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PIVOT: REINVENTION CENTRAL

# Here's What These Execs Wish They Would Have Known at the Start of Their Careers

Wouldn't it be great if someone had advised you--and you would have listened--to not make certain mistakes in the first place?



By Christina DesMarais [@salubriousdish](#)

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CREDIT: Getty Images

Think about your career. Looking back, have there been periods along the way where you misspent time, concentrated on the wrong things, or behaved in ways you regret? Wouldn't it be great if someone had advised you--and you would have listened--to not make these mistakes in the first

place? Here's advice from a half dozen successful executives regarding what they wish they would have known when first starting out in business.

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## 1. Skip the MBA.

"I wish I had known how easily business school can distract you from your passions, and that you can't learn high tech B2B from a textbook anyway. Business school teaches you everything you need to know about pricing, position, segmentation, etc., however these cookie cutter lessons can be counterproductive. Even worse, they can sway you to follow the pack into whatever field is hot at the moment. In my case, it took me 10 years in finance to wake up and head out west to start a career in technology. If I could do it all over again, I would have gone straight from undergrad to Silicon Valley."

*--Kon Leong, founder and CEO of ZL Technologies, a developer of unstructured data archiving software*

## 2. Understand the value of relationships.

"I wish I would have made networking a higher priority at the beginning of my career. As a working parent juggling multiple schedules, I often find myself deprioritizing networking activities. However, when I spend time networking I always wish I made more time for it. I find it rewarding both personally and professionally to gain new perspectives and develop new relationships as mentor and mentee."

*--Lori Mitchell Keller, global general manager of SAP Consumer Industries*

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## 3. Identify and execute the small steps that will eventually help you realize the big vision.

"Thinking big is an essential quality for an entrepreneur. However, over the years, I have realized that it is equally important to identify and execute the small steps that will eventually help you realize the big vision. Big dreams need a meticulous execution plan and, it's the small details that separate success from failure. Thinking big and breaking down that thinking into smaller chunks, are both equally important, and often, one needs to combine both simultaneously to achieve goals."

*--Naveen Tewari, founder and CEO at global mobile advertising and discovery platform InMobi*

## 4. Know that people are the key to any business success.

"I started out thinking that business strategy is most important to get right, but came to realize people are a more important factor for success. You can have a fabulous strategy, but without the right people and right motivation the company will fail. That starts with having the right employees and understanding their motivations (and everyone aligned). It extends beyond that though, to your customers, and not having too much of an inside-out viewpoint. Remember to consider your business value from the customers' perspective to really get your strategy right. In the end, people, both internally and externally, are the key to any business' success."

*--Rohit De Souza, president and CEO of Actian, a hybrid data management, integration and analytics company*

## 5. Figure out what you want to be.

"At the beginning of my career, I wish I had known more about the 'Be, Do, Have' principle. I think that most people in the early stages of their career think of that principle in reverse: 'Have, Do, Be.' In other words, they set a goal of having a certain title or having a certain level of wealth and then go about

doing whatever it takes to accomplish that goal, and as a result, they end up being a certain type of person, which may or may not be the type of person that they actually want to 'be.' So, my advice for people starting off their careers is to think of that principle in the order of 'Be, Do, Have.' Decide what

you want to be, which will help you be more disciplined in what you do, and as a result you are more likely to end up having what you want."

--Jim Offerdahl, CFO of *Bazaarvoice*, which connects brands, retailers and consumers in a shopper network, delivering ROI through reviews, analytics and targeted media

## 6. Stop interrupting.

"One of the biggest learnings from the beginning of my career is that good listening is an art and a necessary skill! I was an interrupter in the early days because I wanted to prove I was the smartest person in the room. This meant I missed opportunities to learn from other people who also had very valuable, intelligent things to say. The funny thing is, while I have benefited along the way from professional training opportunities, those urges haven't gone away. But now I have the tools and wisdom to stop myself from interrupting a colleague simply to get my point across first. And now as a manager, my real focus is on letting my team shine rather than needing to prove myself in every meeting or project."

