

Sarah Daniels, Matthias Franchoo & Laura De Blaere

3W-Framework

**Entrepreneurship through the lens of work happiness,
workability, and wellbeing**

Entrepreneurship through work happiness, workability and wellbeing

Within entrepreneurship, a wide range of models and conceptual frameworks exist to support the development of highly viable and innovative business ideas. Central questions are how to start a business, what constitutes a top trending or promising business idea, and how to create value. These models are not developed in isolation; rather, they reflect the dominant search behaviour of (future) entrepreneurs, which typically emphasizes identifying unique market opportunities, understanding the cost of entrepreneurship, required turnover, and maximising profit potential. In short, the focus is predominantly financial and market-oriented.

What is notably absent, however, is the question: how can entrepreneurs ensure their personal “sustainability” within their business venture?

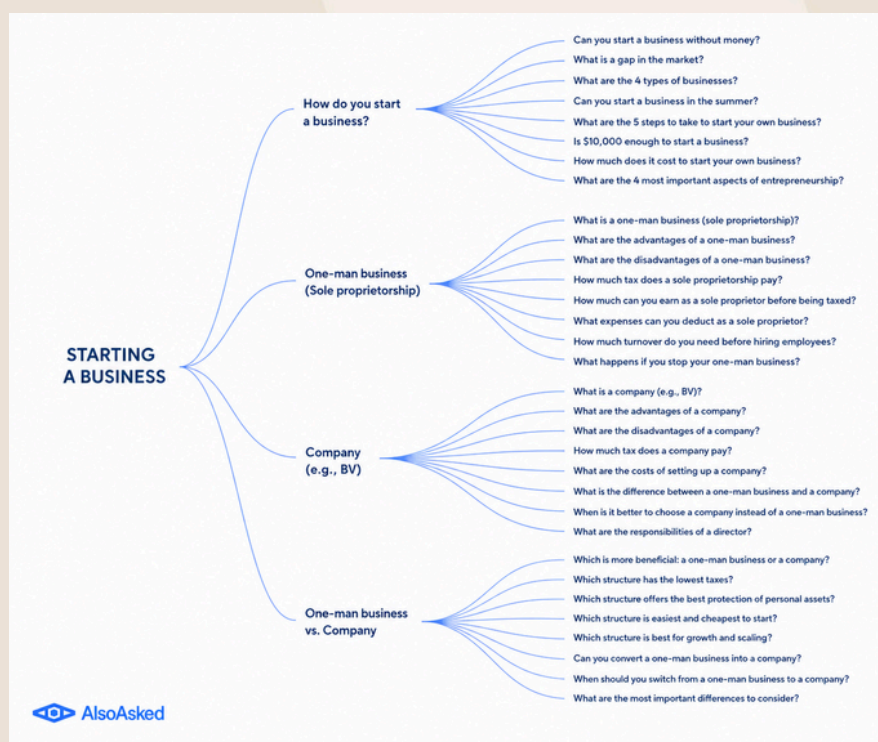


Figure 1. Search via AlsoAsked.be (28.04.2026) – questions related to “starting a business” in Belgium. – translated into English using AI.

The blind spot in entrepreneurship

Frameworks such as the Lean Startup approach and the related ‘Business Model Canvas’ (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010) support entrepreneurs in building innovative and financially viable ventures. They emphasize value creation, product–market fit, and scalability. The subsequential ‘Social Enterprise Model Canvas’, extended the original framework by integrating societal impact for social entrepreneurs (Sparviero, 2019).

What remains largely underdeveloped, however, is the position of the entrepreneur within this context. How can entrepreneurs ensure not only that they build profitable or impactful business ventures, but also that they are able to sustain them, in line with their own ambitions?

Regardless of differences in future perspectives or growth ambitions, research shows that even well-performing and highly profitable businesses are closed because entrepreneurs no longer perceive them as manageable or workable (Sardeshmukh et al., 2020).

Since 2010, there has been a sharp increase in academic research focusing on **the ‘human’ aspects of entrepreneurship**, with focus on stress, motivation, wellbeing, and work happiness. This reflects the recognition that how entrepreneurs feel influences how their ventures function. Research shows that entrepreneurs who experience higher wellbeing perform better, are more creative, identify more opportunities, and are less likely to close their business (Stephan, 2018). At the same time, this relationship is **bidirectional**: wellbeing and work happiness both contribute to entrepreneurial success and are also outcomes of it (Barbosa et al., 2025).

On average, entrepreneurs report higher levels of work happiness than employees, partly due to higher levels of autonomy, perceived meaningfulness, and learning opportunities. Moreover, their work has a stronger impact on overall life satisfaction—up to 30% (Annemans & NN Group, 2017; 2023). This is particularly true when entrepreneurship results from a personal career choice (Stephan, 2018).

