InternexT

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT REVIEW

v.20, n. 3, e869, 2025| e-ISSN: 1980-4865 | http://internext.espm.br

CORPORATE LEAN STARTUP: UNCOVERING THE PROBLEM BEFORE THE SOLUTION

Ricardo Tomaz Caires[1]*

[1]Escola Superior de Propaganda e Marketing – São Paulo (SP), Brazil.

ARTICLE DETAILS

Received:
May 30, 2025

Accepted:
July 22, 2025

Available online:
Nov. 17, 2025

Double Blind Review System

Editors
Priscila Rezende da Costa
Mário Ogasavara
Alex Fabianne de Paulo
Diogo Barbosa Leite
José Jassuipe da Silva Morais

ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the study was to discuss the application of the Lean Startup approach in mature companies, emphasizing the importance of managers dedicating time to structuring the discovery and analysis of the problem prior to defining solutions or minimum viable products (MVPs). The text warns about the dangers of accelerated innovation without proper diagnosis and argues for a methodology that integrates purpose, learning, and value delivery. **Relevance/Originality:** The article connects Lean Startup to classic tools such as the Ishikawa Diagram and the Five Whys, proposing their integrated application in corporate contexts. It highlights gaps in problem validation and warns about the superficiality with which many MVPs are developed. **Social/Management Contributions:** It promotes more conscious, data-driven innovation by strengthening the alignment between the real problem and the proposed solution. It encourages an investigative culture that avoids waste and increases the effectiveness of outcomes.

Keywords: Lean Startup, Problem Validation, Innovation, Minimum Viable Products (MVPs), Agile Management.

LEAN STARTUP CORPORATIVO: DESCOBRINDO O PROBLEMA ANTES DA SOLUÇÃO

DETALHES DO ARTIGO

Recebido:
30 Maio, 2025

Aceito:
22 Jul., 2025

Disponível online:
17 Nov., 2025

Sistema de revisão
"Double Blind Review"

Editores
Priscila Rezende da Costa
Mário Ogasavara
Alex Fabianne de Paulo
Diogo Barbosa Leite
José Jassuipe da Silva Morais

RESUMO

Objetivo: Discutir a aplicação do *Lean Startup* em empresas maduras, enfatizando a importância de os gestores se dedicarem à estruturação da descoberta e análise do problema previamente à definição de soluções ou produtos mínimos viáveis (MVPs). O texto adverte sobre os perigos da inovação acelerada sem o devido diagnóstico, defendendo uma metodologia que integre propósito, aprendizado e entrega de valor. **Relevância / Originalidade:** O artigo conecta o *Lean Startup* a ferramentas clássicas como Ishikawa e os 5 Porquês, propondo sua aplicação integrada no contexto corporativo. Destaca lacunas na validação de problemas e alerta para a superficialidade com que muitos MVPs são desenvolvidos. **Contribuições Sociais / para a Gestão:** Promove uma inovação mais consciente e baseada em dados, fortalecendo o alinhamento entre problema real e solução proposta. Estimula uma cultura investigativa que evita desperdícios e amplia a efetividade das entregas.

Palavras-chave: *Lean Startup*, Validação de Problema, Inovação, Produtos Mínimos Viáveis, Gestão Ágil.

*Corresponding author: eng.ricardocaires@gmail.com

https://doi.org/10.18568/internext.v20i3.869

INTRODUCTION

The Lean Startup approach, conceived by Eric Ries (2011), revolutionized the way new business initiatives approach innovation. By proposing build–measure–learn (BML) cycles grounded in constant experimentation and validated learning, Ries (2011) introduced a paradigm for product and service development in high-uncertainty contexts. This philosophy transcended the startup universe and was gradually embraced by large corporations seeking greater agility, efficiency, and proximity to their markets (Blank, 2013).

