ADVANCE BUSINESS GROWTH
2026 | MAGAZINE

BUSINESS LIFECYCLE PHASES

1 HOW-TO BUSINESS GUIDE SERIES

WHERE IS YOUR BUSINESS IN THE LIFECYCLE?
Understanding your phase is the first step toward unlocking growth.

EVERY PHASE HAS A PURPOSE
Your evolution isn't accidental — it's strategic.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW MORE THAN EVER
The silver tsunami, workforce shifts, and ownership transitions are reshaping the Midwest economy.

SUITE 128 BUSINESS NEWSLETTER
UNI University of Northern Iowa Business & Community Services

Executive Summary

EVERY BUSINESS IS IN MOTION — moving toward growth, transition, or reinvention. The leaders who succeed aren't the ones who try to avoid change; they're the ones who know how to use it.

Todd E. **Hutcheson**
Director, ADVANCE **IOWA**
and Adjunct Professor

The Four Phases **MATTER**

In today's Midwest business landscape, shaped by shifting markets, workforce transitions, and the accelerating silver tsunami of retiring owners, strategic clarity has become more than a leadership skill. It's a competitive advantage.

The Business Lifecycle Framework gives leaders that clarity. It helps organizations understand where they stand today, what pressures they're experiencing, and what opportunities lie ahead. More importantly, it identifies the strategic priorities that matter most right now — whether you're building, scaling, optimizing, or preparing for what comes next.

This compendium distills months of our LinkedIn ***What's Next*** **and Suite 128 Business** LinkedIn newsletter series into a concise, high-value guide for business owners, executives, and advisors. Each phase includes:

- ✓ A clear explanation of the phase
- ✓ The strategic challenges and opportunities
- ✓ A Director's Edge that highlights the leadership mindset needed
- ✓ A key quote or statistic to anchor the insight
- ✓ A Midwest/Iowa relevance lens connecting the phase to reality
- ✓ A forward-looking insight tied to succession, workforce shifts, or long-term value creation

Together, these pages form a practical, accessible roadmap — and an invitation to think differently about your organization's next chapter.

The 4 Phases

2-3 **Start-Up —** Build the Foundation

4-5 **Growth —** Scale with Intention

6-7 **Maturity & Saturation —** Optimize for Long-Term Values

8-9 **Renewal & Decline —** Reinvent & inflect

The Four Business Lifecycle Phases

Every organization evolves — markets shift, teams grow, priorities change, and new opportunities emerge. The Business Lifecycle Framework helps leaders make sense of this movement by clarifying two things:

YOUR PHASE — the broader position your organization is in
YOUR STAGE — the specific moment you're experiencing within that phase

Knowing both gives leaders a clearer view of what's happening now and what should happen next. Click the colored phase names to read the original newsletter, and try our Business Lifecycle Clarity Quiz to identify your position.

