decide your winner.
By this point there should be a clear winner and an idea that you feel confident in pursuing. If you still feel uncertain continue working on different part of the SOE framework and keep developing your ideas further.

P.S. If you need a second set of eyes to validate your idea or guidance to take it from concept to reality, you can always reach out to me directly here.

6. Case Study: How I developed my 3rd startup idea.

When I stepped away from my second company in 2024 for health reasons, I knew I needed space to recover. I spent several months in South Africa – slowing down, recharging, and trying to heal after years of pushing at full speed.

When I returned, the entrepreneurial itch was still there. I wanted to build something new. So I started exploring ideas with the same curiosity and drive that had fueled my first two companies. But there was a difference this time. I could still feel traces of burnout. The warning signs were there but still I was eager to find a new venture again.

Instead of starting with the “Signal” I started with what I can do well, so the tip of the pyramid “Edge”.

As an entrepreneur and investor, I have a high exposure to signals through investment opportunities, conversations with industry leaders, and market trends. That makes it easy for me to spot opportunities. Therefore I started with what I am good at.

1. Finding my Edge

Skills (e.g., coding, design, sales, marketing):
➔ Fundraising, go-to-market strategy, sales leadership, investor relations, startup scaling, strategic positioning, public speaking.
Network (who you know in key industries):
➔ Strong connections with top-tier VCs (EQT, KKR, Permira, Carlyle), founders of unicorn and high-growth startups, AI and SaaS experts, B2B Customers.
Experiences (unique career or life background):
➔ Built and exited an AI-first SaaS company for $60M, scaled from 0 to 130+ employees in 5 countries, founded and funded multiple ventures, early-stage investor in unicorns and €100M+ companies.
Resources (capital, audience, distribution channels):
➔ Access to capital, talent, large highly engaged Linkedin audience.
Traits (personal qualities like focus, resilience, storytelling):
➔ ability to execute quickly, sales, empathy, focus under pressure, resilience.

2. My Obsession

I focused on one question that is important to me:

What topics would you still work on if you weren't being paid?

➔ Anything with health, writing, coaching and mentoring entrepreneurs, investments, talking about my journey, longevity, fitness, sports

3. Aligning with Signals

By combining insights from all the sources mentioned above with my own interactions with VCs and other industry experts, I narrowed it down to my top 3:

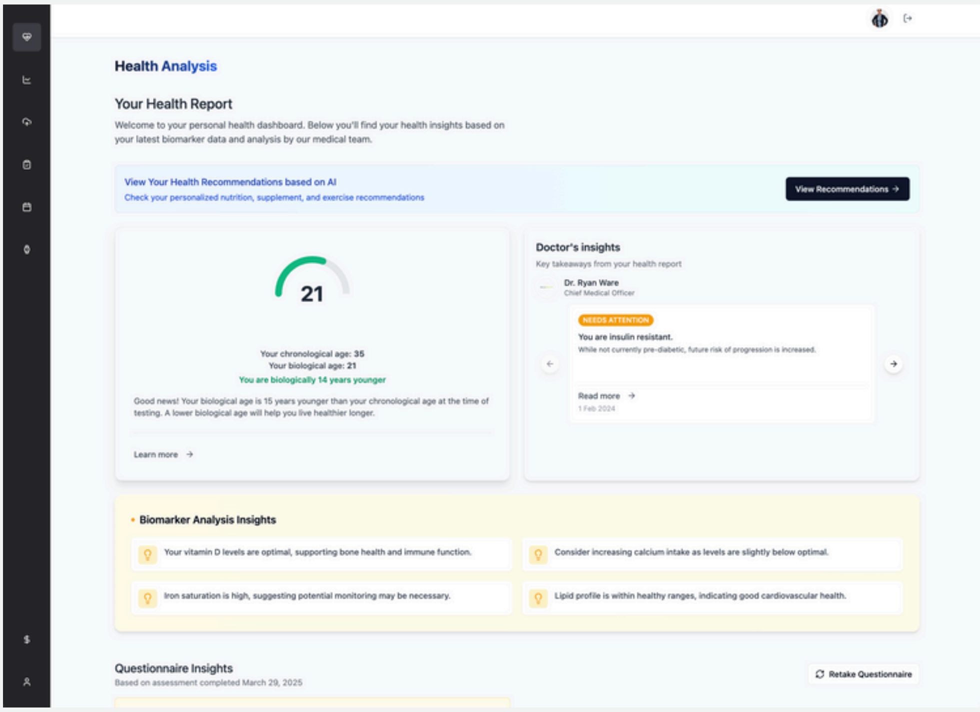
1. AI for Health & Longevity SaaS
A software platform that uses AI to analyze personal health data (wearables, bloodwork, lifestyle) and give tailored longevity recommendations.

