THE MIDLIFE SOLOPRENEUR WORKBOOK

A Practical Workbook to Design A Business That Suits Your Life, Not The Other Way Around.

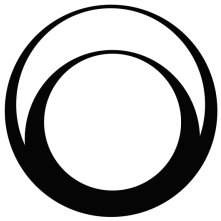
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The Midlife Solopreneur

A New Business Workbook

by Second Harvest



Why I wrote this workbook

I started a venture-funded adtech company in 1997 and sold it in 2000. I moved to the US, ran a startup that failed. So I tried again, and I failed again. You learn more from failure than from success. With that well-earned knowledge I then built a design agency that was profitable for 15 years. In 2019 my wife received a cancer diagnosis, so I sold the agency and got a job where I could spend time with her and take care of our youngest son. Then came what I call the shitstorm of 2021. My wife died, we lost our family coworking business to Covid, and my dad had a heart attack. Everything changed for me.

While I was living through my shitstorm, Devon was living through her own. Burnout, illness, and a marriage in decline, forced her to ask the hard questions about what she really wanted. She left the business where she had been a partner for over a decade, filed for divorce and wandered into the unknown. With three young kids and a deep desire to run her own business we partnered to create Second Harvest.

Given that we both wanted something more meaningful and balanced, than the careers we left behind, our goal was never to build something as big as possible. It was to create a $400K–500K business with no employees, with 20-hours a week and a full-body yes. We wanted to be around for school pickup, lunch with each other, and regular vacations. We also never open Microsoft Teams again.

Introduction

In principle, a business is a simple thing. It has to communicate what it sells to the people that need that product or service for a price that feels reasonable in exchange for the solution to their problem. Then it must deliver that product or service. Simple.

So why does it feel so complicated?

It doesn't have to be. In this workbook we're going to take a reductionist approach. By boiling down the essentials of a business, aligning it with your purpose or passion, and building a clear actionable path forward, we're going to create momentum.

How to use this workbook:

This workbook is a place to think on paper. A place to have a clarifying conversation with yourself. Each section has a short bit of context, a few questions, and space for us to work through together. Space is the point. Mental space. Don't fill it to look productive. By the end of the day you should have a marked-up, slightly coffee-stained set of answers you can act on immediately.

Push yourself toward the specific. The key here is alignment and clarity. Vague answers help no one. "I help businesses grow" is not an answer. "I help newly-independent CFOs build their first board deck in two weeks so they can present with confidence" is an answer. Be clear, not clever.

Let's begin.

Section One: The Alignment

You didn't leave the big job to rebuild a smaller version of the same trap. Before you dive deeper into the entrepreneurial pool, make sure the thing you're building is aligned with who you want to be and the life you want.

This alignment work allows you to gain clarity on what makes you unique and how that can be applied to your work. This isn't a test. There's no score at the end, no four-quadrant chart to tell you who you are. Answer honestly. Nobody's reading this but you. Write the thing you'd normally edit out because you were a little embarrassed.

If a question makes you slightly uncomfortable, that's the one to make more time for. Discomfort is just information you haven't looked at yet.

What work feels like play to you?

Think about the thing you lose time to. The task other people brace themselves for that you'd happily do on a Sunday for no reason. Said another way: what's easy and fun for you that other people find difficult, or assume must be hard work?

Be very specific. Not something like "helping people." Describe the actual activity that helps people. The verb, not the virtue.

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Who are you a big fan of, and why? Who is the person whose work makes you a little envious in a good way?

Then go deeper: what specifically do you admire about what they do? Admiration is a mirror. We rarely admire a quality we don't already carry some seed of.

What are you enamored by? What's the thing you can't stop thinking about?

The subject you read about when you're meant to be doing something else. The thing you keep bringing up at dinner until people change the topic.

What would you do if you weren't trying to make money from it?

Money's a useful filter for most decisions and a terrible one for this. Take it out. Imagine everything is paid for, the number's handled. Now what fills the day? Watch for the answer you immediately dismiss as impractical. That dismissal is doing a lot of work.

What would you work tirelessly for, no matter how long it took?

Different question from the last one. Not what's fun, but what's worth it. The thing you'd grind on for years without a finish line, because the doing is the point.