However, the adoption of the Lean Startup approach by mature organizations is not without its challenges. Ghezzi (2020) points out that the traditional corporate environment tends to superficially internalize Lean Startup, often adopting its instruments (such as minimum viable products—MVPs—and A/B tests) without a structural shift in how problems are framed. In many cases, enthusiasm for quick solutions and fashionable methodologies replaces a deeper, systemic investigation of organizational contexts. The absence of a robust problem-investigation stage leaves iterative validation cycles vulnerable, as they rest on flawed initial assumptions.

The central concept of lean thinking is the elimination of waste (Womack & Jones, 1996). This includes not only the waste of materials or time but also of cognitive and financial effort channeled into solutions that fail to address significant problems. As in Lean Manufacturing, it is essential to identify root causes before proposing any intervention. This is where tools such as the Ishikawa Diagram and the Five Whys (Ohno, 1988) are vital for systematizing the understanding of the causes of a problem before defining solutions.

Ries (2011) emphasizes that many apparent technical problems are manifestations of deeper human problems. Ignoring this investigation can lead teams to run fast iteration cycles that merely mask symptoms, without generating sustainable solutions. Instead of asking "how do we improve this product?," the more appropriate question might be: "Are we solving the right problem?." Moreover, this shift in mindset encourages more customer-centric management-less guided by internal assumptions and more oriented by data and active listening.

In the field of management research, this perspective can also foster better-grounded studies by encouraging researchers to begin their investigations with the clarity and relevance of the problem before proposing solutions. This contributes to the formulation of more robust hypotheses, greater alignment between theory and practice, and results in higher organizational applicability.

1. FOUNDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In the learning cycle proposed by Ries (2018), known as BML), validated knowledge must be constructed upon solid hypotheses, with understanding the problem as an essential first step. In his work, the author highlights the importance of using tools such as root cause analysis and the Five Whys to understand the underlying reasons for errors and failures in a product or service. This point is expanded in Caires's dissertation (2020), which incorporates this principle by proposing a Lean Startup application guide based on a literature review, recommending the use of techniques such as the Five Whys and the Ishikawa Diagram in the learning stage of the BML cycle. The study's results underscore that lack of diagnostic clarity is a recurring factor in misdirected MVP failures and that systematizing the problem-discovery process is essential for generating relevant value propositions and reducing organizational resource waste.

Felin et al. (2020) observe that although Lean Startup is often presented as a method grounded in experimentation, its practical application in organizations often lacks rigor in the initial formulation of hypotheses. In many projects, the problem hypothesis is treated as an arbitrary assumption, without prior investigation that proves its relevance. As a result, even well-executed tests may rely on weak premises, compromising the validity of the learning generated. The outcome is a biased iterative cycle in which the company repeats experiments without actually learning what is essential to deliver value.

Studies such as Giardino et al. (2014) analyze startups that fail because they create solutions for poorly understood or non-existent problems. In the corporate environment, this behavior translates into "innovation theater," where prototypes, hackathons, and innovation labs are implemented without direct relation to the organization's real challenges (Scheuen-

stuhl et al., 2021). The distance between the solution created and the customer's pain widens, resulting in low adoption, resource waste, and team frustration.

Within this context, the association between the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010) and problem-diagnosis tools proves powerful. The Canvas provides a systemic view of the business model; however, without a deep understanding of customer-segment problems and their causes, the risk of formulating an irrelevant value proposition is high. Applying causal-investigation tools alongside value-hypothesis formulation makes the process more robust and connects cause, effect, and proposition.

Frederiksen and Brem (2017) reinforce that the scientific mindset of Lean Startup requires more than testing solutions: it requires testing the understanding of the problem. This approach suggests that iterative cycles are necessary in the problem-discovery phase as well—not only after an initial solution has been defined. Combining this discovery with qualitative metrics and interactions with real users creates a more responsive ecosystem that is less prone to upstream errors.

