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# Where Do Ideas Come From?

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Pei Yuechen (*pictured below*) loves sports. When she's not working on her demanding class schedule at The Benjamin School in Palm Beach, Florida, U.S., the rising high school senior is usually dribbling down the basketball court, serving on the tennis court, or running competitive cross-country. Yuechen's father, who lives in her hometown of Changchun City, Jilin Province in the northeast part of China, operates a soccer school to train players for the national soccer team.

A few years back when Yuechen was 13 and a student at the Middle School Attached to Northeast Normal University in China, she began thinking of ways to combine her love of science and technology with her athletic pursuits. "I saw that technology was involved in every aspect of our life, but there was little technology involvement in sports training or exercising," says Yuechen, who is 16. "I decided to try to insert technology into sports training to make it more efficient."

With the help of her middle school science teacher Li Bing and useful feedback from coaches, Yuechen began the process of product development. She created a vibration sensor for the starting and finish lines of the running track to take the place of a stopwatch, a light that runners and speed skaters could chase around the track and rink to improve their performance, and a basketball net sensor to count successful shots as a way to create a more competitive environment while players log long hours of shooting and free-throw practice.

While her innovations are still in various stages of development, Yuechen has a valuable takeaway from her time as a sports-technology entrepreneur. "Some of my peers say they want to build up a company and become entrepreneurs, but they don't have a good idea. I've learned that ideas come from life," says Yuechen. "When you see things, you need to think more about how to make them better. It's a temperament to be an entrepreneur. If high school students can be observant and think more about how to improve and how to make the world better, they're going to come up with ideas."

Many ideas do come from personally felt needs, confirms Tyler Wry, an assistant professor of management at Wharton who specializes in entrepreneurship and innovation. There's even a name for this: feel-my-pain opportunities. "At base, an entrepreneurial opportunity combines a resonant need with a compelling solution," notes Wry. "So, if there is a pain point that you experience in your daily life, this might be a good place to start thinking about an entrepreneurial idea."

Wry suggests three key steps to generating entrepreneurial ideas. They are:

1. **Research.** As you begin to identify pain points in your life, it's worth doing some basic analysis to get a sense of the size of the potential opportunity. You want to ask questions like: Who has this need? How many people fit this profile? How big of a need is this (is it a big pain point, or a small inconvenience)? How are people addressing this need now? What do they like about current solutions? What do they not like? Would they pay for a better solution? How much?
2. **Need and knowledge.** If the answers to these questions point to a big, compelling need that people will pay to have addressed, then it's time to start thinking about potential solutions. The advantage to looking for personal pain points is that people usually have a good understanding of that issue space. This is helpful for generating good and insightful ideas. The concept of putting in 10,000 hours to be an expert on something applies to entrepreneurship as well. Unless you know the space intimately well, you're probably not going to come up with much more than a surface-level solution that others could also come up with pretty easily. Good ideas are born

from need and knowledge.

- Brainstorming.** Once you have a deep understanding of the issue space, it's time to start applying idea-generation techniques. Brainstorming allows individuals and teams to challenge their creative minds and to actively come up with innovative and groundbreaking ideas. Specific approaches work well for entrepreneurial ideas. For example, analogical reasoning is where you take an idea or business model that has been used in one context and think about how it would apply in others. Think: "the Uber of babysitting," or "the Airbnb of tools." Venture capitalists are getting a bit burned out on these types of ideas, but the technique is still useful. Similar to analogical reasoning is geographic arbitrage, which looks at ideas from different geographies. Ask these questions: How are people in other countries solving this problem? Would their solution work here? What would have to change to make it fit here? The key is to be sensitive to cultural differences, and to make sure you tailor the idea for your local context. Read more of Wry's [brainstorming techniques](#) for aspiring entrepreneurs, especially his all-important problem-solving tool: What would Croesus do?



Pei Yuechen and her coach hit the tennis court (and a whole lot of balls) for some technological inspiration.