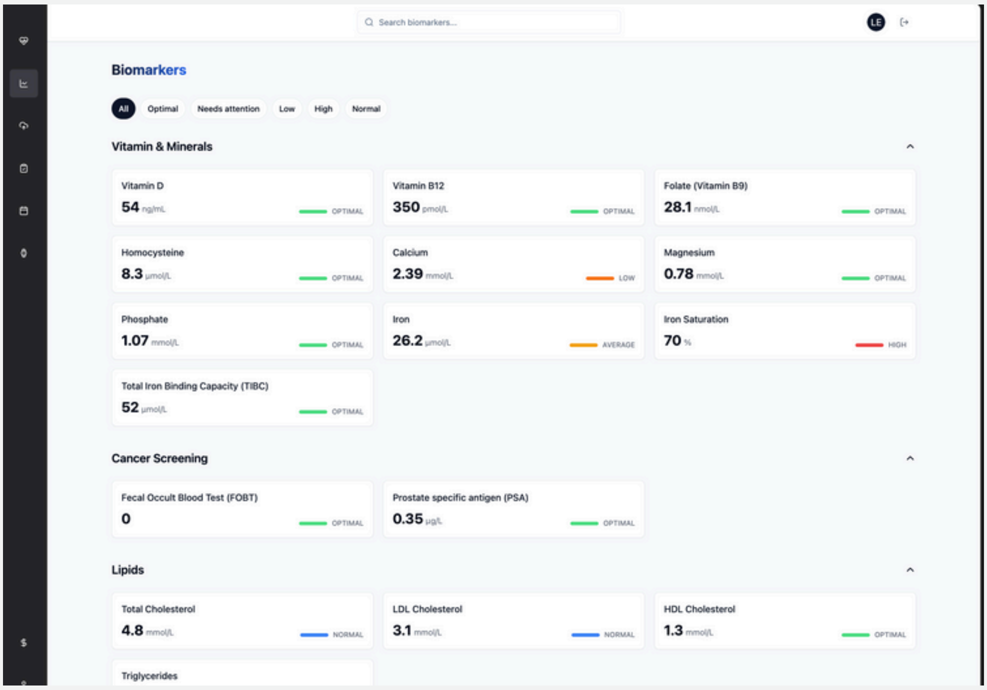
2. Founder Academy – Online Education & Community for Founders
A subscription-based platform with courses, live workshops, and resources on fundraising, scaling, and founder well-being. You become the face of the brand.

