



The Saunter Group

● Field Guide · Version 1.0

The Founder Task Architecture

Forty tasks that move you from idea to traction — and the failure each one is built to prevent.

“Evidence before effort. Demand before build. Proof before scale.”

Foundation



Problem & Market



Validation



Offer & Model



Proof & First Revenue



Foundation for Growth

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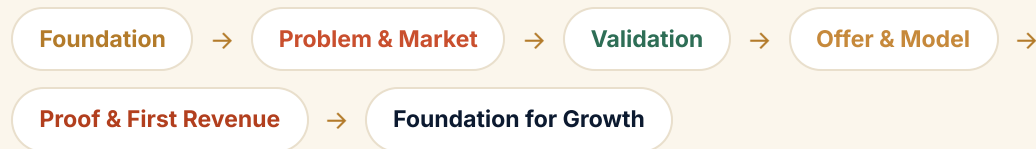
The map you were never handed

Most early ventures don't fail from a bad idea. They fail from a handful of predictable, preventable gaps — usually because the right things were done in the wrong order.

This field guide is the map. It lays out the forty tasks that carry you from an idea to real, paying traction — in the order that keeps you alive — and shows you exactly which failure each task is there to prevent. It is deliberately short. The goal is not to list everything you could do; it is to sequence the few things that, skipped, most reliably sink an early company.

THE FOUNDER ARCHITECTURE METHOD

Six stages, in the order that keeps you alive



How to read this guide

Part A — The Task Map

All forty tasks in order, by stage. Work top to bottom.

Part B — What to Do First

The same tasks sorted by priority, for when you can only focus on a few.

Deep-Dives

The most important tasks explained — what breaks if you skip them, what good looks like, and how to know you are done.

Why These Tasks Matter

The real-world failures behind the map, with the research they come from.

Why forty, and not a hundred

Plenty of “startup checklists” run to a hundred items or more, most of which belong to a company that has already found its footing. Before you have proven demand, that kind of breadth is a distraction. This guide concentrates on the forty tasks that get you from idea to first traction — and points you to what comes next once your foundation can bear weight.

PART A

The Task Map

All forty tasks in execution order, grouped by stage. Work top to bottom — but finish every Critical task in a stage before you lean on the next stage's work.

CRITICAL Do this — skipping it is how companies die.

HIGH Real risk if you rush or skip it.

SUPPORTING Helpful; keep it light at this stage.



Readiness & Foundation

You, your runway, and your reasons — before you spend a dollar.

PROTECTS YOU FROM — Founder burnout and running out of money before you have proven anything.

#	TASK	TIER	PREVENTS
1	Inventory your expertise, unfair advantages, and monetizable assets STRATEGY	HIGH	FC-03
2	Calculate your runway and define your walkaway number FINANCIAL CONTROL	CRITICAL	FC-01, FC-03
3	Assess your risk tolerance, time availability, and constraints honestly LEADERSHIP CAPACITY	HIGH	FC-03
4	Define why-this / why-now: personal vision and non-negotiables STRATEGY	HIGH	FC-03, FC-19
5	Establish a founder operating rhythm (focus, energy, anti-burnout) LEADERSHIP CAPACITY	SUPPORTING	FC-03
6	Line up mentors and honest advisors LEADERSHIP CAPACITY	SUPPORTING	FC-03, FC-16

Problem & Market

Find a real problem worth solving, and the person who has it.

PROTECTS YOU FROM — Building something nobody wants, and getting out-positioned by focused competitors.

#	TASK	TIER	PREVENTS
7	Surface problem areas where you have real insight or access STRATEGY	HIGH	FC-02, FC-06
8	Screen problems for pain intensity, frequency, and willingness to pay STRATEGY	HIGH	FC-02, FC-07
9	Commit to a single problem worth solving STRATEGY	CRITICAL	FC-02, FC-06
10	Define the specific customer and the job to be done GTM ENGINE	CRITICAL	FC-02, FC-17
11	Draft your Ideal Customer Profile hypothesis GTM ENGINE	HIGH	FC-02
12	Map alternatives and competition (including “do nothing”) STRATEGY	HIGH	FC-02, FC-06
13	Articulate your differentiation and point of view STRATEGY	HIGH	FC-02, FC-06

Validation

Prove demand before you build. You cannot validate what you have not defined.