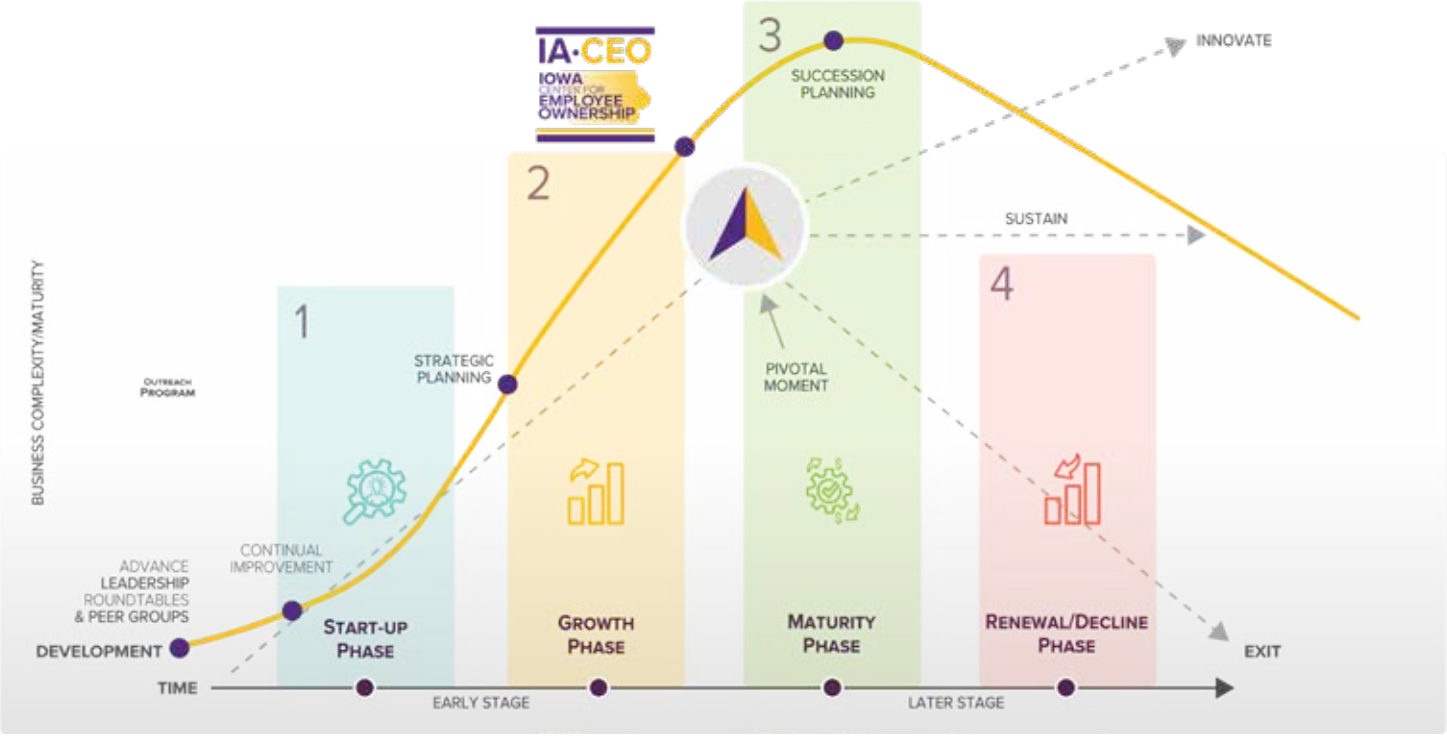
THE FOUR PHASES

START-UP — Build the Foundation
You're shaping a vision and building the systems to support it.

GROWTH — Scale with Intention
Complexity increases, and discipline becomes the differentiator.

MATURITY & SATURATION — Optimize for Long-Term Value The challenge shifts from building to staying sharp.

RENEWAL & DECLINE — Navigate What Comes Next Transitions become pivotal moments: succession, sale, reinvention, or transformation.



This framework isn't about being "**ahead**" or "**behind**." **It's about recognizing the natural cycle of growth, refinement, and reinvention — and using that insight to create value through change.**

If you find this helpful, subscribe to our LinkedIn "Business Suite 128" newsletter to stay ahead of the curve and click here to get access to our Business Lifecycle Phase Clarity Quiz.

Phase 1 — Start-Up

BUILD THE FOUNDATION

PHASE 1 AT A GLANCE | The Start-Up phase is where possibility becomes direction. It's a chapter defined by momentum — a blend of energy, experimentation, and the pursuit of clarity. Leaders are shaping a vision, testing assumptions, and building the early systems that will eventually support sustainable growth.

In this phase, clarity becomes the ultimate accelerator. The sharper your understanding of the value you create, the faster your organization can align people, resources, and decisions around it. Every choice — from defining your market to structuring your team — influences the trajectory of the business.

This is the moment when identity forms, habits take root, and priorities crystallize. While the pace may feel urgent, the work done here becomes the foundation for everything that follows.

What Organizations Experience in this Phase

Start-ups often feel like they're building as they go — momentum and uncertainty moving in parallel. Common experiences include:

- ✓ **Evolving Models** — Vision is strong, but the business model is still taking shape.
- ✓ **Early Financial Discipline** — Leaders begin tracking the numbers that matter.
- ✓ **Functional Systems** — Processes work for now but aren't built to scale.
- ✓ **Ruthless Prioritization** — Focus becomes essential as opportunities multiply.
- ✓ **Founder-Driven Culture** — **Leadership behaviors set the tone for everything.**

The challenge isn't simply to move fast — it's to move with intention.