What's something out in the world that genuinely tugs at your heart, that you wish you could change?

Not the thing you're supposed to care about. What's the one that actually gets under your skin? The story you can't scroll past because it speaks to your soul.

If you had to live your life again, what would you do differently?

Maybe you don't have regrets but maybe you'd make some adjustments. The decision you'd change, the year you'd give back, the thing you talked yourself out of. How much of that other life is still available to you?

What's on the other side of cringe that you actually want to do?

There's a thing you want badly enough that the wanting embarrasses you. Writing the book. Going back to the studio. Saying out loud that you want to start the thing. Write it. You don't have to do it yet. You just have to stop pretending it isn't there.

What makes you feel most alive?

Not what you're proud of, not what looks good. What actually makes you feel awake. When were you last fully there? Be concrete. A heartfelt moment, not a title or a label.

Section Two: The Who

The single most common reason smart people stall out with a business isn't a lack of talent. It's trying to be everything to everyone. If you came up in big companies, you served clients who already had an idea of your brand promise. If you're starting from scratch, or are new to the entrepreneurship game, you need to start with a simple and clear description of who you serve with your product or service. You cannot expect to win if your customer is "anyone who needs help."

David Ogilvy, the "Father of Advertising", famously said you are always writing advertising copy for one specific person. You should treat the reader as an intelligent individual in a personal, one-to-one conversation rather than addressing a faceless crowd. So, who is that one type of person I am best positioned to help? Be very specific.

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Let's go a step further. What were they doing five minutes before they decided they needed someone like me? What's the prompt they'd type into some AI search at 11pm?

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Now, describe who I am NOT for? Who would need too much education or hand-holding to understand what my value is? Who would waste my time?

Take this a step further, who might consider my services or product unnecessary or a waste of their time? Is there someone who would actively avoid what I'm offering?

Gut check: If a friend or stranger read your "who I'm for" answer, could they immediately think of someone to refer you to? If not, go back and narrow it.

Clarifying Notes:

Section Three: The Problem

People don't buy what you *do*. They buy the thing that closes the gap between where they are and where they want to be. Your job is to clearly articulate that gap better than they can. And then, describe how you close that gap for them.

Most people have no idea what that gap is until you clarify it for them. For example, a person may think they need a landscaping service to mow their lawn. What they actually want is the pride of having a beautiful lawn and the signal that sends to their neighbors. The gap isn't lawncare, the gap is signalling status and that they have the means to take care of their property.

Describe the expensive, painful problem my person has right now. What are they avoiding or feeling overwhelmed by?

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_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

What is it costing them to leave it unsolved (time, money, stress, reputation)?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Describe the result they actually want. Not the product or service I deliver, the outcome they get. What will they *feel* like when you've delivered your product or service?

Now, use your answers to finish this sentence:
"I help [who] go from [bad current state] to [desired outcome] without [the thing they dread]."

Now, be even more specific:

Section Four: The Offer

People weigh an offer by four things: 1) They want the dream outcome or feeling (as described in the previous section), and 2) they want to believe it'll actually work for them. But, 3) they also want it without a long wait and, 4) without a lot of effort on their part. There are exceptions to the last two, which we'll clarify.

Your job is to elevate the first two elements, and reduce the anxiety associated with the last two. This makes the offer more compelling without you doing anything heroic. The trap to avoid is to create a feature dump. "It includes these 40 things" is not better.

Using the starting point from your work in Section 2, "I help [who] go from [bad current state] to [desired outcome] without [the thing they dread]," let's refine our offers:

- How do I make it more believable: what's my proof, track record, guarantee?
- How do I make it accessible: what's a small, risk-free first step?
- How do I reduce the wait: what can the customer/client feel or see quickly?
- How do I reduce their effort: what steps do I take off their plate entirely?

Using your combined notes, describe the one problem you solve, with the one promise, and when and how that solution is delivered. "I help [who] go from [bad current state] to [desired outcome] without [the thing they dread], and because I [credibility statement], I can deliver [the solution] in [period of time] or they get [reduced risk promise or guarantee]."

Now, reread that paragraph and edit to be more focused and specific. What would you cut? What can be said in fewer words?