PROTECTS YOU FROM — The number-one early-stage killer: pouring time and money into a product the market never asked for.

#	TASK	TIER	PREVENTS
14	Frame testable hypotheses: problem, customer, willingness to pay GTM ENGINE	CRITICAL	FC-02
15	Design your validation plan — who to talk to, what to learn GTM ENGINE	HIGH	FC-02
16	Run customer discovery conversations (listen for truth, not praise) GTM ENGINE	CRITICAL	FC-02, FC-17
17	Distinguish real demand signals from false positives GTM ENGINE	CRITICAL	FC-02
18	Set kill / pivot / persist criteria before you test STRATEGY	HIGH	FC-02, FC-19
19	Build the smallest test needed to learn (only if required) SYSTEMS	HIGH	FC-02, FC-13
20	Decide: iterate, pivot, or proceed STRATEGY	CRITICAL	FC-02, FC-19

Offer & Model

Turn validated demand into an offer that can actually make money.

PROTECTS YOU FROM — An offer that customers like but that never turns into a profitable, repeatable business.

#	TASK	TIER	PREVENTS
21	Define your offer: problem → outcome → mechanism GTM ENGINE	CRITICAL	FC-02, FC-07
22	Choose a simple business model (how you make money) STRATEGY	HIGH	FC-07
23	Set pricing anchored to value, not cost or fear FINANCIAL CONTROL	CRITICAL	FC-07
24	Understand your unit economics (cost to deliver, margin) FINANCIAL CONTROL	CRITICAL	FC-07, FC-01
25	Build a conservative financial model and runway plan FINANCIAL CONTROL	CRITICAL	FC-01, FC-14
26	Define “enough”: target revenue and break-even FINANCIAL CONTROL	HIGH	FC-01

Proof & First Revenue

Get paid before you scale. Revenue is the only validation that pays rent.

PROTECTS YOU FROM — Running the tank dry, and mistaking activity for a real, paying business.

#	TASK	TIER	PREVENTS
27	Make direct offers to validated prospects (sell the outcome) GTM ENGINE	CRITICAL	FC-01, FC-12
28	Handle objections and close your first customers GTM ENGINE	HIGH	FC-12
29	Collect payment or firm pre-commitments FINANCIAL CONTROL	CRITICAL	FC-01
30	Deliver with the simplest viable delivery system SYSTEMS	HIGH	FC-13, FC-17
31	Capture feedback and your first documented result GTM ENGINE	HIGH	FC-17
32	Set up money hygiene: account, bookkeeping, invoicing FINANCIAL CONTROL	HIGH	FC-01, FC-14
33	Track the few numbers that matter (cash, pipeline, delivery) DATA & DASHBOARDS	HIGH	FC-18, FC-01

Foundation for Growth

Build the architecture that lets you grow without breaking — then choose your path.

PROTECTS YOU FROM — Growth that outruns your foundation — the classic way a promising early company falls apart.

#	TASK	TIER	PREVENTS
34	Document your handful of repeatable core processes SYSTEMS	SUPPORTING	FC-04
35	Define your first KPIs and a weekly review rhythm DATA & DASHBOARDS	HIGH	FC-18, FC-03
36	Identify single points of failure (starting with you) STRUCTURE / PEOPLE	HIGH	FC-05, FC-03
37	Plan your first delegation or hire STRUCTURE / PEOPLE	SUPPORTING	FC-05
38	Cover baseline legal, compliance, and risk basics RISK & COMPLIANCE	SUPPORTING	FC-09, FC-20
39	Run the Readiness Self-Assessment (20-point check) CROSS-DOMAIN	CRITICAL	Your readiness check
40	Choose your next path: keep building, or advise others STRATEGY	HIGH	—

PART B

What to Do First

The same tasks, sorted by priority. If you can only focus on a few things, do the Critical tasks — in order. These are the ones whose failure modes are both common and most dangerous at the earliest stage.