However, entrepreneurship is not simply a “**road to happiness**.” It also entails risks such as stress, uncertainty, and work overload. The expression “living to work” is common in entrepreneurial contexts, particularly in high-income countries. For many entrepreneurs, their venture is more than work; it is a form of self-expression (GEM, 2023; Van Gelderen et al., 2020). While this strong engagement can be motivating, it also has a downside, including risks of workstrain, work addiction, and a lack of work-life balance (De Prins, 2023).

Entrepreneurship is therefore often experienced as an emotional rollercoaster, characterised by highs and lows in which success and setbacks [SD1] frequently coexist (De Cock et al., 2020).

Karasek’s Job Demand–Control model (Figure 2) illustrates that high job demands and pressure are not inherently problematic, if they are accompanied by sufficient control and recovery. This is not always the case for entrepreneurs, who are often dependent on external factors or ‘outside forces’ (e.g., late client payments, customer demands, market dynamics, inflation, technology, ...).

The challenge is therefore not to avoid pressure, but to prevent it from becoming structurally harmful, leading to emotional exhaustion, chronic stress and burnout, while ensuring adequate recovery and balance. At the same time, it is important to regularly reflect on one’s activities and assess whether entrepreneurship continues to generate enough energy and engagement, to sustain one’s motivation and entrepreneurial spirit.

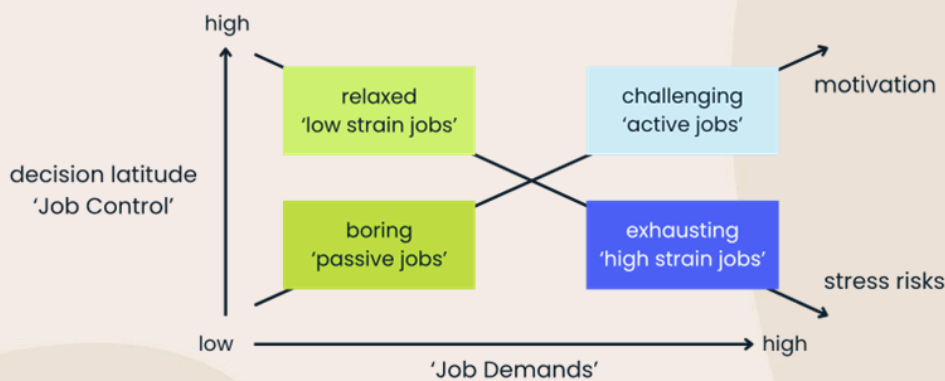


Figure 2. Karasek's Job Demand–Control model (SERV, 2018)

3 W's

To explicitly address this balance and support entrepreneurs in managing the emotions embedded in the entrepreneurial process, the '3W Framework' was developed within StartUpWellbeing. It is based on three interrelated dimensions: work happiness, workability, and wellbeing.

- **Work happiness**

Work happiness refers to the positive subjective experience of work, shaped by the individual, the work itself, and the environment. It arises from the fulfilment of positive experiences such as recognition, meaning, or competence, and from the alignment between personal values and a business vision or culture. It can generate positive energy and positive gain spirals.

- **Workability**

Workability refers to how work is organised and executed. It includes work structure, workload, culture, systems, and processes, as well as work–life balance.

- **Wellbeing**

Wellbeing refers to the physical, mental, and social health of the entrepreneur. It concerns the extent to which an individual feels vital, resilient, and balanced, both within and outside the work context.

3W-FRAMEWORK

Three dimensions of sustainable entrepreneurship



Figure 3. 3W-framework

These three dimensions can be distinguished individually but are also strongly interconnected. A change in one dimension often affects the others. For example, high workload may lead to fatigue (wellbeing), which in turn may reduce work happiness. The framework therefore emphasises balance among the three dimensions.

▶ Catamaran of Workability

The 3W Framework is operationalised through the reflection tool “Catamaran of Workability.” This reflective instrument makes entrepreneurial experiences more concrete, visual, and discussable. The catamaran metaphor represents balance, agility, and adaptability to different speeds, depending on individual preferences and goals. Whereas entrepreneurship is often associated with acceleration, rapid expansion, change and growth (“the sky is the limit”), this tool encourages reflection and space for slowing down, depending on one’s growth intentions and personal needs. In doing so, we also aim to offer an alternative to the dominant “rocket metaphor” (“shoot for the moon”) of entrepreneurship, whereas entrepreneurial journeys are rarely characterized by sudden success, efficiency, fast and unlimited growth.

The strength of the tool lies not in providing ready-made solutions, but in drawing attention to aspects that might otherwise be overlooked or insufficiently questioned.

It helps entrepreneurs identify their own “pains and gains,” recognize connections between work happiness, workability, and wellbeing, and potentially make different choices in how they organise their entrepreneurship.

It also supports the early identification of shifts in experience (“mission driven mindset”). For instance, someone who started from strong passion may gradually lose their business motivation due to different or other responsibilities. The tool brings such changes to light and encourages reflection, helping entrepreneurs reconnect with what energises them, ‘rekindle’ their passion and shape how they wish to experience entrepreneurship in a more sustainable and workable way.