Here's an example:
"I help accomplished founders and executives who've hit the *is-this-all-there-is* wall go from feeling lost to designing a clear next chapter they're genuinely excited about. I do this while respecting the foundation they've built and without therapy-speak or life-coach platitudes. We can design that next chapter and get you into a tribe that'll support you into whatever's next because I've been through that exact unraveling myself and built the community I couldn't find when I needed it. If you're committed, then I guarantee I'll do this in 72-hours or I'll keep working with you until you're excited for what's next and you're in the right room, on me."

Section Five: The Price

Pricing is hard because asking for money isn’t comfortable for most people. In 30 years of consulting, advising and building products, I can positively say that most people are underpricing their services.

You're also probably underpricing, because you set the number with your own impostor voice for company. Price isn't a reflection of your costs. It's a reflection of the value the client receives. Undercharging doesn't just shrink your income; it signals that you and your work are not valuable. People can smell cheap.

What outcome is this worth to the client in real financial terms?

_____

_____

My current price or prices (or the number I've been too nervous to say out loud):

_____

_____

The price I'd charge if I genuinely believed the financial value I described above:

_____

_____

What would have to be true for me to charge that?

_____

_____

Exercise to practice daily: Say your real price out loud to the person you believe is your customer or prospect. No flinching, no explanation, no immediate discount. Leave the awkward silence without jumping in to explain it.

Notice what your face does. How does your body feel? What part of you feels uncomfortable? What did you feel you needed to do to make yourself comfortable?

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Additional notes:

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Section Six: The First Customers

Your first customers or clients are very likely not going to be your long-term core audience. At the earliest stages of a business they're won by outbound effort, not captured by an inbound funnel. That will probably change, but it's good to start with this clarity: *Your first customers will be people who already know you.*

Who are the ten people who already know me, trust me and support me?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Of these people, who could either hire me or introduce me to a prospect in the next few weeks? Circle their name above.

Now, what I'd actually say to them to get them to work with me? Go back to your notes in Section 1, 2, and 3 to write a personal and clear offer.

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The feast-or-famine cycle that wrecks new businesses or practices comes from only reaching out to prospects when the pipeline's empty. Most businesses have an inconsistent pipeline, which makes all other aspects of the business nerve-wracking. Consider that 80-90% of the prospects in your pipeline will *not* work with you for a variety of reasons – like budget, timing, decision-making power, etc. Almost all of those things are out of your control, but you can control how much you prospect for new opportunities.

A key way to change this is to dedicate some part of your week to outreach. One day, or just one morning or afternoon, is often enough to fill the pipeline.

What's the weekly habit I'll commit to so I'm not marketing only in a panic?

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What is the one platform or channel, where I can place one offer, with one daily action (post, ad, question), without fail for one year?

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_____
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Section Seven: The Sale

Planning your business can be fun. New logo, new website, new office space. But at some point you have to have the sales conversation. While every business has competition, and certainly a big 800-lbs gorilla in their space, but your willingness to personally talk to the client is an advantage no big competitor can match.

Two things to remember in any sales conversation is to 1) sell the outcome, not the feature list, and 2) get to a clear "no" fast. A quick no is a gift, a slow maybe is a tax.

If you believe you are not a natural salesperson then consider that we are all selling and negotiating every day. The mindset is not that we are selling, but that we are moving others towards an outcome that's good for everyone involved. Whether meeting with your team at work to discuss a project, or you're parenting, or planning a vacation with your spouse, or discussing a bathroom refit with a contractor, we're all moving others towards a goal.

Another way to think about sales is that you are not actually selling anything, you are *helping*. If you have trust that your product and service is of real value, then the customer is helped by buying it. A marketing consultant's retainer is *helping* their clients get more customers. A vacation rental host *helps* tourists experience new places and create new memories. Even a simple lemonade stand at a farmer's market *helps* visitors overcome their thirst.

In reality, people like being sold a product or service if it's something they want. People are looking to buy solutions to their problems all the time. They want to be sold because that means they can have the solution to their problems. Instead of feeling like you are forcing someone to buy your products, focus on the outcomes and feelings you are helping create for them.

What was a recent conversation where I described what I do? What did I lead with, the work or the outcome? How specific was I?

What was my body's reaction? How did the other person respond?

