

# How to turn your startup dream into reality

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In 2012, Matt McCann came up with the idea for a website that uses crowdsourcing to. McCann, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheeled walker, was intent on using his computer expertise to collect information on the accessibility of places like restaurants, hotels and tourist attractions around the world. Four years later, all his hard work has taken shape, as is scheduled to launch this month. From inception to launch, McCann and O'Neill have experienced just about every stage of launching and building a social enterprise project. They shared the valuable lessons they've learned on their journey so far.

### **Listen to Advice (Even the Critics)**

During the four years they've been working on Access Earth, McCann and O'Neill say they've received no shortage of advice. "The worst assumption you can make is to think you can do this all on your own," McCann said.

But keep in mind that there's no one-size-fits-all solution to the different problems that startups face, and don't be surprised if you also get some constructive criticism. After working hard on a project, it's never fun to get negative feedback. It can, however, help you improve the quality of your product in the long run.

"That's going to work for you, and don't get disheartened when someone tells you something you don't want to hear," O'Neill said. "That ends up being some of the best advice."

### **Be Flexible**

Founders of a startup are pulled in a lot of different directions. McCann, for example, admits that he sees a lot more of Access Earth's lawyer than he

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expected. At the same time, he's been racing to get the right logo redesign from a graphic designer before the launch. "There are so many moving parts," McCann said. "We started out with just the two of us, but now there are so many people with different and different commitments."

McCann recommends trying to work with individuals and organizations that have experience with startups so that they have a baseline understanding of your project from the start.

And, it's not just your schedule that needs to be flexible. After spending lots of time on a project, it's easy to get attached to certain aspects of it, but you have to be willing to make changes if they're in the best interest of your product.

The Access Earth team experienced this first hand after feedback from the beta version of their site caused them to make a big change. In the beta, Access Earth marked businesses as either accessible or not accessible, but in reality, everyone's accessibility needs are unique. That's why on the new version of Access Earth, users will enter their specific accessibility requirements, which the site will then use to populate a list of accessible businesses based on the needs of each individual user.

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## **Put Yourself Out There**

Contests, like, are not merely ways for startups to win some funding. They are amazing opportunities to meet peers and experts in the field—and learn from them. McCann and O'Neill took Access Earth to the world finals of the

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2014 and then the 2015, where they represented Ireland. They didn't win that social entrepreneurship contest, but they did make an important connection with one of the judges who has since become a mentor.

It may sound obvious, but it's smart to surround yourself with people who know things you don't. O'Neill recommends participating in similar contests or joining entrepreneurship groups in your school or community. " You get lots of expertise, and it opens your mind in terms of what it takes to succeed," he said.

## **Be Resourceful**

In the early days of Access Earth, McCann and O'Neill met a lawyer who did pro-bono work on behalf of startups. Arrangements like this can help ease the burden when you're starting out.

Access Earth has also been resourceful when it comes to marketing. O'Neill recommends talking to the media as much as possible to get your vision out there. Even though they hadn't even launched, they were already featured in places such as and.

McCann and O'Neill both admit that their journey with Access Earth hasn't been easy, but it's been rewarding. The biggest piece of advice they offer to others in their shoes: ". "

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