

How to spin silicon into solid gold

Tech entrepreneur Matt Barrie shakes up business models, writes **Stephen Lacey**.

There aren't many 38-year-olds running their own companies valued about \$250 million. Then again, there aren't many with the passion to succeed like Matt Barrie.

The Sydney-based technology entrepreneur founded *freelancer.com* in 2009, and within two years it was turning over \$35 million a year. The online recruitment company has about 3.5 million registered users and has earned Barrie accolades including being named the 2010 entrepreneur of the year (*Dynamic Business* magazine) and the inaugural *BRW* entrepreneur of the year (2011). He was also cited as one of the 10 most influential people in Australian IT by the *International Business Times*.

Barrie studied at Sydney Grammar School on a scholarship, then enrolled at the University of Sydney, where he attained first-class honours in a bachelor of science (computer science) and a bachelor of engineering (electrical engineering). In 1997 he travelled to the US to complete his master's in electrical engineering at Stanford University.

"It was an interesting time," he says. "We were right in the middle of the dotcom boom. One of the classes I did... was called technology entrepreneurship, and PayPal co-founder Ken Howery was one of my classmates. Out of that course a whole bunch of companies was started, from Andale to like.com. All told, they had a market capitalisation of \$3 billion to \$4 billion."

Barrie was so inspired by the course at Stanford that he now teaches a similar class, technology venture creation, at the University



of Sydney. He takes 40 final-year students and puts them into 10 teams of four. They have to write a business plan and pitch it to venture capitalists and entrepreneurs.

"It's been so successful that I'm already seeing companies emerge that have attracted real funding," Barrie says. "One of these is

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leasate.com. It's going to really shake up the rental market.

"Another company is called Minefold. It was selected to go through the Y Combinator program - a technology incubator in Silicon Valley. It's incredibly competitive to get into. Dropbox emerged from that same incubator."

Barrie is no stranger to Silicon Valley. He worked as a security consultant for Securify after graduating from Stanford, and later acquired security-information

website Packetstorm. He says the digital revolution is just beginning. "It's a gold rush out there ... If you've ever dreamt of starting a business, there's never been a better time; it's never been easier or cheaper. The internet now has 2 billion people connected. That's 2 billion potential customers."

For those thinking of starting an online business, Barrie recommends looking at old-school industries that are highly fragmented. He says real estate is ripe for a digital shake-up. "The industry is archaic, inefficient and highly fragmented," he says. "Why does every suburb in the country need a half-a-dozen real estate agencies in a row occupying the most expensive land in town? It just doesn't make any sense. People no longer look through the agency window to find a property. They look online."

Not interested in real estate? Barrie recommends wandering along a high street, looking at businesses and questioning whether things could be done differently.

"No matter what career you are getting into, it's important that everyone has an understanding of what's happening in the world of technology," he says.

"The world is getting hyper-competitive, so unleash your inner entrepreneur and keep on top of the pack. Otherwise, you are going to get steamrolled."



Ideas man ... Matt Barrie now teaches others to embrace the business reach of the internet; (far left) the IT industry has come a long way.

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