For management, this translates into concrete opportunities: structuring interdisciplinary teams that begin their project journeys with immersion in data, stakeholder interviews, and the use of visual investigation tools. Moreover, the problematization phase should be valued as an essential part of the innovation cycle, with adequate time, training, and indicators allocated to it. Investments in this phase—often invisible to traditional management—yield exponential returns in efficiency, alignment, and impact.

The result is a structured learning environment and evidence-based decision-making. By avoiding the waste of energy on solutions disconnected from reality, organizations increase their ability to deliver true customer value and to innovate with efficiency and purpose. Ultimately, they cultivate a culture that confidently learns from the market, iterates not only on solutions but also on the problems themselves, and makes decisions that truly transform.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Applying the Lean Startup approach in corporate environments requires more than superficial adoption of tools and rapid iteration cycles. This editorial comment argues that the essence of the approach lies in building validated learning on solid hypotheses—and this is only possible when one starts with a deep understanding of the problem to be solved. Ignoring this stage compromises not only short-term results but also team confidence and the sustainability of innovation programs.

By incorporating classic practices such as the Ishikawa Diagram and the Five Whys, Lean Startup can become more robust and reliable, mitigating the risk of "innovation theater" and prioritizing what truly matters to the customer. What is proposed here is a synthesis between agility and depth: understand better to err less. The time devoted to problem discovery should not be seen as a delay but as an investment that reduces waste, improves decision-making, and increases solution effectiveness.

Therefore, the urgency for innovation must be mediated by an organizational culture that values questioning, continuous learning, and genuine alignment with market needs. Only then can Lean Startup fulfill its promise of transforming ideas into tangible results with real and lasting impact.

REFERENCES

Blank, S. (2013). Why the Lean Startup changes everything. Harvard Business Review, 91(5), 63–72.

Caires, R. T. (2020). Proposta de guia para aplicação da metodologia Lean Startup em empreendimentos de base tecnológica [Dissertação do Mestrado Profissional em Propriedade Intelectual e Transferência de Tecnologia para Inovação, Universidade Estadual de Maringá].

Felin, T., Gambardella, A., Stern, S., & Zenger, T. (2020). Lean Startup and the business model: Experimentation revisited. Long Range Planning, 53(4), 101889.

Frederiksen, D. L., & Brem, A. (2017). How do entrepreneurs think they create value? A scientific reflection of Eric Ries' Lean Startup approach. International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal, 13, 169–189. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-016-0411-x

Ghezzi, A. (2020). How entrepreneurs make sense of Lean Startup approaches: Business models as cognitive lenses. Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 161, 120324. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120324

Giardino, C., Wang, X., & Abrahamsson, P. (2014). Why early-stage software startups fail: A behavioral framework. In C. Lassenius & K. Smolander (Eds.), Software Business. Towards Continuous Value Delivery. ICSOB 2014. Lecture Notes in Business Information Processing (Vol. 182). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08738-2_3

Ohno, T. (1988). Toyota production system: Beyond large-scale production. Productivity Press.

Osterwalder, A., & Pigneur, Y. (2010). Business Model Generation: A handbook for visionaries, game changers, and challengers. Wiley.

Ries, E. (2011). The Lean Startup: How today's entrepreneurs use continuous innovation to create radically successful businesses. Crown Books.

Ries, E. (2018). O estilo startup: Como as empresas modernas usam o empreendedorismo para se transformar e crescer. Leya.

Scheuenstuhl, F., Bican, P. M., & Brem, A. (2021). How can the Lean Startup approach improve the innovation process of established companies? International Journal of Innovation Management, 25(3), 21500298. https://doi.org/10.1142/S1363919621500298

Womack, J. P., & Jones, D. T. (1996). A máquina que mudou o mundo. Campus.

How to cite this article:

Caires, R. (2025). Lean startup corporativo: descobrindo o problema antes da solução. *Internext*, 20(3), e869. https://doi.org/10.18568/internext.v20i3.869