

PROGRAM OVERVIEW: McMaster University's Startup Survivor Pitch Competition

February 26, 2026

Startup Survivor Summer 2026 Cohort
is generously funded by **IPON** and **McMaster University**.

Programming is delivered by **The Forge Business Incubator**
and **DeGroot Heersink Hub** at McMaster University.

The Forge Business Incubator

What is it?

- **Startup Incubator** for McMaster University and Hamilton Region
- Supports **entrepreneurship and innovation** on campus and in the community
- Helps entrepreneurs **validate business ideas** and **grow startups**
- Connects students with startups for **work and experiential learning**
- **Learn more:** [Forge website](#)



The Forge Business Incubator

10 Year Legacy

- 350 Businesses Incubated
- \$100 Million+ Funds Raised
- 1K+ Jobs Created
- 50+ Countries Reached

BOARD BALL





Introduction to Startup Survivor

Startup Survivor

What is it?

\$200,000 Entrepreneurship Training Program and \$30,000 Pitch Competition

- **Next Cohort:** May 4 - August 28, 2026 (Summer term)
- **Application Deadline:** March 29, 2026
- **Learn more:** [Startup Survivor website](#)



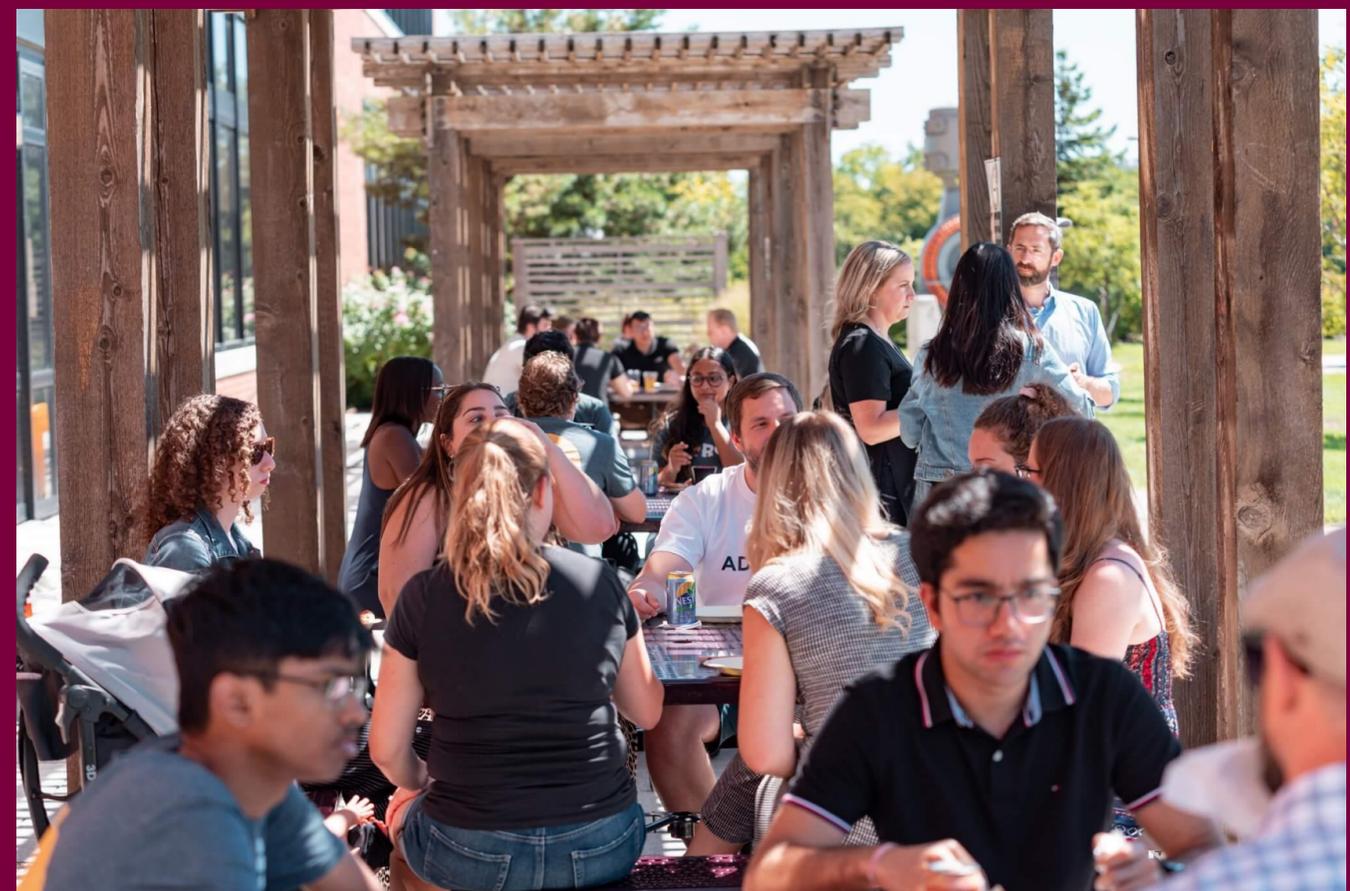


Program Benefits

Startup Survivor

Program Benefits

- **Funding**
 - **\$10,000 funding per team**
 - Non-dilutive; McMaster does not take equity
 - **\$30,000 Pitch Competition**
- **Weekly one-on-one mentorship**
- **Professional service provider advisory**
 - IP lawyers, accountants, insurance experts, etc
- **10 Entrepreneurship workshops**
- **Monthly cohort meetups**
- **Co-working at The Forge Incubator**
- **Access to Makerspace and prototyping advisory**
- **Investor Pitch Day**
 - One-on-one pitch coaching
 - Guaranteed investor feedback
 - Potential for \$50K dilutive investment





Program Overview

Startup Survivor

Program Overview

- Program duration: **May 4 - August 28, 2026**. Virtual Orientation on April 23, 2026.
- Goal: Team completes **monthly business and technical challenges to fast-track startup**.
- Workshops: Each challenge begins with **educational workshops led by industry experts**.
