



How to build more impact-driven businesses

We need to get the world's best entrepreneurial talent working to solve society's biggest challenges - and then give them the support and resources they need to succeed

Ella Goldner

Co-founder & General Manager
Zinc



N.B. This essay is an edited version of the transcript of Ella's 20/30 Visions interview, which you can watch at www.bridgesfundmanagement/2030Visions.

When we started Zinc, our motivation – the thing that really brought us together – was the idea that if we could put the hundreds of millions of talented people out there to work on the biggest societal issues of our time, we might have a chance of solving them.

There were a few ingredients that we thought were really important. The first was talent. How do we get the best talent in the world excited by the opportunity of working on these really big issues?

The second was to break down silos. Often there are people in government trying to solve these issues; people in academia doing research; people working in charities and NGOs. But there was nowhere they could all come together in an interdisciplinary way.

And third, we noticed that some of the people trying to build these new innovations and solutions didn't necessarily have the right science behind them. We wanted to make sure that these companies had a body of evidence that could help them achieve what they wanted to achieve.

So it was all about solving big societal issues in a different way, in a commercial way, using the best talent.

HOW THE ZINC MODEL WORKS

We start by putting out a specific manifesto – a call to action based on the current state of play. We tell people: this is our mission, and these are the opportunities we see within it. Then we help people to think about how they can apply themselves to that mission.

For example, our current 'venture builder' is around transforming businesses that have the most impact on our envi-

ronment. So we're looking for people to build solutions that enable businesses to either reduce their harm on the environment, or to improve it.

We usually have about 1,000 applications for every cohort; and through a rigorous process, we choose about 70 people who will join us on the first day of a new venture builder.

Some of these people will be second- or third-time entrepreneurs – so they've started companies before, they understand what it takes, and now they want to do it in an area that they care about. Some come from commercial roles, so it's easy for them to translate that into becoming an entrepreneur.

The other group is people who have previously worked on the impact side – maybe in policy, or research, or in NGOs or charities. They've seen the problem first-hand, and they feel really frustrated by the lack of innovation and the inability to scale. These are people who wouldn't necessarily have seen themselves as entrepreneurs. But when this opportunity presents itself – and when they see people like them who have started companies in our portfolio – that inspires them to take the risk.

That's really exciting, because these are people that actually have a really good understanding of the problem and the opportunity. And if they're matched with the right person, that really unlocks a lot of innovation.

The venture builder also includes 100 'visiting fellows'. These are experts who might not be able or want to leave their job, but they want to be part of the cohort that is trying to solve this problem. So they volunteer their time to provide workshops and advice and connections.

“If we can put the hundreds of millions of talented people out there to work on the biggest societal issues of our time, we might have a chance of solving them”



A key element of the Zinc model is helping would-be entrepreneurs to identify and team up with the right co-founder

Photo: Mimi Thian / Unsplash



In addition, we have about 25 to 50 executive coaches per cohort who work with the entrepreneurs; again, people who are motivated by unlocking human potential. So on the first day of each venture-builder, you have about 200 people, all united by this one mission.

ACCELERATING TO SCALE

The founders then have six months to navigate through two questions: one, who do they want to be co-founding their business with; and two, what is the problem they want to solve. So by the end of the six months, if they're successful, they'll have a co-founder, they'll have agreed a problem they're really passionate about, and they'll have shown some traction in terms of how they're going to solve it. We're looking to further fund another set of about 15 ventures that will come out of that cohort.

After this, we've developed an accelerator programme, which is another six months of intense, tailored support: we help with fundraising, go-to-market, products, talent, advisors, and so on. The fellows and coaches stay involved, and there's also lots of peer-to-peer support.

Then they move into our portfolio, where we continue to provide support. That might be access to grants. They might come in for a workshop to think about how they measure impact. They might want us to help them think through a senior hire.

Part of the reason why we started Zinc was that we didn't think there was a very good fundraising ecosystem: just angels, and a bit of early-stage money. Today, there's a much bigger pool of investors looking for these opportunities.

Over the last 12 months, the early-stage investment space hasn't been great – but from what we've seen, areas like climate haven't suffered as much. There are still funds that have raised money and have an appetite to deploy it. There are some commercial, generalist funds, who see climate as an opportunity because it's growing and there's not enough innovation, and they like the fact it has a positive impact. And you have more specialist funds that are specifically looking at climate.

So I'm quite bullish about the chances of our companies finding investors – and if they're good, they'll find smart money too.