Why This Phase Matters in the Midwest & Iowa

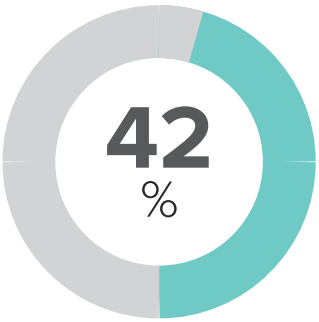
Iowa's business landscape is powered by entrepreneurs — from advanced manufacturing to ag-tech to professional services. As the state faces demographic shifts and a tightening labor market, strong start-ups are essential to sustaining regional economic vitality.

The Start-Up phase is also where many future succession stories begin. The decisions made here — about structure, governance, financial discipline, and culture — determine whether the business will someday be transferable, scalable, or sustainable.

> IN THE START-UP PHASE, **CLARITY** IS YOUR GREATEST ACCELERATOR.”

THIS IS THE MOMENT WHEN LEADERS SET THE TRAJECTORYAND PATH FOR EVERYTHING THAT FOLLOWS.

Todd E. Hutcheson
— Director’s Strategic Edge



of start-ups FAIL because they misread market needs.

Source: CB Insights

Foundations

Clarity

The foundation of early momentum and aligned decision-making.

Discipline

The systems, habits, and financial rigor that shape long-term success.

Culture

The behaviors and expectations that become the organization’s DNA.

DIRECTOR’S EDGE — What Matters Most Right Now...

- ✓ **DEFINE YOUR VALUE WITH PRECISION** vague value propositions slow growth.
- ✓ **BUILD EARLY FINANCIAL DISCIPLINE** it’s easier to create good habits now than fix bad ones later.
- ✓ **DESIGN SYSTEMS THAT CAN SCALE** even if you’re not scaling yet.
- ✓ **PRIORITIZE RUTHLESSLY** not everything matters equally.
- ✓ **PROTECT YOUR CULTURE** it becomes the DNA of the organization.

The Strategic Bridge to Phase 2 — GROWTH

Organizations that succeed in the Start-Up phase don’t just build a product or service — they build a foundation. When clarity, discipline, and early systems are in place, the transition into Growth becomes a strategic step forward, not a scramble.

Phase 2 — Growth

SCALE WITH INTENTION

PHASE 2 AT A GLANCE | The Growth phase is where momentum meets complexity. Demand increases, teams expand, and leaders shift from doing the work to building the systems that support it. What once relied on instinct now requires structure. What once depended on a few people now depends on coordinated effort.

This is the phase where organizations learn to scale with intention. The challenge is no longer proving the concept — it's managing the complexity that comes with success. Clear priorities, strong leadership, and disciplined execution become essential as the business grows beyond its early boundaries.

Growth is exciting, but it's also demanding. Decisions made here determine whether the organization accelerates, plateaus, or fractures under its own weight.

What Organizations Experience in this Phase

Growth brings opportunity — and pressure. Leaders often encounter:

- ✓ **System Strain —** Early processes begin to break under increased volume.
- ✓ **Shifting Roles —** Founders move from "doing" to "leading," often for the first time.
- ✓ **Rising Complexity** — More customers, more people, more moving parts.
- ✓ **Expanding Teams —** Hiring accelerates, and leadership capacity must grow with it.
- ✓ **Need for Alignment —** Communication, priorities, and expectations must be clarified and reinforced.

The work of this phase is not just to grow — but to grow well.

Why This Phase Matters in the Midwest & Iowa

Iowa's growth-stage companies are the backbone of regional prosperity. As industries evolve and workforce shortages intensify, organizations that scale effectively create stability, jobs, and long-term economic resilience.

