

*The Accidental Entrepreneur,
or,
Engineering for FunŠ and Profit?*

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The path from idea to product passes through several distinct phases: Research, opportunity recognition, technology validation, product development, commercialization. Each phase embodies a distinct set of activities, with distinct yet complementary skill sets. And the people necessary to make this process happen oftentimes have radically distinct perspectives as well. A few stereotypical generalizations: Technologists over-estimate the value of their ideas; businessmen under-appreciate the laws of physics; everybody under-estimates the level of effort necessary to bring a successful product to market, and over-estimates how much money they will make.

The author will provide an overview of technology entrepreneurship from the perspective of a "backsliding engineer," and his experiences in starting four high-tech companies. Special emphasis will be given to Senera, a development-stage company creating performance-based structural health monitoring systems and services for our nation's aging bridges. Topics illustrated by example include: What is the difference between an idea and an opportunity? How do you match technology push with market pull? Do engineers and venture capitalists share the same genotype? Can you really turn an idea into a product? And, most importantly, why would anyone want to do this in the first place?