

Did somebody say this was going to be easy?



Entrepreneurship is tough, brave and courageous on the part of the entrepreneur. It starves you of precious personal and family time, wholeheartedly drains both your savings and mental health and, in many cases, places you and your family in a vulnerable (financial) position as you are effectively risking one of the families income streams. Putting yourself in that position isn't for the faint-hearted and won't be something that many people would experience in their lifetime, but certainly, for those with lived experience of gambling harms (or any other addiction), it's a position we often used to put ourselves in at the height of our addiction.

Therefore those who have struggled with addiction do have some appreciation of the struggles of entrepreneurship I would suggest (perhaps without initially realizing it). It is also why, in my opinion, those who have struggled with addiction but have had an extended period of abstinence should absolutely consider using their lived experience to bring about awareness, and hope for others and contribute to building a more tolerant, kind and understanding society. This is a perfect antidote to the stigma that many of us and our families face when there is an 'addict' in the family.

One way you might contribute to bettering society is through the establishment of an organisation, where your lived experience is central to its mission. That's not to say the organisation should be all about 'you', but instead, 'reflections' from your experience. It is with this experience, as highlighted earlier, tips the probability of success very slightly in our favor as entrepreneurs.



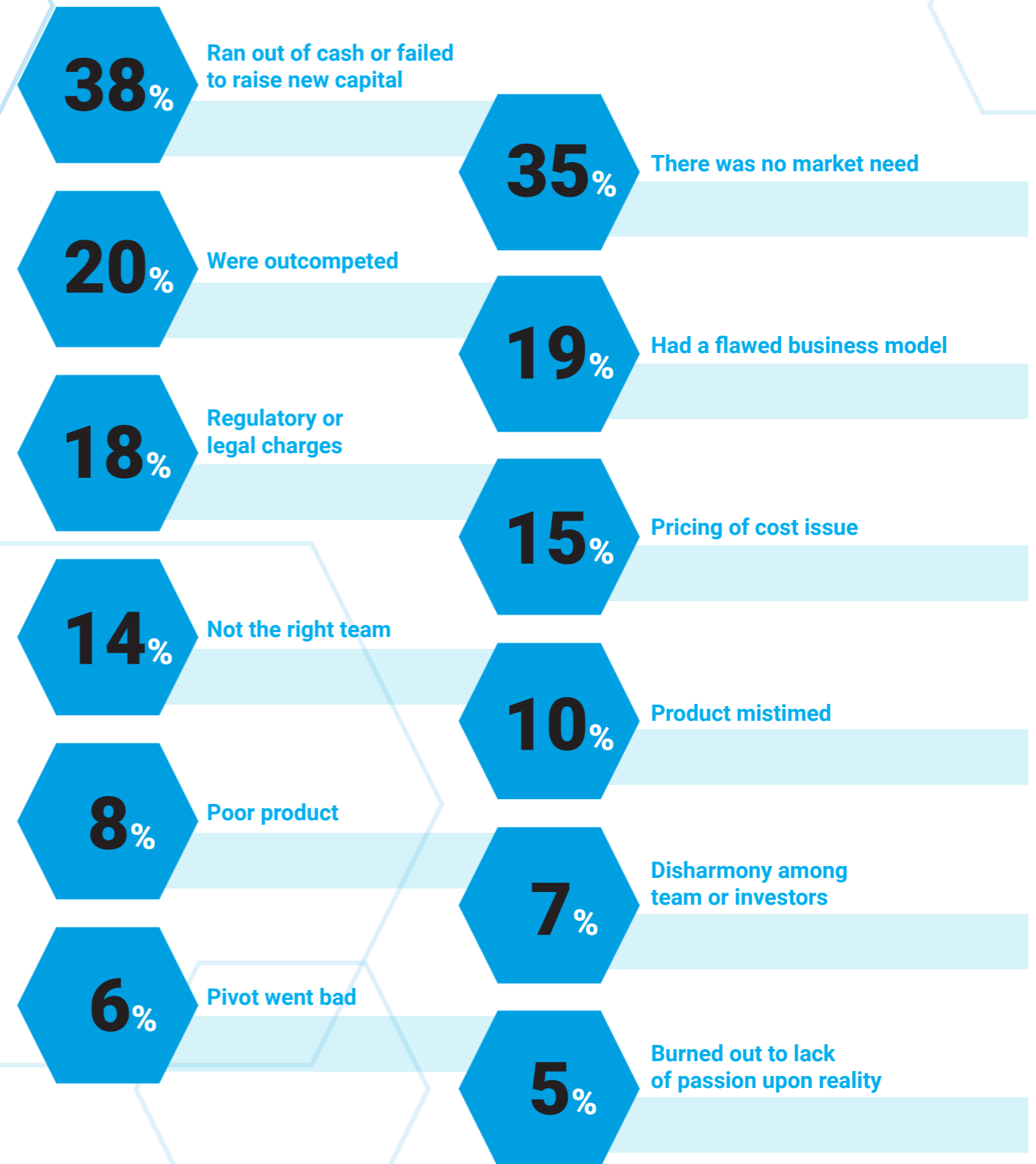
I am not and don't claim to be a leadership guru, growth expert or somebody seeking the limelight. In fact, the limelight is something I have wholeheartedly shone away from over the past ten years, as talking about my addiction, while important is incredibly painful. To me, it's like reopening a scar, especially for my partner, my family, my loved ones and myself. I am instead, just a regular guy whose life was turned upside down ten years ago due to an addiction, but fortunately, given my career and experience, I have been fortunate to use that lived experience, I believe for the greater good. I hate and walk away from conflict, try not to get caught up in politics and always prefer to gravitate to positive people whom I consider gracious and humble. This approach has helped me hugely over the years and is something I would absolutely advocate.