For many Iowa businesses — especially family-owned and founder-led firms — the Growth phase is where future leadership pathways emerge. Decisions about structure, delegation, and talent development determine whether the organization can eventually transition to the next generation or new ownership.

Scaling well isn't just about expansion — it's about building a business that lasts.

> GROWTH REQUIRES LEADERS TO SHIFT FROM DRIVING THE WORK TO DESIGNING THE SYSTEM. ”

THIS IS THE MOMENT WHEN LEADERS SET THE TRAJECTORY AND PATH FOR EVERYTHING THAT FOLLOWS.

Todd E. Hutcheson
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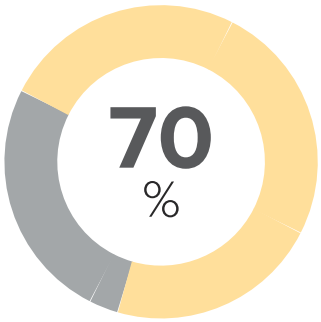


of growing companies struggle because their systems can’t keep pace with demand.

Source: McKinsey

Foundations

These three elements determine whether growth becomes sustainable — or overwhelming.

Leadership Capacity

Developing leaders who can guide teams, make decisions, and carry the organization forward.

Scalable Systems

Building processes and infrastructure that support growth without sacrificing quality.

Strategic Focus

Aligning people and priorities around what matters most as complexity increases.

DIRECTOR’S EDGE
What Matters Most Right Now...

- ✓ **BUILD LEADERSHIP CAPACITY EARLY —** growth stalls when leaders don’t grow with it.
- ✓ **STRENGTHEN SYSTEMS BEFORE THEY BREAK** proactive design prevents reactive chaos.
- ✓ **CLARIFY ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS** ambiguity slows teams and creates friction.
- ✓ **PROTECT YOUR CULTURE AS YOU SCALE** growth magnifies both strengths and weaknesses.
- ✓ **STAY STRATEGICALLY FOCUSED** not all growth is good growth.

This is the phase where discipline and leadership determine the organization’s future trajectory.

The Strategic Bridge to Phase 3 — MATURITY

Organizations that navigate the Growth phase with intention build the systems, leadership, and strategic clarity needed for long-term stability. As the business matures, the focus shifts from scaling to optimizing and strengthening performance, deepening capabilities, and preparing for the next chapter of the life-cycle. Phase 3 is where organizations refine, stabilize, and position themselves for sustained success.

Phase 3 — Maturity

STRENGTHEN PERFORMANCE

PHASE 3 AT A GLANCE | The Maturity & Saturation phase is where organizations shift from rapid expansion to disciplined optimization. Systems are established, teams are experienced, and the business operates with greater predictability. The focus moves from building capacity to strengthening performance — refining processes, deepening capabilities, and ensuring the organization remains competitive in a changing landscape.

In this phase, excellence becomes the differentiator. Leaders concentrate on efficiency, consistency, and strategic positioning. The challenge is no longer proving the model or scaling it — it's sustaining momentum, protecting margins, and preparing for the next evolution of the business.

Mature organizations thrive when they stay curious, adaptive, and committed to continuous improvement.

What Organizations Experience in this Phase

- ✓ **Operational Stability** — Systems run smoothly, and performance becomes more predictable.
- ✓ **Refined Processes** — Efficiency, quality, and consistency become top priorities.
- ✓ **Established Leadership** — Teams are experienced, and roles are clearly defined.
- ✓ **Market Pressure** — Competition intensifies as growth slows.
- ✓ **Need for Innovation** — Staying relevant requires fresh thinking and strategic renewal.

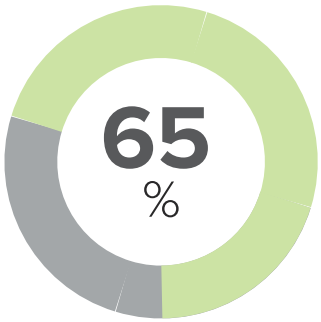
Maturity is a strength — but only if the organization continues to evolve.

