

How to Make Better Decisions with an MVP Mindset

A guide to using product management strategies in your daily life



Jessica Greene / June 12, 2018

It's human nature to seek perfection.

I learned that lesson quickly as a product manager when I was tasked with

guiding web development projects from first idea to formal launch. No one wants to release a product that's not perfect, right? So the company executives who funded the projects always wanted every feature imaginable, each with the shininess of the newest iPhone.

Example: I once had a project sponsor ask for "Google-like search functionality" for a rarely used feature of a project—one that was already behind schedule and over budget. He felt certain that in two weeks, we could (and should) recreate what Google had been building for decades.

That's when I introduced him to the concept of a **minimum viable product (MVP)**.

An MVP defines the absolute *minimum* features you need for a project to feel like it's complete. And not complete in the it-has-every-feature-you-want kind of way. Just in the it's-ready-for-the-world kind of way. It has no wish lists or maybes in the scope. Instead, it's all about, as the name implies, the minimum you need for the project to be valuable.

The concept of MVP is most prominent in web development projects, but it also maps onto decision-making in all aspects of life. Before I get into that, though, let's start from the beginning.

What Is a Minimum Viable Product?


What better place to get the definition of MVP than from Frank Robinson, CEO of SyncDev, Inc. and the person who coined the term?

We define MVP as that unique product that maximizes return on risk for both the vendor and the customer. - SyncDev

So the goal of an MVP is to reduce risk and maximize return. Said another way, all MVP's need to meet 2 requirements:

1. They must deliver value.
2. They must allow you to gather feedback.

The first part is simple: If you don't deliver any value with your product, it's not really worth doing in the first place. As for the second part, gathering feedback is what allows you to see if the value you delivered satisfies your end user. You can determine what's working and what's not—and where to go next. You there. Basically, you're pursuing a long-term goal in a series of short-term steps. Instead of looking to the finish line, you're looking to the next checkpoint. And each of these checkpoints is its own MVP.



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CHECKPOINT. AND EACH OF THOSE CHECKPOINTS IS ITS OWN MVP.

For more context, we'll take a look at how to use MVP within a web development project.

Let's say you want to start accepting credit card payments for purchases on your website. You recently purchased a rug from [Rugs Direct](#) and decided its interactive form would be perfect for your site.



The image shows a payment form titled "3 PAYMENT & PURCHASE SUMMARY". It includes several input fields and a card graphic. The fields are: a text input for "CREDIT CARD #", a text input for "CARD HOLDER NAME", two dropdown menus for "EXP. MONTH" and "EXP. YEAR", and a text input for "SECURITY CODE". All fields are marked with an asterisk and the word "REQUIRED". To the right of the form is a gray graphic of a credit card with a chip, a card number, the name "FULL NAME", and logos for VISA, MasterCard, AMEX, and DISCOVER.

You take the request to your developers—basically "hey, please copy this"—and they tell you that it will take 3 months and cost \$5,000 to build. The problem? You need it in a month, and you only have \$1,000.

That's right: You need an MVP.

Remember, to find your MVP, you need to determine the smallest amount of

work you can do that both delivers value and allows you to gather feedback. Let's walk through it step by step.

Step 1

You need to be sure you're delivering value, so start by defining what's valuable about what you're asking for. Put simply: What is the must-have? In this case, the value of the project is being able to accept credit card payments on your site.

Step 2

Next, look back at the original ask ("hey, please copy this") and determine what you *absolutely must build* to deliver that value. In this case, that's the credit card form (shown on the left side of the image above). You can't accept credit card payments without giving users a way to enter their card information.

Step 3

Now you need to be sure that your MVP allows you to get feedback. By releasing only the credit card form, you can gather feedback from your customers and determine if the interactive card feature (shown on the right side of the image above) is actually needed. If so, you can always build and

release the interactive component later. But if not, building and releasing your MVP first saved a lot of time and money.

So you can see that an MVP lets you make small, incremental progress toward a larger goal, deriving value and gathering feedback at each step along the way.

Folks in Silicon Valley love mottos. Two of their favorites: "Fail fast" and "Perfect is the enemy of the good." Sure, we'd all love to succeed fast and always be perfect, but that's not usually how life goes. You need to make mistakes to learn—so you might as well make those mistakes quickly.

How MVP Leads to Better Decisions

Now it's time to see how MVP can be mapped onto personal decision-making.

We're not coming up with this connection ourselves, either. Frank Romano himself is on board:

"MVP is more than its definition. It's more than a series of procedural steps. It's a mindset. It says, think big for the long term but small for the short term."

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If MVP is a mindset, that means it has applications well beyond web development. In a personal setting, adopting an MVP mindset helps you tackle the smallest valuable steps you can take toward long-term goals, testing the accuracy of your assumptions along the way.

In layman's terms: baby steps.

To start, let's look at an example of what can happen when you *don't* use an MVP mindset in your personal decision-making.

I knew a girl—let's call her Mary—who had spent 2 years and thousands of dollars pursuing an undergraduate degree in teaching. She had always wanted to be a teacher and had a feeling that it would be a rewarding gig for her. In her third year, the program required her to work as a student teacher. And after a week of student teaching, she realized that she didn't like teaching. At all.

Where did she go wrong?