— Critical — 14 tasks

Do these first, in order. If you can only focus on a few things, these are the ones whose failure modes are both common and most dangerous at the earliest stage.

#	TASK	AREA	PREVENTS
2	Calculate your runway and define your walkaway number	Financial Control	FC-01, FC-03
9	Commit to a single problem worth solving	Strategy	FC-02, FC-06
10	Define the specific customer and the job to be done	GTM Engine	FC-02, FC-17
14	Frame testable hypotheses: problem, customer, willingness to pay	GTM Engine	FC-02
16	Run customer discovery conversations (listen for truth, not praise)	GTM Engine	FC-02, FC-17
17	Distinguish real demand signals from false positives	GTM Engine	FC-02
20	Decide: iterate, pivot, or proceed	Strategy	FC-02, FC-19
21	Define your offer: problem → outcome → mechanism	GTM Engine	FC-02, FC-07
23	Set pricing anchored to value, not cost or fear	Financial Control	FC-07
24	Understand your unit economics (cost to deliver, margin)	Financial Control	FC-07, FC-01
25	Build a conservative financial model and runway plan	Financial Control	FC-01, FC-14
27	Make direct offers to validated prospects (sell the outcome)	GTM Engine	FC-01, FC-12
29	Collect payment or firm pre-commitments	Financial Control	FC-01

#	TASK	AREA	PREVENTS
39	Run the Readiness Self-Assessment (20-point check)	Cross-domain	Your readiness check

— High — 21 tasks

Real risk if you rush or skip them. Work them once the Critical tasks in your current stage are done.

#	TASK	AREA	PREVENTS
1	Inventory your expertise, unfair advantages, and monetizable assets	Strategy	FC-03
3	Assess your risk tolerance, time availability, and constraints honestly	Leadership Capacity	FC-03
4	Define why-this / why-now: personal vision and non-negotiables	Strategy	FC-03, FC-19
7	Surface problem areas where you have real insight or access	Strategy	FC-02, FC-06
8	Screen problems for pain intensity, frequency, and willingness to pay	Strategy	FC-02, FC-07
11	Draft your Ideal Customer Profile hypothesis	GTM Engine	FC-02
12	Map alternatives and competition (including “do nothing”)	Strategy	FC-02, FC-06
13	Articulate your differentiation and point of view	Strategy	FC-02, FC-06
15	Design your validation plan — who to talk to, what to learn	GTM Engine	FC-02
18	Set kill / pivot / persist criteria before you test	Strategy	FC-02, FC-19
19	Build the smallest test needed to learn (only if required)	Systems	FC-02, FC-13
22	Choose a simple business model (how you make money)	Strategy	FC-07
26	Define “enough”: target revenue and break-even	Financial Control	FC-01

#	TASK	AREA	PREVENTS
28	Handle objections and close your first customers	GTM Engine	FC-12
30	Deliver with the simplest viable delivery system	Systems	FC-13, FC-17
31	Capture feedback and your first documented result	GTM Engine	FC-17
32	Set up money hygiene: account, bookkeeping, invoicing	Financial Control	FC-01, FC-14
33	Track the few numbers that matter (cash, pipeline, delivery)	Data & Dashboards	FC-18, FC-01
35	Define your first KPIs and a weekly review rhythm	Data & Dashboards	FC-18, FC-03
36	Identify single points of failure (starting with you)	Structure / People	FC-05, FC-03
40	Choose your next path: keep building, or advise others	Strategy	—

— Supporting — 5 tasks

Helpful — keep them light at this stage and revisit as you grow.

#	TASK	AREA	PREVENTS
5	Establish a founder operating rhythm (focus, energy, anti-burnout)	Leadership Capacity	FC-03
6	Line up mentors and honest advisors	Leadership Capacity	FC-03, FC-16
34	Document your handful of repeatable core processes	Systems	FC-04
37	Plan your first delegation or hire	Structure / People	FC-05
38	Cover baseline legal, compliance, and risk basics	Risk & Compliance	FC-09, FC-20

The Tasks That Matter Most

For each Critical task: what breaks when you skip it, what good practice looks like, the warning signs to watch for, and how you know you are done.