Why This Phase Matters in the Midwest & Iowa

Iowa's mature companies anchor local economies — providing stable jobs, community investment, and long-term industry presence. As demographic shifts and succession pressures intensify, the Maturity phase becomes a critical window for strengthening governance, developing next-generation leaders, and preparing for ownership transition.

For many Iowa businesses, this is the phase where legacy is shaped — and where the groundwork for renewal or transition is laid.

> MATURE ORGANIZATIONS SUCCEED WHEN THEY BALANCE OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE WITH STRATEGIC RENEWAL."
>
> Todd E. Hutcheson
> — Director's Strategic Edge



of mature companies lose market share because they fail to innovate.

Source: Deloitte

Foundations

These elements determine whether the organization sustains success — or begins to stagnate.

Operational Excellence

Driving consistency, efficiency, and quality across the organization.

Strategic Renewal

Identifying new opportunities, markets, and innovations to stay competitive.

Leadership Continuity

Preparing future leaders and strengthening governance for long-term stability.

DIRECTOR'S EDGE

What Matters Most Right Now...

- ✓ **STRENGTHEN OPERATIONAL DISCIPLINE** efficiency protects margins and competitiveness.
- ✓ **INVEST IN INNOVATION** renewal must begin before decline appears.
- ✓ **DEVELOP NEXT-GENERATION LEADERS** continuity is essential for long-term success.
- ✓ **EVALUATE STRATEGIC POSITIONING** markets shift, and strategy must shift with them.
- ✓ **PREPARE FOR TRANSITION** succession planning begins here, not at the end.

MATURITY IS THE MOMENT TO STRENGTHEN THE CORE & PREPARE FOR WHAT'S NEXT.

The Strategic Bridge to Phase 4 — RENEWAL/DECLINE

Every mature organization reaches a crossroads. Some renew — innovating, adapting, and repositioning for the future. Others decline — losing relevance as markets evolve. The difference lies in leadership's willingness to challenge assumptions, embrace change, and invest in the next chapter.

Phase 4 is where organizations either reinvent — *or risk erosion.*

Phase 4 — Renewal/Decline

REINVENT & INFLECT

PHASE 4 AT A GLANCE | Every mature organization reaches a crossroads. Some renew — innovating, adapting, and repositioning for the future. Others decline — losing relevance as markets evolve. The difference lies in leadership's willingness to challenge assumptions, embrace change, and invest in the next chapter. Phase 4 is where organizations either reinvent — or risk erosion.

The Renewal / Decline phase is defined by inflection. Markets shift, customer expectations evolve, and competitive pressures intensify. Organizations must decide whether to reinvent themselves — or risk losing relevance.

This phase is not inherently negative. In fact, it's one of the most strategic moments in the lifecycle. Renewal requires courage, creativity, and a willingness to disrupt the very systems that once made the organization successful. Decline occurs when leaders cling to the past instead of designing the future.

The organizations that thrive are those that treat this phase as an opportunity — not a threat.

What Organizations Experience in this Phase

- ✓ **Market Shifts** — customer needs evolve, and old strategies lose effectiveness.
- ✓ **Margin Pressure** — costs rise while demand softens.
- ✓ **Innovation Gaps** — new competitors outpace legacy offerings.
- ✓ **Leadership Crossroads** — decisions determine renewal or decline.
- ✓ **Urgency for Change** — reinvention becomes essential for survival.

This is the moment when organizations must choose: evolve or erode.

Why This Phase Matters in the Midwest & Iowa

Iowa's legacy companies are pillars of their communities — but many face aging ownership, shifting markets, and workforce transitions. Renewal is essential to preserving jobs, strengthening local economies, and ensuring long-term viability.

This phase is also where succession becomes urgent. Without renewal, transition becomes difficult — or impossible.

> “RENEWAL REQUIRES THE COURAGE TO DISRUPT WHAT MADE YOU SUCCESSFUL.”
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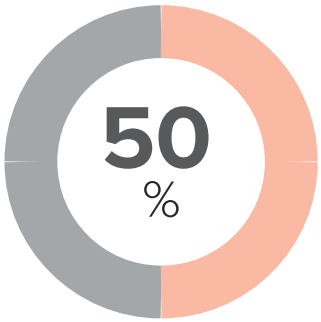
> Todd E. Hutcheson
> — Director’s Strategic Edge



of companies entering decline never recover without intentional renewal.