What signals from my body and my behavior tells me I'm uncomfortable or comfortable selling? Am I over-explaining? Discounting early? Talking too long? Am I excited? Do I look forward to calling prospects?

What's the one sentence I can use to ask for the business directly? Consider writing a few different versions you can experiment with:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

What are my criteria for doing business with someone? What lens or filter would I use to select the best customers and prospects, and eliminate those that don't fit?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Exercise to practice daily: Start a conversation with a stranger with no agenda except to get used to starting conversations. Ask them questions that give you insight into what they are experiencing.

Section Eight: The Stack

There's a back-office to every business. This is often where the obstacles to getting momentum hide. If your business was a factory floor, these are the places you'd see stuff piling up and not moving down the line. The website that's been "almost done." The unsent invoices, the missing contract, the pricing page you keep redesigning instead of publishing. None of it is hard but it's being avoided because something is blocking you. It might be perfectionism, or lack of knowledge, or just time.

What are the very necessary but boring/confusing/overly-technical things I've been avoiding that could open up new revenue or new business opportunities for me?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Which high priority obstacles, if finished this week, would actually unblock the flow of new opportunities and revenue?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Selecting just the top three obstacles, what are the smallest versions, or thin slices, of these things I could ship by Friday (not perfect, just shipped)?

Who can help me immediately and who can hold me to getting this done?

Section Nine: The Connection

Now, review both the earlier work answers and the alignment answers.
Does the work above still sound like something I want, or something I think I should want? Does this feel like a true alignment with who I've become or am becoming?

The one thing from today I'll take action on before I do anything else?

What's the version of this business that would feel like a genuine second harvest — not just a fresh coat of paint?

Closing Notes

If you’re working through this workbook, then you’re already the type of person who gets stuff done. You probably already know how to build things. You've done hard things before. The work is less about learning something new. It's giving yourself permission to do this in your own name, at a price that respects the value, for the specific people you're meant to serve.

The website doesn't get finished because you finally have new skills. It gets finished the day you decide who you are now and you feel the energy that awakening creates. The sales call doesn’t get done because you magically turned into a salesperson. It happens because you deeply value yourself and you’re proud of what you offer.

Today's a good day to decide.
Richard & Devon

Appendix

1. Charter agreement for advisory and consulting roles

Charter Agreement Between [Your Name] & [Client Name], on [Start Date]

Objective: To be completed in partnership with [insert client name and title here] to [describe general work, e.g. align on projects, objectives, outcomes and results]

Each of us agrees to:

1. Do what we say we are going to do, by when we say we are going to do it, or else give the other person as much advance notice of our expected failure to deliver as possible.
2. Provide candid feedback to the other person/s, with compassion and objectivity.
3. Be responsive to the other person within 24hrs unless on vacation or holiday.
4. Assume discussions (written or verbal) between us are confidential unless we explicitly agree on what each of us can share and with whom. Discussions with other staff at the company, including on topics relevant to our work together, need not be shared with each other if that 3rd party asks for confidentiality.
5. Speak up if this charter isn't working for one of us or if we believe the charter needs to evolve to account for changing circumstances.
6. Allow the other person/s to opt out of the charter with 90 day's notice, but both of us will still honor the confidentiality clause of the charter.

[Contact name], representing [Client Name], further represents that:

7. [Client Name] will pay [insert your name] a fee of [$XX]/month, invoiced at the start of each month and payable within 7 days of billing.
8. [Your Name] will be named a [e.g. Special Advisor] to [Client Name] for the duration of this charter, and if they choose, they can share this role on their public profiles (e.g. LinkedIn).

[Your Name] further agrees that:

9. They will provide at a minimum a weekly business consulting and advisory services to [Client Name], mostly remotely. A weekly call will be scheduled. Additional calls can be arranged as needed based on engagements needed as summary and work load dictates.
10. Once a quarter, when appropriate and reasonable, [Your Name] will meet with [Client] and their team in-person in a location suitable for both parties.
11. All in-person meetings that require transportation and accommodation expenses will be paid for by [Client Name].
12. Asynchronous communication like email, slack or text is unlimited but response times remain reasonable based on needs and within the bounds of the relationship.

This charter is hereby agreed to on the ___ day of [Date of Engagement] by:

[Your Name] _____ [Client Name] _____