Task 16 **CRITICAL** GTM ENGINE

Run customer discovery conversations

IF YOU SKIP IT You build on assumptions instead of evidence, then discover the gap after spending money and months on the wrong thing.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

- Talk to 15–30 target customers before building anything meaningful.
- Ask about their past behavior and current workarounds, not hypothetical future purchases.
- Separate the interviewer from the seller — you are collecting data, not pitching.
- Take structured notes and look for patterns across conversations, not single anecdotes.

WARNING SIGNS

- You can only name two or three people who have the problem.
- Everyone is polite and positive, but nobody has tried to solve it themselves.
- You are describing your solution more than their problem.

YOU'RE DONE WHEN

- 15+ conversations logged with consistent problem language.
- You can quote the problem in customers' own words.
- A clear pattern of who feels the pain most acutely.

Task 17 **CRITICAL** GTM ENGINE

Distinguish real demand signals from false positives

IF YOU SKIP IT Enthusiasm gets mistaken for demand, and you scale on compliments instead of commitments.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

WARNING SIGNS

- Strong verbal interest, zero commitment.

YOU'RE DONE WHEN

- Weight behavior over words: pre-orders, deposits, waitlist sign-ups, and referrals beat verbal praise.
- Ask for a small commitment and watch what happens.
- Track objections — the ones you hear again and again are your real product spec.
- "I'd definitely use this," with no follow-through.
- You are counting likes instead of intent.
- A handful of prospects took a costly action — paid, pre-committed, or referred.
- You can name your strongest and weakest demand signals with evidence.

Task 9 **CRITICAL** STRATEGY

Commit to a single problem worth solving

IF YOU SKIP IT Effort spreads across too many ideas, and none gets enough evidence to prove or kill. Focused competitors move faster.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

- Score your shortlist on pain, frequency, willingness to pay, access, and your advantage.
- Pick one. Write it down as a commitment with a review date.
- Treat the others as a parking lot, not parallel bets.

WARNING SIGNS

- You keep switching what you are working on week to week.
- You cannot state your problem in one sentence.

YOU'RE DONE WHEN

- A single, written problem statement.
- A clear reason why you — and why now.

Task 23 **CRITICAL** FINANCIAL CONTROL

Set pricing anchored to value, not cost or fear

IF YOU SKIP IT Underpricing out of fear destroys your margin and signals low value; cost-plus pricing ignores what the outcome is worth to the customer.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

- Anchor to the value of the outcome you create, not the hours you spend.

WARNING SIGNS

- You justify price by your costs, not their outcome.

YOU'RE DONE WHEN

- A price you can defend with value logic.

- Test price in real offers — price is a hypothesis until someone pays it.
- Leave margin for the cost to deliver, support, and win the customer.
- You discount before anyone even objects.
- Every customer says yes instantly — you are too cheap.
- At least one customer paid it without heavy discounting.

Task 24 **CRITICAL** FINANCIAL CONTROL

Understand your unit economics

IF YOU SKIP IT You grow a business that loses money on every sale, so more customers just accelerate the failure.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

- Know your margin per sale: price minus the direct cost to deliver.
- Estimate what it costs to win a customer and how long to earn it back.
- Confirm the numbers work at small scale before adding volume.

WARNING SIGNS

- You cannot state your margin per sale.
- Your acquisition cost is a guess.
- "We'll make it up in volume."

YOU'RE DONE WHEN

- A positive, understood margin per sale.
- A believable payback period on winning a customer.

Task 25 **CRITICAL** FINANCIAL CONTROL

Build a conservative financial model and runway plan

IF YOU SKIP IT Without a simple forecast and honest assumptions, a surprise shortfall can end an otherwise healthy business.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

- Build it bottom-up: real costs, a conservative revenue ramp, assumptions written down.