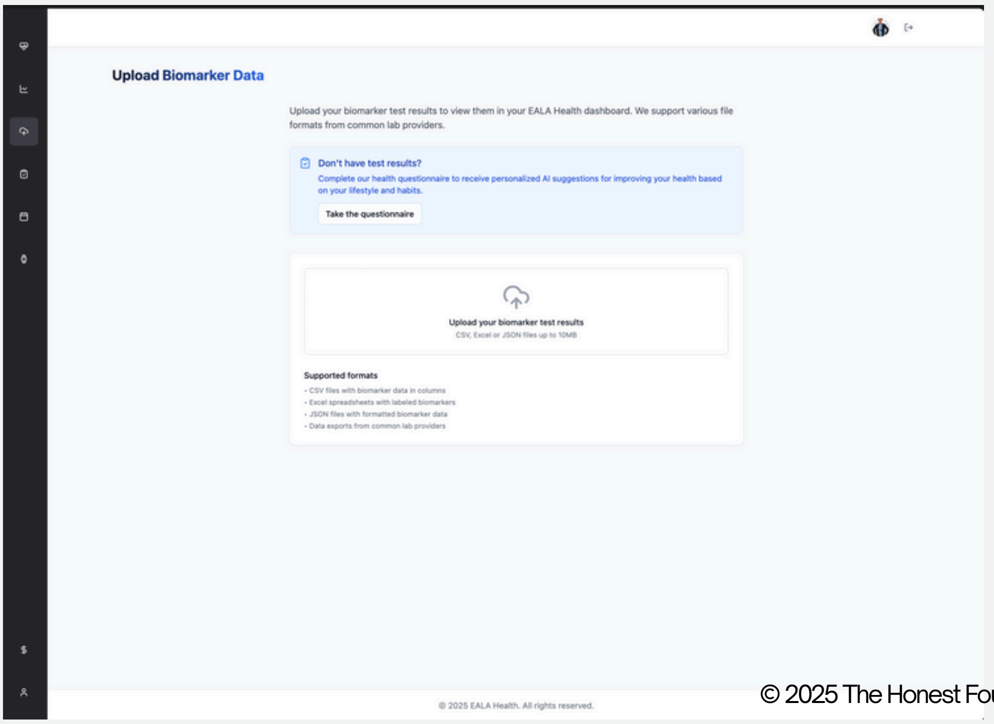
3. Startup Investor Syndicate
Launch a syndicate that invests in pre-vetted health, AI, and longevity startups you source via your network. Offer educational content for LPs.

I kicked off the first idea - AI for Health & Longevity SaaS, and quickly moved from concept to prototype. I built a working dashboard, spoke with potential clients and partners, and tested the concept in the real world. For speed, I used Lovable to create the prototype.

Here is the result (after roughly 4h of working on it):


Health Analysis
Your Health Report
Welcome to your personal health dashboard. Below you'll find your health insights based on your latest biomarker data and analysis by our medical team.
View Your Health Recommendations based on AI
Check your personalized nutrition, supplement, and exercise recommendations
View Recommendations
21
Your chronological age: 35
Your biological age: 21
You are biologically 14 years younger
Good news! Your biological age is 15 years younger than your chronological age at the time of testing. A lower biological age will help you live healthier longer.
Learn more
Doctor's insights
Key takeaways from your health report
Dr. Ryan Ware
Chief Medical Officer
NEEDS ATTENTION
You are insulin resistant.
While not currently pre-diabetic, future risk of progression is increased.
Read more
1 Feb 2024
Biomarker Analysis Insights
Your vitamin D levels are optimal, supporting bone health and immune function.
Consider increasing calcium intake as levels are slightly below optimal.
Iron saturation is high, suggesting potential monitoring may be necessary.
Lipid profile is within healthy ranges, indicating good cardiovascular health.
Questionnaire Insights
Based on assessment completed March 29, 2025
Retake Questionnaire


Search biomarkers...
LE
Biomarkers
All
Optimal
Needs attention
Low
High
Normal
Vitamin & Minerals
Vitamin D
54 ng/mL
OPTIMAL
Vitamin B12
350 pmol/L
OPTIMAL
Folate (Vitamin B9)
28.1 nmol/L
OPTIMAL
Homocysteine
8.3 µmol/L
OPTIMAL
Calcium
2.39 mmol/L
LOW
Magnesium
0.78 mmol/L
OPTIMAL
Phosphate
1.07 mmol/L
OPTIMAL
Iron
26.2 µmol/L
AVERAGE
Iron Saturation
70 %
HIGH
Total Iron Binding Capacity (TIBC)
52 µmol/L
OPTIMAL
Cancer Screening
Fecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT)
0
OPTIMAL
Prostate specific antigen (PSA)
0.35 µg/L
OPTIMAL
Lipids
Total Cholesterol
4.8 mmol/L
NORMAL
LDL Cholesterol
3.1 mmol/L
NORMAL
HDL Cholesterol
1.3 mmol/L
OPTIMAL
Triglycerides