Mary had set a long-term goal. That's not a problem in and of itself, of course, but she didn't set any checkpoints for herself along the way. Instead, she looked ahead to the finish line, which didn't give her any early opportunities to

validate her assumption that she would enjoy teaching. Instead, she spent a

validate her assumption that she would enjoy teaching. Instead, she spent a lot of time and money on classes she didn't need. If she'd gone into it with an MVP mindset, she could have gathered feedback ("Do I actually like teaching?") before diving in head first.

OK, it's easy to identify what went wrong. But how about some solutions?

Mary needed a solid first MVP that would have

- delivered value on Mary's long-term goal of becoming a teacher and
- given Mary an opportunity to validate her assumption that she wanted to be a teacher.

There are plenty of ways she could have hit both these marks. Maybe she could have volunteered at a summer camp or found work as a tutor. Maybe she could have even shadowed a teacher during her first semester of college—or the summer before. Any of these options would have given her experience in the field while providing feedback along the way.

Sure, web development projects and your personal life are completely different beasts. But using an MVP mindset in either one will save you time and money.

Just ask Mary.

JUST ASK MARY.

How to Find Your MVP

Now let's start from scratch and walk through the process of finding an MVP for your personal goals. To start, you need to answer 3 questions:

1. What is my goal?
2. What are all of the steps I need to take to meet that goal?
3. What are some *small* steps I can take to make progress toward my goal that will test my assumptions along the way?

Now that Mary knows she doesn't want to be a teacher, she needs to choose another career path. But she doesn't want to make the same mistake she made last time, so she's going to use our tried and true MVP mindset.

1. What is my goal?

- To find a career I love

2. What are all of the steps I need to take to meet that goal?

- Choose a career

- Earn the right credentials
- Get professional experience
- Land a job within that field

3. What are some *small* steps I can take to make progress toward my goal that will test my assumptions along the way?

- Talk to a career counselor to learn about different types of careers
- Take a college course in that field to see if I enjoy the subject matter
- Volunteer/intern for some work in that career field to see if I enjoy it

All 3 of Mary's answers to the third question are their own little MVP's. Each is valuable to Mary's long-term goal of finding a career she loves, but each also gives Mary a quick way to gain feedback before taking major steps. In the end, Mary will need to tackle a whole slew of MVP's as she progresses toward her goal.

One Big Decision vs. Many MVP's

That's right: Finding an MVP isn't something you do once. Instead, the MVP mindset lets you make small, incremental progress toward a larger goal. So

instead of stressing over all the different steps she needs to take, Mary just

instead of stressing over all the different steps she needs to take, Mary just picks one and runs with it. Because it's a *baby step*, it's okay if she fails.



You don't have to pick just one door.

In fact, she might learn something valuable if she fails.

Let's do a quick run through of Mary's MVP's as they happen:

- First, Mary decides to talk to a career counselor. The career counselor gives Mary lots of options to consider, but she's most interested in graphic design. So her initial MVP is complete, but that doesn't mean it's time to

change her major and enroll in a bunch of graphic design courses next semester. Mary should follow that MVP up with another.

- Next, she decides to take a single graphic design class to see if she enjoys the subject matter. This MVP does what a good MVP should do: It provides value by getting her closer to a degree, and it helps her validate her assumptions that she enjoys the field of graphic design.
- After that, Mary chooses another MVP: She takes what she's learned and volunteers to do some design work for a local charity over the summer. This time, the value is gaining experience in the field in a more authentic environment, and the assumption she's trying to confirm is that she'll enjoy the work itself—not just the field.

After completing these 3 MVP's, Mary is no longer just *assuming* she would enjoy a career as a graphic designer: She now has experiential evidence that she will. Her MVP mindset shouldn't end there, of course, but maybe her next MVP will be a bit bigger, like changing her major and working toward her degree again. What's important isn't necessarily the size of the MVP; it's the mindset you use to establish that step, one that encourages you to validate your assumptions, make progress quickly, and derive value in increments along the way.

A Few Final Tips for Finding Your MVP

I've hopefully convinced you that finding your MVP will help you with personal decisions, but it's not easy to take the leap into the MVP mindset. Especially when you're feeling confident about something, it can be hard to admit that you should still take baby steps along the way to that something. So I'll leave you with a few final tips that will help as you embark on your MVP journey:

- **Ask others for advice.** Sometimes, you won't know how to answer the questions needed to find your MVP. That's okay. Ask someone you trust to help you come up with ideas. Sometimes, an outsider's perspective highlights a possibility you hadn't considered on your own.
- **Consider many options.** It's all about non-judgmental brainstorming. Think through all possible solutions and make sure you're giving them each their fair shot. If you only test one solution, you may never discover that another possibility was ideal.
- **Remember that it's okay—and often good—to fail.** Sometimes, you'll fail. You'll invalidate your assumptions. But with an MVP mindset, you'll fail *fast*, and you'll have plenty of time and resources to try again.

Like with most things you practice, your ability to find your MVP will improve over time. The more you think about decisions in a series of valuable steps, the easier drilling down to those steps becomes. Eventually, you may find yourself executing on MVP's without even realizing you're doing it.

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About the Author

Jessica Greene is a freelance marketing and business writer. A former writing instructor and corporate marketer, she uses her subject-matter expertise and passion for educating others to develop actionable, in-depth, user-focused content.

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