THE THREE BIGGEST CHALLENGES

One of the hardest pieces of this process is finding the right co-founder.

The societal issues that we're trying to solve require experience, and expertise, and a deep understanding of how to solve the problem in a way that is commercial and scalable. If you want to create a company that has at least two of those three elements, I think you need at least two people.

Plus it's a really hard journey; going it on your own is really hard. So if you have a co-founder that can pick things up

“I think more people want to have a meaningful career, where they build things that matter, as well as being unapologetically commercially ambitious”

when you let go and vice versa, that increases the chances of these companies succeeding,

What we've tried really hard to do is to make sure people don't jump on the first person they see who looks like them – because for us, the whole point is that innovation comes from bringing together diversity of thought.

Another big challenge comes when you're trying to solve problems that are not about you. If you're not representative of the population you're trying to solve for, it's going to be harder to reach that population. So we've developed partnerships with charities and foundations and research centres, to help people get access to users that may not be the people they hang out with or represent.

Third, fundraising is still hard. There are externalities that are not necessarily tied to how the business is doing. And if you're a founder from an underrepresented background, for example, it is harder for you to raise the initial capital; all the data points to that.

We're trying to tackle this by building a very active ecosystem of investors who can help with introductions, or give feedback, or help in the early stage. (I personally created a network that invests in women founders, because I saw that was a limiting factor.)

But it's still hard, because lots of people still see the world as being philanthropy and doing good on the one hand, then hard-nosed commercial business on the other. There are more of us who see the overlap between the two, that in fact one plus one can equal three. But that's still not necessarily the case for most investors.

WHAT MORE CAN WE DO?

What we've found is that the ecosystem is a huge part of our design principles. We've built a really big network:

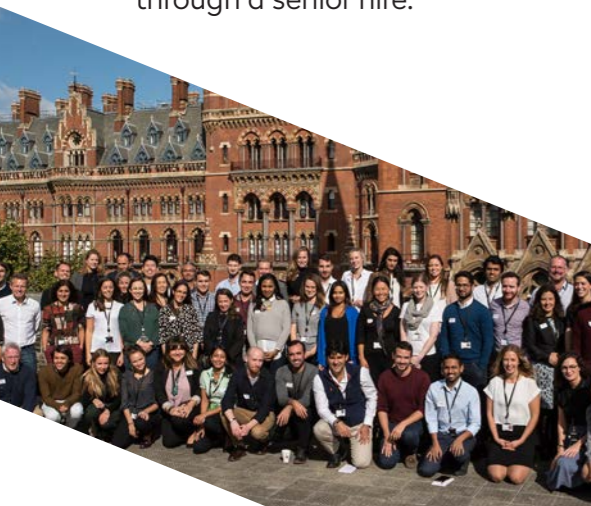
some 20,000 people advocating for us. London's a really good place to be: we're able to bring talent in from across the world. And there's an internal network effect – where missions overlap and one thing leads to another. Our vision for Zinc is to make this the best place for people to experiment with ways to have impact at scale.

A lot of other venture-builders have blitz-scaled around the world. But the challenge is that you need an ecosystem that has the same ingredients we have here: investors, academia, local government, national government, policymakers. If you go to the U.S., say, it's very different: the commercial hubs are not necessarily in the same place as the academic hubs or the policy hubs or the NGOs.

I think overall as a country, we should also be doing much more to make entrepreneurship a valid career choice – which means starting in school. How do we get people more curious about working in this environment from the outset? And from a diversity point of view, how do we make sure that underrepresented populations get access?

But I do think that the ecosystem is growing. Across the generations – whether it's Gen Z, or millennials or baby boomers – I think more people want to be able to have a meaningful career, where they build things that matter, as well as being unapologetically commercially ambitious. They don't want to get to their end of their life and think: what did I do to help society?

Ella Goldner is the co-founder and GM of Zinc. She is a former Strategy Director at IPG Mediabrands, one of the world's largest media agencies, working with global leading brands. She is the Co-Founder of NewCo UK, which connects the most successful large corporates with the most innovative start-ups in the UK. Ella started her career as an engineer in Tel Aviv's hi-tech aerospace industry, before becoming a consultant to tech firms.



One of Zinc's recent cohorts





20/30 Visions is a series of interviews with global thought-leaders, exploring how we build a more sustainable and inclusive world in the next decade

BRIDGES
Fund Management