Upload Biomarker Data
Upload your biomarker test results to view them in your EALA Health dashboard. We support various file formats from common lab providers.
Don't have test results?
Complete our health questionnaire to receive personalized AI suggestions for improving your health based on your lifestyle and habits.
Take the questionnaire
Upload your biomarker test results
CSV, Excel or JSON files up to 10MB
Supported formats
• CSV files with biomarker data in columns
• Excel spreadsheets with labeled biomarkers
• JSON files with formatted biomarker data
• Data exports from common lab providers
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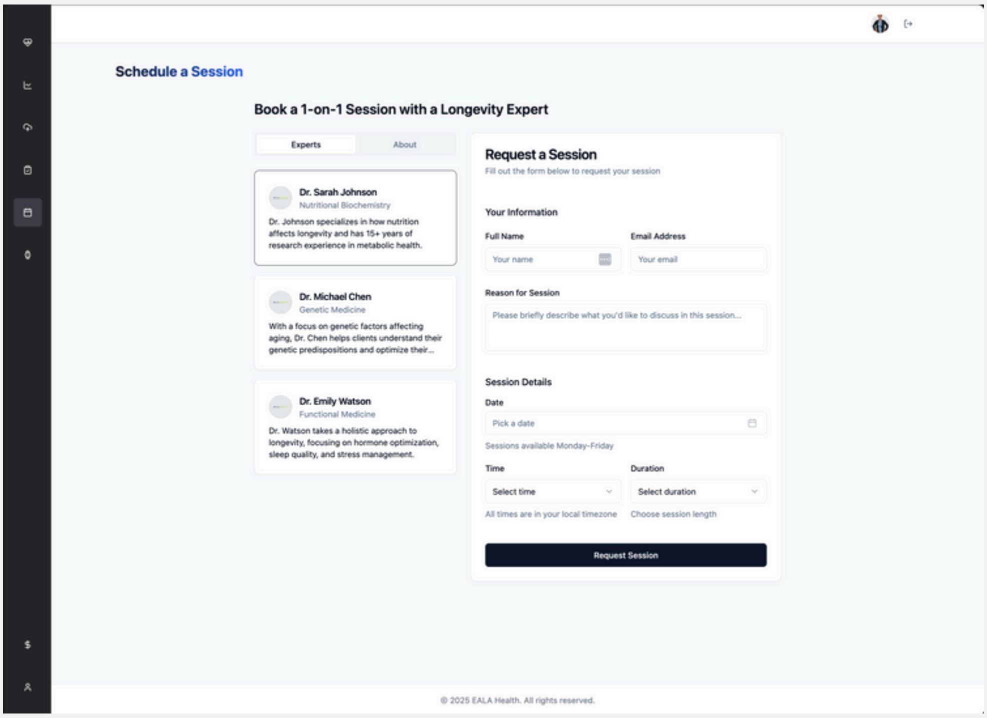
Schedule a Session
Book a 1-on-1 Session with a Longevity Expert
Experts
About
Dr. Sarah Johnson
Nutritional Biochemistry
Dr. Johnson specializes in how nutrition affects longevity and has 15+ years of research experience in metabolic health.
Dr. Michael Chen
Genetic Medicine
With a focus on genetic factors affecting aging, Dr. Chen helps clients understand their genetic predispositions and optimize their...
Dr. Emily Watson
Functional Medicine
Dr. Watson takes a holistic approach to longevity, focusing on hormone optimization, sleep quality, and stress management.
Request a Session
Fill out the form below to request your session
Your Information
Full Name
Your name
Email Address
Your email
Reason for Session
Please briefly describe what you'd like to discuss in this session...
Session Details
Date
Pick a date
Sessions available Monday-Friday
Time
Select time
Duration
Select duration
All times are in your local timezone
Choose session length
Request Session
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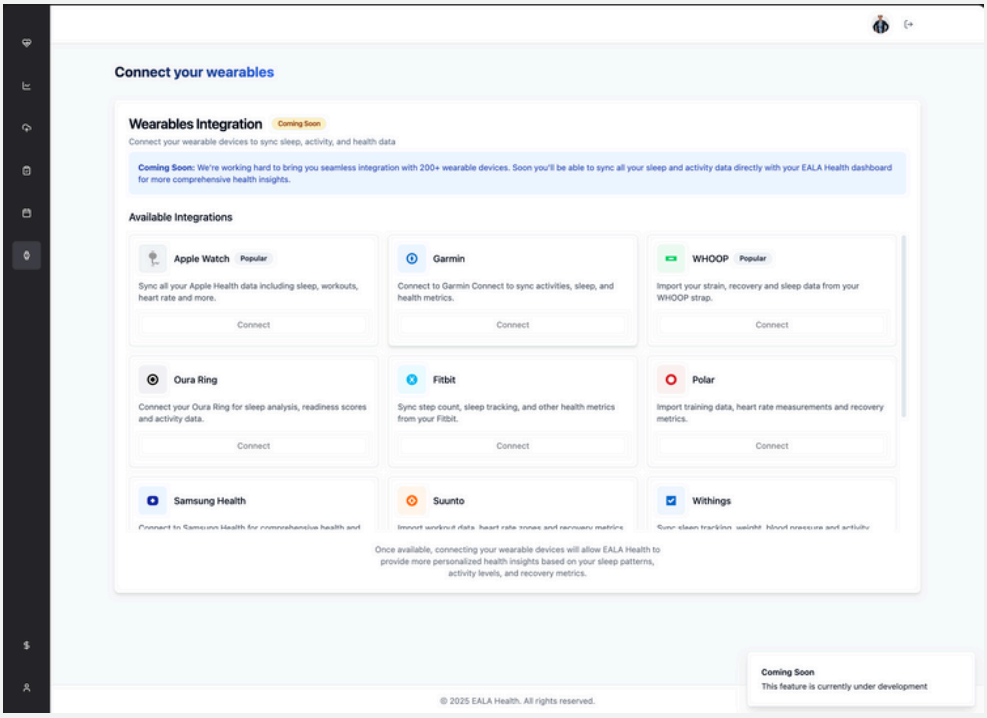
Connect your wearables
Wearables Integration
Coming Soon
Connect your wearable devices to sync sleep, activity, and health data
Coming Soon: We're working hard to bring you seamless integration with 200+ wearable devices. Soon you'll be able to sync all your sleep and activity data directly with your EALA Health dashboard for more comprehensive health insights.