So following that introduction, this blog is some reflections and a bit of a self-critical analysis of how my lived experience has enabled me to continue working in the third sector, post-addiction.



A good friend and wise mentor said to me when I started working with the gambling sector about ten years ago 'Lee, what is the problem you are looking to solve'. A statement that they repeated when we founded ESG Gaming. Another good friend and wise mentor has said repeatedly to me, 'Lee, if anybody else is doing anything else remotely similar to what you plan, then walk away'. These two statements have guided how I have approached establishing new organisations to create social impact. Another thing I continue to do and not something you hear from many self-proclaimed gurus, is having at the front of my mind a checklist, of why organisations fail.

The United Kingdom's Business Insolvency Helpline suggest these are the top reasons 60% of businesses fail in the United Kingdom in the first three years of trading:

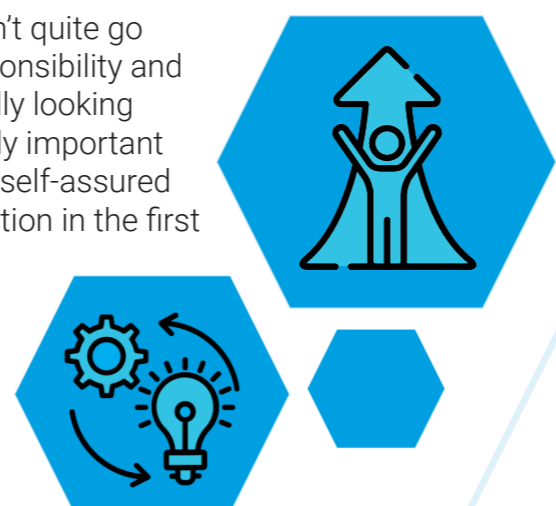


The broader Third Sector, in particular in the United Kingdom, is a hotbed for entrepreneurship, and rightly so.


