

Is This Problem Worth Solving?

A practical framework for evaluating startup ideas before you build

Problem

Evidence

Market

Decision

Start with the problem, not the product

A clever solution is not enough. First establish that a **painful, frequent, urgent and economically meaningful problem** exists.

Three different questions

1. Is there a problem worth solving?
2. Is our solution worth building?
3. Is this a business worth pursuing?

Do not collapse these into one score. A huge market can still contain a weak problem.

The Problem Worth Solving score

Score each dimension from **1 to 5** and apply the weight.

Criterion	Weight	What a 5 means
Problem severity	15%	Critical / painful
Frequency	10%	Daily / continuous
Urgency	10%	Must solve now
Current cost	10%	Very expensive / risky
Existing workaround	10%	Already paying / building solutions
Willingness to pay	15%	Actual spending / commitments
Number of affected customers	10%	Large / growing market
Customer reachability	5%	Clear, inexpensive channels
Dissatisfaction with alternatives	10%	Customers actively seek better options
Structural trend	5%	Problem is growing rapidly

Calculate the score

$$PWS = \Sigma(\text{weight} \times \text{score})$$

Interpretation

Score	Meaning	Action
4.0–5.0	Very attractive	Strong candidate for validation
3.3–3.9	Promising	Investigate further
2.5–3.2	Uncertain	Gather substantially more evidence
1.8–2.4	Weak	Probably don't pursue
1.0–1.7	Very weak	Abandon unless assumptions change

The score is a decision aid, not a precise valuation.

The most important distinction: stated vs. revealed pain

Weak evidence

"Yeah, that sounds annoying."

"I would probably use that."

"Lots of people have this problem."

Strong evidence

"I spend €500/month on the workaround."

"I lose three hours every Friday doing this."

"We already built an internal tool for it."

Principle

Observed behaviour beats stated preference.

Add Evidence Confidence

A score without evidence can create false confidence.

Evidence	Typical confidence
Founder intuition	~20%
Online research	~30%
One customer says it hurts	~40%
Repeated interviews	~60%
Observed customer behaviour	~75%
Customer pays for workaround	~85%
Signed commitment / preorder	~90%
Customer actually pays you	100%

Track both numbers

Problem attractiveness: 3.85 / 5

Evidence confidence: 58%

→ The problem looks promising, but the next job is **validation**, not product development.

Kill criteria matter

A high total score should not hide a fatal weakness.

Treat these as warning gates

- **Severity ≤ 2** $\rightarrow$ probably not painful enough
- **Willingness to pay ≤ 2** $\rightarrow$ weak economic signal
- **No credible evidence of the problem** $\rightarrow$ hypothesis still unproven

Why?

A large market or fast-growing trend should **not compensate** for a problem customers do not care enough to solve.

Worked example: expense management

Hypothesis: Small companies waste substantial time collecting receipts, matching expenses and preparing reimbursement/accounting records.

Criterion	Score	Weight	Weighted
Severity	3	15%	0.45
Frequency	4	10%	0.40
Urgency	3	10%	0.30
Current cost	4	10%	0.40
Workarounds	5	10%	0.50
Willingness to pay	4	15%	0.60
Customer pool	5	10%	0.50
Reachability	4	5%	0.20
Alternatives	3	10%	0.30
Trend	4	5%	0.20
Total		100%	3.85 / 5

Verdict: promising problem; evidence quality still determines what to test next.

Evaluate ideas in three stages

1 · Problem

Severity · frequency · urgency · cost · workarounds · willingness to pay · market

Gate: Is the pain real and valuable enough?

2 · Solution

Value proposition · alternatives · feasibility · usability · switching costs · pricing

Gate: Is our approach materially better?

3 · Business

TAM/SAM/SOM · CAC · LTV · margin · defensibility · scalability · capital requirements

Gate: Can this become an attractive company?

What to validate next

Use the score to identify **the weakest high-impact assumption**.

Example

High PWS + low confidence in willingness to pay

→ Do not build the product yet.

→ Test pricing, preorders, paid pilots, or replacement of an existing paid workaround.

The goal of validation

Not to make the score look good.

The goal is to find out quickly whether the idea should survive.

A simple decision rule:

Attractive problem

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Credible evidence

→

Worth validating further

Large market ≠ valuable problem ≠ good solution ≠ good startup.

Further reading

- Y Combinator — *How to Evaluate Startup Ideas*
<https://www.ycombinator.com/blog/startup-school-week-1-recap-kevin-hale-and-eric-migicovsky/>
- Strategyzer — *How to Test Your Idea: Start With the Most Critical Hypotheses*
<https://www.strategyzer.com/library/how-to-test-your-idea-start-with-the-most-critical-hypotheses>
- Strategyzer — *Testing Business Ideas: Key Takeaways*
<https://www.strategyzer.com/library/testing-business-ideas-book-summary>
- Founder Institute — *How to Validate a Startup Idea*
<https://fi.co/insight/how-to-validate-a-startup-idea-a-step-by-step-guide-for-founders>

Takeaway

Before building a solution, prove that the problem is painful enough, frequent enough, urgent enough, and valuable enough that people already invest effort or money to solve it.

Score the problem

Score the evidence

Find the weakest assumption

Run the smallest useful test