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--Joanna O'Connell, CMO of *MediaMath*, which provides technology and services that enable marketers to reach audiences

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FOUNDERS 10

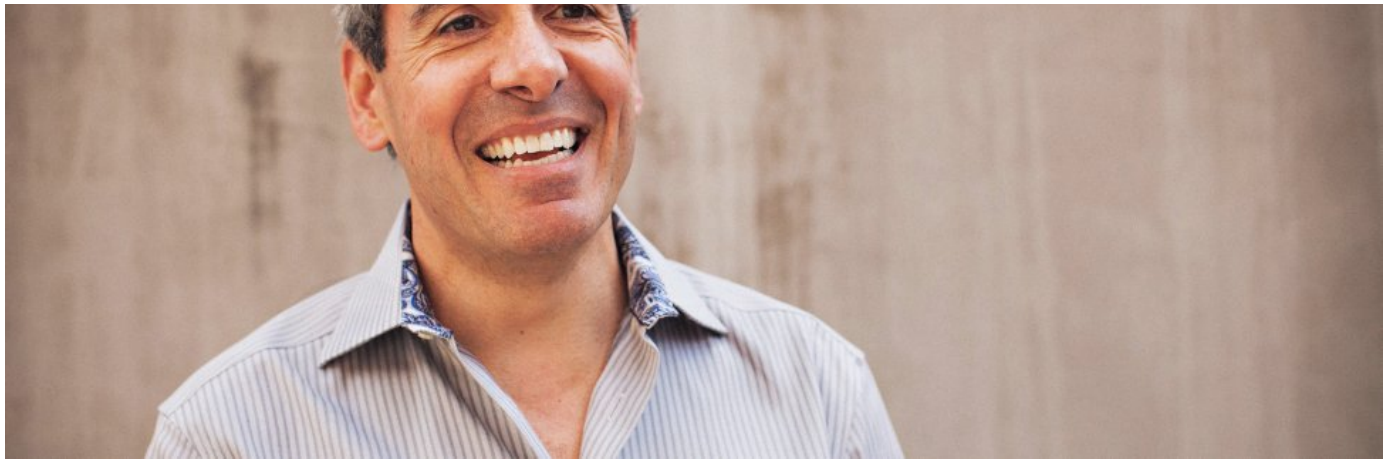
# How This Company You've Never Heard of Is Taking Over With Technology You Can't See

For this patient tech founder, success was a marathon, not a sprint.



By Tori Finkle [@VictoriaFinkle](#)





Impinj co-founder and CEO Chris Diorio. *CREDIT: Courtesy company*

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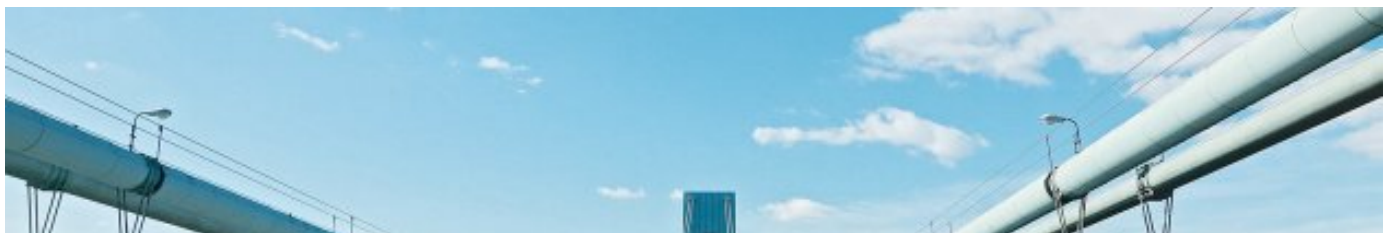
**Editor's Note:** *This company is part of Inc.'s Founders 10 list, our annual look at the most innovative post-IPO startups in America. Here's a look at what it takes to make the list.*

Impinj just might be the most ubiquitous tech company you've never heard of.