Source: Harvard Business Review

Foundations

These elements determine whether the organization renews — or declines.

Reinvention Strategy

Reimagining offerings, markets, and business models for the future.

Cultural Agility

Building a mindset that embraces change rather than resists it.

Succession Readiness

Preparing leadership and ownership for transition or transformation.

DIRECTOR’S EDGE

What Matters Most Right Now...

- ✓ **CHALLENGE LEGACY ASSUMPTIONS** what worked before may not work now.
- ✓ **INVEST IN INNOVATION AND TALENT** renewal requires new capabilities.
- ✓ **STRENGTHEN FINANCIAL DISCIPLINE** margins tighten during decline.
- ✓ **ENGAGE IN HONEST ASSESSMENT** clarity precedes renewal.
- ✓ **PREPARE FOR TRANSITION OR TRANSFORMATION** leadership decisions shape the future.

RENEWAL IS A CHOICE — AND SO IS DECLINE

The Strategic Bridge: What’s Next

Organizations that embrace renewal position themselves for a new cycle of growth. Those that resist change risk erosion. The next chapter depends on leadership’s willingness to adapt, innovate, and reimagine the future.

Bringing It All Together

PLANNING ACCORDING TO YOUR BUSINESS LIFECYCLE PHASE

WHERE INSIGHT BECOMES ACCELERATION — and Strategy Becomes Lift-Off.
Over the past several months, our What's Next newsletter series explored the Business Lifecycle one phase at a time — Startup, Growth, Maturity, and Renewal — giving leaders space to reflect, respond, and apply each concept in real time.

This magazine brings all of that work together in one place. It transforms a phased learning journey into a single, integrated resource — a strategic guide leaders can reference at any point in their lifecycle.

When planning aligns with your lifecycle phase, you gain clarity, momentum, and confidence. When it doesn't, you lose time, money, and goodwill. Each phase brings a new opportunity to align your planning with what your customers expect and accelerate progress with intention.

Clarity creates momentum and sets the direction.

Customer expectations evolve with every phase.

Alignment — between your phase, your planning, and your execution

Why Lifecycle-Aligned Planning Matters in 2026

2026 is defined by faster tech adoption, shifting labor dynamics, and rising customer expectations. In this environment, lifecycle alignment helps leaders:

- ✓ **Set realistic goals** that reflect capacity and risk
- ✓ **Allocate resources wisely** where phase-returns are highest
- ✓ **Avoid over- or under-investing** to reduce wasted effort
- ✓ **Strengthen leadership alignment** with one clear plan
- ✓ **Prepare intentionally for what's next** — growth, stability, or reinvention

Lifecycle clarity is strategic clarity.

> “CLARITY IN YOUR LIFECYCLE PHASE IS THE FIRST STEP TOWARD PROTECTING LONG-TERM VALUE.”
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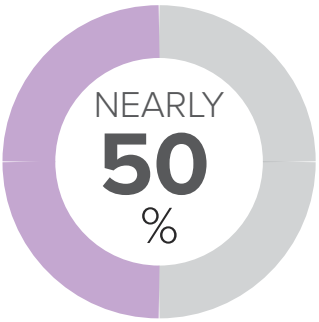
> **Todd E. Hutcheson**
> — Director’s Strategic Edge



of failed initiatives can be traced back to planning that didn’t match the organization’s phase.

Source: organizational effectiveness studies

DIRECTOR’S EDGE

Leadership Moves That Accelerate Lifecycle Success

LEADERS WHO CONVERT PLANNING INTO RESULTS CONSISTENTLY DO FIVE THINGS WELL:

- ✓ **NAME THE PHASE AND THE GAP**
- ✓ **SET PHASE-APPROPRIATE CADENCE**
- ✓ **PROTECT RUNWAY FOR EXPERIMENTS**
- ✓ **COMMUNICATE THE “WHY”**
- ✓ **MEASURE WHAT MATTERS**

THE DIRECTOR’S EDGE IS THE DISCIPLINE OF TURNING LIFECYCLE INSIGHT INTO ACTION TEAMS CAN FOLLOW.