WARNING SIGNS

- Spending based on "it feels right," not a number.
- No runway figure you actually track.

YOU'RE DONE WHEN

- A model with its assumptions written down.

- Keep a simple rolling cash view; know your actual runway, not just what the model hopes.
- Stress-test it: what if revenue is half, and takes twice as long?
- A hockey-stick revenue line with nothing behind it.
- A runway you know in weeks or months, and update regularly.

Task 29 CRITICAL FINANCIAL CONTROL

Collect payment or firm pre-commitments

IF YOU SKIP IT Until money changes hands, you have interest — not a business. Cash is both your oxygen and your truest validation.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

- Sell the outcome, and ask for the order or a deposit.
- Prefer paid pilots to free ones — free hides the real objection.
- Get the first dollar in before over-building delivery.

WARNING SIGNS

- A pipeline full of “maybes” and no invoices.
- Endless free trials that never convert.

YOU'RE DONE WHEN

- First revenue collected, or a firm, signed pre-commitment.

Task 39 CRITICAL CROSS-DOMAIN

Run the Readiness Self-Assessment (20-point check)

IF YOU SKIP IT You try to scale on an unproven foundation — the single most common way promising early companies fall apart.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

- Score the 20 readiness items honestly; mark N/A only when truly not applicable.
- Treat any unchecked box in money or go-to-market as a stop sign.

WARNING SIGNS

- Fewer than 15 of the 20 items checked.
- One person — usually you — leaving would cripple the business.

YOU'RE DONE WHEN

- A completed readiness score and a clear next step: keep building, fix the gaps, or bring in deeper support.

- Re-run it every quarter as your foundation matures.

THE EVIDENCE

Why These Tasks Matter

Every task in this guide exists to prevent a specific, well-documented way businesses fail. The table below shows the failures behind the map and how often each one shows up in the research. Because most failures have more than one cause, the figures don't add up to 100%.

CODE	THE FAILURE	HOW OFTEN IT'S CITED	WHERE IT'S DOCUMENTED
FC-02	Poor product-market fit	About a third to over 40% of failures	CB Insights; Startup Genome
FC-01	Cash flow collapse	Primary cause in ~30–38%; a factor in far more	CB Insights; U.S. Bank
FC-03	Leadership / founder breakdown	Cited in ~18–23%	SCORE; CB Insights
FC-06	Competition & disruption	Cited in ~19–20%	CB Insights; JPMorgan
FC-07	Pricing & unit economics	Cited in ~15–18%	CB Insights; PwC
FC-14	Financial mismanagement	Cited in ~16%	CFO.com; ACFE
FC-12	Marketing & sales execution	Cited in ~14%	HubSpot; Salesforce
FC-05	Team & talent failures	Cited in ~14–23%	CB Insights; SHRM
FC-13	Product development failure	Cited in ~12%	PMI; Standish
FC-17	Customer retention	Cited in ~9–11%	Totango; Bain
FC-18	Flying blind on data	Cited in ~8%	MIT CISR; McKinsey
FC-19	Failure to adapt	Cited in ~13%	Christensen Institute

A NOTE ON THE NUMBERS — figures reflect how often a cause is cited in studies of business failure, not a precise probability for your business. Where you may have seen dramatic single statistics quoted elsewhere

(for example, that “most” failures are about cash flow), the honest picture is a range — cash-flow problems are the primary cause in roughly a third of failures and a contributing factor in many more. We use the grounded ranges here.

IN PRACTICE

Using this guide

- 1** Each week, look at the stage you are in and put your time into the highest-tier tasks you have not finished yet.
- 2** Do not skip ahead. A Critical task left undone early becomes a debt that compounds the moment you try to grow.
- 3** When you reach Stage 5, run the Readiness Self-Assessment. It tells you honestly whether your foundation can carry more weight.

WORK WITH SAUNTER

Book a call and we'll guide you to your next best steps.

The Saunter Group has tools built for startups and entrepreneurs at every early stage. Book a call and we'll help you read your map, spot the gaps, and figure out your next best steps.

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