Catamaran of workability Date: ____/____/____

Work stress (0-10)
How am I doing in terms of work stress?
0 10

Work Happiness (0-10)
How am I doing in terms of work happiness?
0 10
Reflection: do I still have enough momentum?

Future outlook
If I could adjust one thing, what would it be?
Make it concrete, link it to an action with a timeframe:

Reflection: where do I want to go? Am I still on track with what I want to achieve?

How satisfied am I with my work-life balance? (0-10)
0 10

Ambition and drive (0-10)
Level of motivation, drive, and enthusiasm
0 10
Reflection: which hull is weighing heavily? What does this mean for me and my business?

Capacity and resilience (0-10)
Level of energy, buffer, and resilience
0 10

Context and influences
Who or what strongly influences my entrepreneurship?

How does entrepreneurship feel today?
☐ calm ☐ peaceful ☐ turbulent ☐ stormy
☐ rough ☐ unpredictable
Alternative: _____
Reflection: Which waves are currently hitting hard?

Gains - resources
What pushes me forward?

Pains - stressors
What holds me back?

How is my health?
Physical - energy, fitness
☐ good ☐ moderate ☐ low ☐ issue of concern
Mental - focus, rest
☐ good ☐ moderate ☐ low ☐ issue of concern
Social - contacts, sense of connectedness
☐ good ☐ moderate ☐ low ☐ issue of concern

Support from environment
To what extent is my entrepreneurship supported by my social environment?
0 10

howest sup

Figure 4. Tool

In addition, the tool provides a shared language for discussing work happiness, workability, and wellbeing in entrepreneurship. It offers a clear one-page ‘blueprint’ with building blocks and can be used for individual reflection, team discussions, or evaluation processes.

Although such tools are sometimes considered overly generic (Felin et al., 2020), research shows that entrepreneurs experience them as helpful in creating structure and overview, particularly during periods of doubt or uncertainty. They function as a ‘cognitive lens’ that enables entrepreneurs to view their business from a different perspective, leading to new insights and decisions (Ghezzi, 2020).

At the same time, reflection alone is not sufficient: “talk doesn’t cook rice” (Barbosa et al., 2025). Insights only gain full meaning when translated into concrete actions and changes in behaviour, organisation, or context.

Conclusion

Entrepreneurship is not a linear process. It is characterised by highs and lows. The 3W Framework invites entrepreneurs not only to build ventures, but also to consciously reflect on themselves within that process.

References

- Annemans, L., & NN Group. (2017). Nationaal Geluksonderzoek België 2017. UGent / NN Group.
- Annemans, L., & NN Group. (2023). Nationaal Geluksonderzoek België 2023. UGent / NN Group.
- Barbosa, R., Barbosa, M., Pérez-Nebra, A. R., Villajos, E., & González-Ladrón-de-Guevara, F. (2025). A half-century perspective of entrepreneur's well-being: Comparing academic and global entrepreneurship monitor trends. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12, 746. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04869>
- De Cock, R., Denoo, L., & Clarysse, B. (2020). Surviving the emotional rollercoaster called entrepreneurship: The role of emotion regulation. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 35(2), 105936. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2019.04.004>
- De Prins, P. (2023). The dark side: Waarover er gezwezen wordt op de werkvloer. Pelckmans Uitgevers.
- Felin, T., Gambardella, A., Stern, S., & Zenger, T. R. (2020). Lean startup and the business model: Experimentation revisited. *Long Range Planning*, 53(4), 101889. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2019.06.002>
- Ghezzi, A. (2020). How entrepreneurs make sense of lean startup approaches: Business models as cognitive lenses to generate fast and frugal heuristics. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 161, 120324. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120324>
- Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. (2023). Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2023/2024 Global Report. GEM Consortium.
- Osterwalder, A., and Y. Pigneur. 2010. *Business Model Generation: A Handbook for Visionaries, Game Changers, and Challengers*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- SERV – Stichting Innovatie & Arbeid. (2018). *Werkbaar werk en de jobtypes van Karasek*. Brussel: SERV. <https://www.serv.be/stichting/publicatie/werkbaar-werk-en-jobtypes-karasek>
- Sardeshmukh, S. R., Goldsby, M. G., & Smith, R. M. (2020).
- Are work stressors and emotional exhaustion driving exit intentions among business owners? *Journal of Small Business Management*, 58(4), 544–574. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jsbm.12477>
- Sparviero, S. (2019). The case for a socially oriented business model canvas: The social enterprise model canvas. *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 10(2), 232–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19420676.2018.1541011>
- Stephan, U. (2018). Entrepreneurs' mental health and well-being: A review and research agenda. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 32(3), 290–322. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2017.0001>
- Van Gelderen M, Shirokova G, Shchegolev V, Beliaeva T. Striving for Entrepreneurial Autonomy: A Comparison of Russia and the Netherlands. *Management and Organization Review*. 2020;16(1):107–138. doi:10.1017/mor.2019.24