Closing Perspective

This magazine/compendium brings the entire lifecycle journey together — the phases, the insights, the leadership lens, and the practical tools. It also underscores a critical truth: customer expectations shift with every phase. As your organization evolves, so do the people you serve, and alignment between your internal phase and their expectations is what creates trust, momentum, and long-term value.

Lifecycle alignment turns ambiguity into a roadmap. When leaders name their phase, match their planning to reality, and stay attuned to what customers expect right now, they create clarity and forward motion. Choose the planning approach that fits your phase, identify the expectation your customers are holding today, and make one meaningful move that shows you’re evolving with them.

Ask about our Business Transition Solutions and the upcoming Tier One Growth Solutions series — designed to help leaders plan, scale, optimize, and reinvent with confidence.

To get clear on your business phase, scan the QR code and move forward with confidence.

Last **Thoughts**

Before you go...

THE FOUR PHASES AT A GLANCE

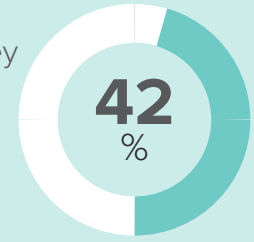
& THE FACTS THAT MATTER RIGHT NOW!

1. START-UP —

Clarity accelerates momentum.

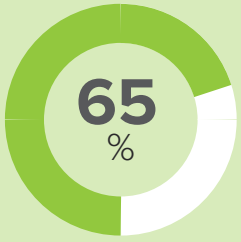
of start-ups FAIL because they misread market needs.

Source: CB Insights



3. MATURITY/SATURATION —

Excellence and renewal protect relevance.



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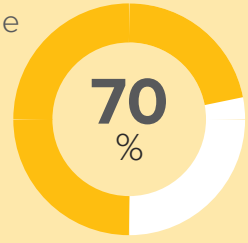
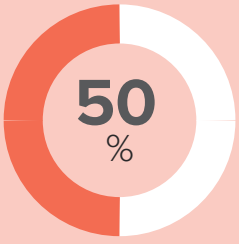


2. GROWTH —

Leadership and systems determine scale.



of companies entering decline never recover without intentional renewal.

Source: Harvard Business Review

4. RENEWAL / DECLINE —

Reinvention is a choice, not a reaction.

Each of the four statistics shared above are not meant to be warnings — they're reminders that clarity, discipline, and leadership matter at every Phase.

INDUSTRY 4.0 — WHY IT MATTERS FOR EVERY PHASE

Industry 4.0 isn't just automation —
it's the integration of data, digital tools, and intelligent systems into everyday operations.
It matters because:

- ✓ **START-UPS can validate markets faster.**
- ✓ **GROWTH companies scale more efficiently.**
- ✓ **MATURE firms protect margins and competitiveness.**
- ✓ **RENEWING organizations reinvent with new capabilities.**

EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP — A STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Employee ownership strengthens:

RETENTION — employees stay longer when they have a stake.

SUCCESSION — ownership transitions become smoother and more viable.

PERFORMANCE — employee-owned firms grow faster and more consistently.

COMMUNITY IMPACT — local wealth stays local.

WHAT LEADERS SHOULD REMEMBER

CLARITY creates momentum

DISCIPLINE builds resilience

LEADERSHIP shapes culture

RENEWAL is always possible

And most importantly:

EVERY PHASE IS AN OPPORTUNITY — NOT A DESTINATION.

EXPLORE MORE...

Get Clear on Your Growth Phase
Identify your phase and move forward with confidence.

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EMPOWERING

STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS FOR IOWA BUSINESSES

Iowa's leaders to grow, transition, & succeed.

This magazine is brought to you by the University of Northern Iowa's Business & Community Services (BCS) Centers listed. The BCS centers are located at 8120 Jennings Drive in Cedar Falls, IA, and are dedicated to helping business thrive and #BUILD A BETTER IOWA.

ADVANCE IOWA business solutions

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