

# Mike McDonald: Taking the safe option of risking everything on a startup!

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## FESTIVAL of INNOVATION SHOWCASE



When looking back at all the times I have been asked what it was that made me want to start a company I will admit there has always been a small sense of guilt to behind the usual answer. Things like “I really didn’t want to be in a big company” “I thought it was a great opportunity and couldn’t pass it up” or even “I just stumbled into it unknowingly” are all true elements that helped shape the decision and sound nice and brave but deep down I think it’s taken a while to really find out why I did it.

I grew up in Zimbabwe where the idea of “entrepreneurship” is scary, our economy hasn’t a good year in a while and there is a lot of uncertainty going around. I have to agree from the outside can look a little dire but the constant challenges seem to instil a weird sense of unbreakable optimism and creativity in everyone. From the people who sell frozen bottles of water at the traffic lights knowing that by lunchtime they will be thawed and amazingly refreshing to two of my school friends who used to buy McDonald’s cheeseburgers whenever they left the school and would on return sell them at 4 times the price having created a monopoly on fast food at boarding school. This creativity, however, was never labelled as entrepreneurship but rather just as “making a plan” and so no one was scared to do it because the step seemed smaller when in my opinion it was always just as bold and pretty much the same thing.

Throughout my time at University I had a heap of fun entering the Edinburgh Apprentice competition and fortunately met Selby Cary (now my co-founder and business partner) during one of the drinks receptions. Bonding over the common ground of where we grew up, we joined into a team and got knocked out in the first round having tried to sell ice-c smoothies without checking to see that the weather report would have suggested hot chocolate instead. A couple of years

later we came back and tried again with Selby managing to win the whole thing on an idea that became our first business of selling coffee cups with advertising on them. We used the prize money and a little investment we managed to get from one of the final judges and bought the first 5000 cups with a trial design to start selling. It took about 12 months until we realised that neither of us knew anything about advertising and we had sold fewer cups than coffees we had bought while trying to sell them.

We did manage to get a heap of people to join us and they helped to pivot the business into a different trajectory of using artwork instead of advertising and make the cups beautiful. We ran with the concept as long as we could but sadly it didn't stick and we eventually closed it down having learnt a lot of strange lessons and made a ton of great friends in the process.



Towards the end of my degree, Selby came up with another idea that we would use his masters' project that had designed a pretty cool self-balancing unicycle, add a camera to it and create an awesome cinematography land-drone for adventuring and exploring. In hindsight it must have seemed to everyone else like a "selfie robot" but it was exciting and we both really thought it was going to work. A few months in and thanks to a whole heap of support from the entrepreneur ecosystem and in particular Tom McGuire from SIE and Evelyn McDonald from Scottish EDGE who kept pushing us forward and encouraging us we managed to win our first competition, Wild Card EDGE in December 2017 where we were awarded £10,000 for our idea. It was a strange feeling in the weeks after that because finally all the slide decks and concepts we had presenting became real and I felt that someone outside of Selby and I finally believed this would work and were willing to put money down behind it. The next couple of months really did blur as I worked on one little problem at a time hoping that when they were all fixed I would have a finished product.

That was pretty much how I went about the whole process. I had university to do and was still considering and applying for "real jobs" but then passionately working away with Selby on our startup and going one problem at a time making a plan to fix it. As we kept going, more and more people bought into the idea and everything was going really well with just one big problem to address. I had been offered a graduate job with Jaguar Land Rover and having loved the internship and my family been so excited it seemed like a great opportunity, barring the one catch that I was too scared to commit to a 2-year grad scheme because it seemed like a long time. This feeling, coupled with a teammate who knew about the startup and told me that most likely case is "the startup will probably fail but still look great on your CV so you can always get another job after", I decided on the safe option of going full time into the startup. I'm still slightly sceptic

logic at the time but a startup that could go bust at any time just seemed like less of a commitment than a 2-year contract and yet 3 years on and a few timely pivots away from the selfie robot and here we are, just going a day at a time and making a plan.

A lot has changed from the initial one-wheeled land drone to a two-wheeled data collection robot with multiple business models from cinematography to security to where we are now – helping strawberry farmers reduce their waste. Each stage came with a whole heap of bad decisions and mistakes from filling in a VAT return completely in the negative because I confused debit and credit to cutting a hole in my flat wall when I didn't check the code properly and couldn't turn off the propellers on the device. The fun part is now looking back and wondering what could have made me think they were good choices and yes at the time they were the best I could make with the information I had available so can't really find one to regret.

For me, thinking forward and trying to imagine what the future will look like and which of these decisions will be wrong can make me feel really scared, and by imagining everything that could go wrong in years to come I can get overwhelmed. So, for now, it's one little step at a time and I know I will be fine as long as I keep making plans for the problems I have and not the ones I could have because they aren't here yet!

**– Mike McDonald, ZIVA Robotics**