Over the past ten years, five organisations of note have had incredible success in the gambling sector, which had been sustained for ten years (or more in one case) and the best thing, is these organisations are led by leaders with lived-experience. Every Third Sector organisation is born by a founder with a passion for improving society and that founder has a lot of plates to keep spinning to achieve success (and I'll share my definition of success shortly). That said, as we see across many start-up organisations, passion alone does not guarantee success as plates will be consistently dropped on our journey, but it is how you respond to these breakages that shapes your organisation's probability of breaking through the initial and perilous first three years. Looking at the list above as to why organisations fail, I believe everything 100% is under your control as an entrepreneur, and where it might not immediately seem obvious this is the case (i.e. regulatory or legal changes), a determined entrepreneur will always come up with a Plan B to keep their organisation financially sustained and delivering social value. These personal challenges will really define you as an entrepreneur and if you happen to have lived experience, perhaps from an addiction, you'll be more resilient than you imagine and more resilient than most. Surrounding myself with humble, insightful, independent mentors whom have walked in your shoes as a founder and had sustained success is something else I would absolutely advocate.

The challenge with society today is that when something doesn't quite go in our favour, some of us might tend to avoid any sense of responsibility and place that failure at the door of others. This is instead of critically looking at ourselves and our behaviours. This self-reflection is especially important for those with lived experience as some of us do have inherent self-assured behaviours, which perhaps might have contributed to our addiction in the first place. However, I believe it is these self-assured behaviours if known, shaped and guided will again tip the probability of success in the favour of an entrepreneur with a previous addiction. Always seeking feedback, being open to acting on that feedback and continuous professional learning and study is another thing I would advocate to tip the balance of success.

Despite what some might say, securing funding within the current RET system is a considerable challenge. With the Levy system being introduced, I sense that the challenge will increase further based on my experience of fundraising and leading services within the community, apprenticeship and criminal justice sectors. However, the irony is that no organisation should be closing or be at risk of closure due to a lack of funding in the gambling support sector, especially when we have encouraged those with lived experience to take the brave step to establish organisations. There are a number of things to consider here and the Gambling Commission and operators in particular have done their best and really stepped up. I'll write more about funding in my blog next week and do a further blog on Lived experience (w/c 14 August) as both are complex. However, we are not putting people on Mars and from my point of view, there are some immediate considerations that some (i.e. our principal commissioner in this space) might wish to consider to bring support to those entrepreneurs with lived experience who are establishing organisations today.




As I say, I am not claiming to be some sort of guru, but other questions I continually pose to myself which have helped me on my journey include:

 Consider the Business Insolvency Helpline factors for failure. How are you, personally as a founder, mitigating against these. Plates will be dropped, immediate success is false and how you respond to your dropped plates is completely in your control.


What in-depth research have you conducted around the need for your product or service; how have you defined the intended social impact and success and how does it complement (and not duplicate) work already in this sector. Additionally is your work anchored to a wider strategic plan for the sector, if not, don't do it.



 What is your Plan A, B, C and even Plan D for income generation and relationship management. Don't assume you will get traction where others have. Income diversification is important as many will tell you, but for the first three years, any income is good income provided there is no influence from the funder. In the Third Sector world, we are moving from what we describe as Corporate Giving (the current RET system) to Commissioning (Levy). These are very different approaches.


Having a broad church of advisors, non-executive directors or trustees is important, but how many have actually walked in your shoes as founder. Be mindful that the world is full of experts who are the complete opposite of that



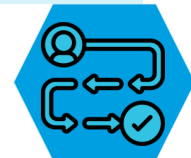
 Always trust your gut. I haven't always done this and wished I had sooner in some cases.

Focus on less to achieve more, don't be afraid to say no and avoid overstating. Again I have struggled with this.



 Always have an enabling or strategic plan appropriate to your organisation's size and complexity. For many start-ups a four-pager plan, with deliverables and an income plan should be enough. Don't overcomplicate this, which I have done previously.

Finally have fun and enjoy the journey. It is tough as suggested earlier so consider surrounding yourself with people who really have walked in your shoes and are solutions focused.



This list could go on forever, and many experts will undoubtedly have views. I am just sharing what has worked for me over the past thirty-two years and what I am learning now as I complete my MBA and journey with Virgin Start Up as a mentor.