

## ENDING THE POVERTY CYCLE NOW WITH EARLY OWNERSHIP

March 14, 2012 by sciencedriven

Early ownership is one way for some middle-schoolers to break the cycle of poverty. At a time when their traditional earning power is far undervalued relative to their competencies and talents, resourceful adolescents may start and run a sole proprietorship. Parents can cultivate and encourage their adolescent's healthy decisions to express generative independence. For student-centered middle schools, early ownership—combined with authentic learn-by-doing/making—can comprise the 21<sup>st</sup>-century repurposing of home economics/shop. Building on the importance of peer interactions, cooperatives of early-owner businesses can enable working together as needed, while letting each owner run a self-sufficient business as best suits them.

As the first in my family to get an advanced degree, I recall with gratitude the patience of my parents; they didn't berate me to get a "real job". Independent graduate and post-doctoral research gave me the freedom and responsibility to carve my own path, to design and execute my own experiments, to discern candidly what I know from what I didn't know. (All of this would have been impossible, of course, without the teamwork of colleagues and mentors.) Nevertheless, the satisfaction and independent self-sufficiency of owning my decisions would not recur until I decided 8 years ago to start my own business. As the only person accountable for the performance of my sole proprietorship, the buck truly stops with me.

**MIGHT SUCH INDEPENDENT OWNERSHIP SERVE AS A PIVOT/SEA-CHANGE THAT BREAKS THE CYCLE OF POVERTY?** Let's imagine a scenario of one early owner, a 13-year-old who starts a business—not for the purpose of rapid growth and/or personal wealth creation, but with a mission of providing at a fair price a service that addresses an unmet need in the early owner's community. Until the early owner is 15, the revenues from the business are almost the only way that s/he can earn money. (Youth soccer referees are a notable exception.) Through high school, early owners run their own businesses, instead of working in part-time jobs, contribute to the family's ability to rise, and gain the ability to make independent build/buy/co-create decisions, albeit at a small scale. In preparation for college, early owners can come up with location-free or portable versions of their businesses – these become self-determined work-study experiences. By their senior year, the difference is telling and dramatic. Instead of hitting the job market burdened with six-figure debt and competing against their classmates for unpaid internships and entry-level jobs, our early owner has an 8-year-old self-sufficient independent business. S/he could even be in a position to be a 21-year-old hiring manager, who never has to ask anyone for a job. Admittedly, our early owner is not every adolescent. Nevertheless, what is striking is that there is no prerequisite for inherited or unearned capital, old-boy networks or helicopter parents.

All that is needed are human traits and qualities: an ability to perceive unmet need, inventiveness as to how to address it, responsiveness to customers/clients, and persistence to make the business work.

Ownership doesn't have to be early. (My first foray into business ownership came within months of my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.) If the scenario we imagined intrigues you, please consider trying it out yourself. Do you. I heard someone cite an estimate that 75,000,000 Americans want to start their own business within the next 5 years. You are not alone. If you are afraid to try, buy the original Broadway version of Rodgers & Hammerstein's "Whistle a Happy Tune" on iTunes. Timeless advice.

### Related Material

**Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society** by John Gardner.

Societal renewal and ending the cycle of poverty through rising seem related. First written in 1963, this is beautifully written and timeless.

**Do You!: 12 Laws to Access the Power in You to Achieve Happiness and Success** by Russell Simmons

Please have a look at the chapter titles online. If they resonate, so will the text of the book.

**Founder Institute: How To Launch In 10 Steps With Less Than \$2,000**

<http://techcrunch.com/2010/08/29/founder-institute-how-to-launch-in-10-steps-with-less-than-2000/>

The steps are in the right order for a high-tech start-up; each owner may have a different approach to specific steps. The take home: Founder Institute's CEO Adeo Ressi shows you that you don't have to be wealthy to start a company. (<http://fi.co>)

## **4 Questions to Get from a Cool Idea to Early Ownership**

### **1. WHAT IS THE (FIRST) SERVICE I'M GOING TO SELL?**

*Avoid boiling the ocean. Even if you think your cool idea has the power to do so.*

### **2. WHO ARE MY CUSTOMERS?**

*Note: "Anyone who will pay" is not an adequate answer. The more specifically you define the customer whose pain point is exactly the service you are offering, the smoother your start-up will be.*

### **3. HOW WILL MY CUSTOMERS AND I CONNECT?**

*Note: If your business is built on cultivating repeat customers and trust-based relationships, you won't need to keep finding as many new customers (but self-marketing never stops). The first step in building any relationship is a conversation to determine if there is overlap in intent.*

### **4. HOW WILL THE MONEY WORK?**

*Note: There is likely to be more than one good answer to this. Talk to several folks who have started their own businesses. Among these, SCORE is high-quality and helpful (<http://www.scoreboston.org/>) and their price is right.*