Last year the Seattle company, which makes radio-tracking tags, connected some six billion items around the world. Airbus Helicopters uses Impinj tags on its aircraft assembly lines; Macy's uses them to keep tabs on merchandise. Hospitals around the country rely on Impinj devices to track equipment and even patients. And every November, the organizers of the New York City Marathon stick Impinj chips on bibs to track the times and progress of some 50,000 runners.

It's a sweet, if mostly silent, world domination for CEO Chris Diorio, who co-founded Impinj with Caltech physicist Carver Mead in 2000 and took it public last year. "I look as far ahead as I can to what's possible and then try to figure out what it takes to get there," Diorio says. "And not just what's possible—but what's exciting, what's transformative."

That sort of long-distance planning and focus on innovation is common to all the founders whose companies made this year's Founders 10 list. Every one of them had an outstanding "score" of patents applied for and granted in 2016, according to IFI Claims Patent Services, which helped *Inc.* identify the entrepreneurs who now run America's most innovative public companies.





Runners at the start of the 2016 New York City Marathon cross the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge from Staten Island to Brooklyn. For the next 26.2 miles, Impinj chips on their bibs tracked their progress. CREDIT: Michael Reaves/Getty Images

Yet new product development is not the only way these companies excel—they're financially outstanding, too. With the help of Ernst & Young (EY), which provided industry median benchmarks, *Inc.* crunched the numbers on the founder-led, patent-hungry North American companies that have gone public in the past three years. These 10 companies (including seven past Inc. 5000 honorees) have since matched or outperformed their peers, in terms of median annual revenue or profit recorded since the year of their IPO.

While *Inc.* usually focuses on private startups, once a year we shift our attention to those entrepreneurs who have recently decided to take on the public markets. One part of the IPO process is that you open up your books, which gives us an unusually wide window into company performance. Another part is that many watch only your stock price and your latest results—the short term rather than the long; or the wedding rather than the marriage, as Jacqueline Kelley, EY Americas IPO leader, writes.

The short term isn't always pretty. Newly public companies tend to underperform the stock market, and quarterly business results are often disappointing. Our Founders 10 members aren't immune to some of these struggles—but their founder-CEOs aren't letting the short-term results distract them from their long-term vision. This list recognizes those entrepreneurs who have maintained an innovative, forward-looking leadership during and sometimes despite the distractions of going public.

For Diorio, for example, outperformance has meant a regular willingness to pivot—and to plan ahead for the rapid evolution of digital technology. When he co-founded Impinj at the turn of the century, Diorio thought its new technology would improve the performance of radio frequency used by cell phones. But when the dot-com bubble burst, so did Impinj's early customers. So the Seattle-based startup shifted its focus to a still-developing technology: radio frequency identification (RFID), the use of radio waves, specialized tags, and readers to track the location of objects.





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Last year, Delta Airlines introduced a mobile first app that lets fliers check the status of their bags, to confirm they've been loaded onto the right plane. Its secret weapon: Impinj RFID technology. *CREDIT: Fotosearch*

Today, Impinj's tags are a key part of the huge and growing tech ecosystem known as the internet of things. They inhabit sometimes-unexpected corners: The University of Tennessee Medical Center, for example, uses Impinj-equipped smart trashcans in its operating rooms, to better track supplies during surgery. Diorio continues to invest in improving Impinj's hardware and software--and to identify new markets for its use, such as tracking food preparation and service at restaurants. "In the same way that the internet expanded and changed how we interact with people, the internet of things, by connecting items in our world, will again change our lives," he says.

Impinj went public last July so it could raise capital to "turbocharge our efforts" and accelerate its already rapid growth, Diorio says. In its first year as a public company, Impinj financially outperformed the median for post-IPO tech companies; and Diorio credits the IPO process for forcing him to refine

Impinj's priorities and innovative mission. "Maybe you thought you understood where you were going," he says. "But when you have to explain it in very simple terms, it helps you from a strategy perspective and from an innovation perspective."

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