

Apoorva Mehta had 20 failed startups before Instacart

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The gig: Apoorva Mehta, 30, is the founder and chief executive of San Francisco grocery delivery startup Instacart. Over the last four years, he has grown the company to more than 300 full-time employees and tens of thousands of part-time grocery shoppers. The startup offers on-demand and same-day grocery delivery in hundreds of cities in 20 states.

Electrical engineering: Growing up in Canada, Mehta had an avid curiosity in how technology worked. "Everything from atoms, all the way to what you see on a computer when you go to Google.com," Mehta said. "I wanted to learn everything in between." Not knowing what he wanted to do after college, he enrolled in an [electrical engineering](#) course at the University of Waterloo.

Bored at Amazon: Mehta spent his post-college years working for technology companies such as Qualcomm and BlackBerry, and even did a stint at a steel factory. His goal was to try a bit of everything to help figure out what he really wanted to do. He eventually moved to Seattle to be a supply chain engineer at Amazon.com, where he developed fulfillment systems to get packages from Amazon's warehouses to customers' doors.

During those years, he learned two things: He liked to build software, and he wanted to be challenged. After two years at Amazon, he felt that he was no longer being challenged. With no other role lined up, he quit his job.

Twenty companies: He spent the next two years putting his learnings into practice. Between leaving Amazon and founding Instacart, Mehta estimates he started 20 companies. He tried building an ad network for social gaming companies. He spent a whole year developing a social network specifically for lawyers. "I knew nothing about these topics, but I liked putting myself in a position where I had to learn about an industry and try to solve problems they may or may not have had," he said. None of the companies worked out.

"After going through all these failures, releasing feature after feature, I realized it wasn't that I couldn't find a product that worked, I just didn't care about the product," Mehta said of the social network for lawyers. "When I went home, I wouldn't think about it because I didn't care about lawyers. I didn't think of what lawyers did day to day."

Which led him to lesson No. 3: solve a real problem you actually care about.

Groceries: With 20 failed startup ideas under this belt, Mehta put some thought into the problems he experienced day to day. He lived in San Francisco. He didn't own a car. He loved to cook, but he couldn't get the groceries he wanted in his neighborhood.

"It was 2012, people were ordering everything online, meeting people online, watching movies online, yet the one thing everyone has to do every single week - buying groceries - we still do in an archaic way," he said. As soon as he came up with the idea for an on-demand [grocery delivery](#) platform, he couldn't stop thinking about it. In less than a month, he'd coded himself a crude version of an app that could be used by people who needed groceries, and a version for those who were shopping in-store for customers. On its first test-run, because Mehta hadn't hired any shoppers yet, he ordered through the app, went to the store and delivered the groceries to himself.

Webvan: The idea of ordering groceries online and having them delivered to your home wasn't new. Webvan, a company founded on that very premise, famously went under during the dotcom bust. But this didn't faze Mehta, who believed that the success of a company rests not only on the quality of the idea but also on timing. "It was very clear to me that the idea was a good one and the time was now for the same reason why Uber and Lyft were finding success," he said.

Smartphones had become ubiquitous, people were comfortable performing transactions over their phones, and the idea of using an app to hire someone to perform a task was fast becoming the norm. "As a result of smartphones, the equation had changed," he said.

Teething troubles: Although Mehta landed on a hot idea and was able to partner with stores such as Whole Foods, Target and Safeway, the expansion of Instacart wasn't without problems. The company was slapped with a class-action lawsuit in 2015, alleging that the workers who shopped for and delivered groceries were misclassified as independent contractors. Instacart eventually made its shoppers part-time employees, with some qualifying for benefits such as health insurance. "We went from having zero part-time employees to having people at thousands of individual store locations," he said, "We had to figure out scheduling and what kinds of training had to be provided. We needed to figure out a lot of things."

Advice: Most startups fail, and those who start a company for the sake of starting a company are even more likely to fail, Mehta said. "The reason to start a company is to bring a change that you strongly believe in to this world," he said. "You really have to want to do this."

Personal: Mehta lives in San Francisco. He's an avid reader and enjoys biking in the city.

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