

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/the-two-kinds-of-mvps/>

Airtable co-founder and CEO Howie Liu explains how different types of startup ideas demand different types of minimum viable products (MVPs). For lower-stakes consumer and social products, Liu observes, a quick, minimal MVP is generally best. However, when you're building business products users must trust with valuable data and important workflows, a more fleshed-out MVP is required.



Transcript

Howie Liu You know, 00:00:03,210 I'll, contrast it also with my prior experience with my first company, Etacts, was around for literally a year, um, from start to finish.. But, you know, from when we founded it, and started working on it to when we sold it, you know, to Salesforce as an acquisition.. And I think we probably only spent 10 to 12 weeks building the product full time, before we launched publicly and got a TechCrunch article into the whole thing when we were in D.C.. And so just very, very different approaches, right, between the first company and the latter.. So I think I've kind of, you know, at least with one data point each experience both, uh, both, both approaches.. And I also like, you know, first of all emotionally they're very different, you know, kind of jurist, right? In the first case it just felt like this constant furious sprint, to try to get to the next milestone, and, you know, we didn't really know what was, you know, what the future would hold, like, there was never really any, you know, kind of clear or certainty around, like, what the next five years look like.. But you know, what, the only thing that mattered was getting some form of forward progress, it was it was almost like, we were these simple vector machines that were just sort of pivoting around, and trying to find what, what is the right direction to go to, to descend the gradient.. And then, with Airtable, you know, we had just a lot more patience, maybe even arguably, to a fault where, you know, obviously, time is precious, I mean, we all would rather get to where we want to be, you know, in terms of, you know, impact success, you know, kind of product growth sooner rather than later, right, all is equal.. And so I think, you know, we always have this level of complacency, or serenity around knowing that, okay, like, here's, you know, here's where we're gonna get to, we kind of know what the mid game end game looks like.. And we just have to, like, methodically build the product that we think, you know, will, will unlock that, or it will be a great starting point..

So to answer the question, more specifically for Airtable.. In that case, we were fighting against a few things that made that MVP, much, you know, a much higher threshold to pass, right.. One is that, you know, we were trying to build a product that individuals, and hopefully businesses would actually in trust with valuable data, and important workflows, right.. And so this is different from, you know, being for instance, a consumer, you know, kind of social product where the stakes are fairly low, you know, somebody can just go and try out a new product like that, with little ramifications, if it doesn't work out.. Whereas with Airtable, you know, we're trying to get companies to, you know, people in companies to actually put, you know, kind of important business process into Airtable, right.. And, you know, if we went down, we went bankrupt, if we lost their data, you know, that would have serious consequences for them, right? So that was already one reason why the stakes were higher.. I think the second was that, you know, we were also trying to replace existing, you know, kind of behavior, right.. So, you know, we weren't just trying to add a new thing into people's lives as sometimes again, like, you know, consumer internet products, they're trying to add a net new thing into the, you know, kind of suite of products that you use, um, you know, Ticktock isn't necessarily directly replacing your usage of Instagram, YouTube, etc.. It's kind of adding a new thing, right.. And so, you know, you don't really have to worry about, you know, replacing one for one, all the functionality of the existing product..

Whereas for Airtable, you know, we were trying to get people to displace other products with Airtable, whether they be, you know, project management tools that were more task centric, Trello, etc, or even spreadsheets, right.. And spreadsheets in particular, were a challenging one to replace because if you think about Excel, or Google Sheets, they're pretty sophisticated products with a ton of, you know, complexity.. And I mean, the number of lines of code and like, you know, countless, you know, probably millions of person hours of engineering effort, if not more, that have gone into Microsoft Excel

over the past three decades to form the product that it is today.. I mean, it's gargantuan, and there's no way that we could get to perfect feature paring against that product.. And yet, we wanted people to replace their existing usage of Excel, especially for non-numeric workflow, use cases where they were really kind of using it, as, you know, almost like an app or an app builder, as opposed to a number crunching tool.. We were trying to get them to replace that existing behavior with Airtable.. And so, I think there was a higher threshold, like we couldn't just have, you know, a weekend hack project version of Airtable that people would use instead of, you know, a traditional spreadsheet, right.. So, I think we're just the nature of our product, and the bet that we were making around why people would use us over the prior art necessitated a much higher kind of MVP threshold across...