Available Integrations
Apple Watch
Popular
Sync all your Apple Health data including sleep, workouts, heart rate and more.
Connect
Garmin
Connect to Garmin Connect to sync activities, sleep, and health metrics.
Connect
WHOOP
Popular
Import your strain, recovery and sleep data from your WHOOP strap.
Connect
Oura Ring
Connect your Oura Ring for sleep analysis, readiness scores and activity data.
Connect
Fitbit
Sync step count, sleep tracking, and other health metrics from your Fitbit.
Connect
Polar
Import training data, heart rate measurements and recovery metrics.
Connect
Samsung Health
Suunto
Withings
Once available, connecting your wearable devices will allow EALA Health to provide more personalized health insights based on your sleep patterns, activity levels, and recovery metrics.
Coming Soon
This feature is currently under development
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Even though I decided not to pursue this idea further for health reasons (returning burnout symptoms), I shifted my focus to an adaptation of the second idea, *building a community and helping founders by openly sharing my journey and lessons learned through The Honest Founder newsletter*.

What I offer:

- **The Honest Founder Newsletter.** A community of 20,000+ founders, CEOs, and operators. Through raw, powerful, and unfiltered weekly stories, I share how I built a $60M business - so you can do it too. Subscribe here.

- **1:1 Coaching.** For founders and CEOs: whether you're feeling stuck, want to raise capital, or need clarity on your next move. Reach out here if you need help.

- **Flagship fundraising course.** This course gives you the exact playbook I used to raise $40M+ from top-tier VCs like EQT and helped other founders raise $100m+ without burning out. Use the code "thehonestfounder" for a 30% discount.

I hope this framework has given you the tools to you explore, reflect and discover your passion to kick start your founder journey!

All the best,

Xaver Lehmann

Want more insights like these?

All my frameworks and courses.

CHECK OUT WEBSITE