- Mentorship: **Weekly mentor meetings** provide strategic advisory and help with challenges.
- Challenges: Expert Review Panels provide **feedback and team scores**. Total score determines top 5 teams.
- Time commitment: Team commits **20 hours per week** to working on their business.
- Funding: When team completes challenges, they are rewarded with **funding** (Total: \$10,000).



Eligibility Criteria

Startup Survivor

Eligibility Criteria

1. At least one founder must be a **recent graduate** (up to two years) or a currently enrolled **student** and in good standing at an **Ontario university or college**.
2. Must have a **novel** business idea or early-stage startup.
3. All industry sectors are welcome as long as you're developing a **scalable** business model.



Program Structure & Event Calendars

Startup Survivor

Event Overview

EVENT FORMAT

Purple: Virtual

Green: In person

Orientation Day: April 23

CHALLENGE 1: Intellectual Property

- ✓ Challenge Start: April 23
- ✓ Asynchronous virtual education modules
- ✓ Workshop on IP Strategy: May 7
- ✓ Mentorship: Weekly in May
- ✓ Cohort Meetup: May 21
- ✓ Challenge Submission Deadline: May 31

CHALLENGE 2: Business Modelling

- ✓ Challenge Start: May 4
- ✓ Workshop on Communication Skills: May 4
- ✓ Workshop on Business Modelling : May 5
- ✓ Workshop on Market Segmentation : May 6
- ✓ Mentorship: Weekly in May
- ✓ Cohort Meetup: May 28
- ✓ Challenge Submission Deadline: May 31

CHALLENGE 3: Prototyping Strategy

- ✓ Challenge Start: June 1
- ✓ Workshop on Prototyping Strategy: June 1
- ✓ Workshop/Design Sprint: June 2
- ✓ Mentorship: Weekly in June
- ✓ Cohort Meetup: June 25
- ✓ Challenge Submission Deadline: June 28

CHALLENGE 4: Go-To-Market Strategy

- ✓ Challenge Start: June 29
- ✓ Workshop on Go-To-Market Strategy: June 29
- ✓ Workshop on Sales Strategy: June 30
- ✓ Workshop on Financial Modelling: July 15
- ✓ Mentorship: Weekly in July
- ✓ Cohort Meetup: July 30
- ✓ Challenge Submission Deadline: August 2

CHALLENGE 5: Pitching to Investors

- ✓ Challenge Start: August 4
- ✓ Workshop on Pitching to Investors: August 4
- ✓ Mentorship and Pitch Coaching: Weekly in August
- ✓ Cohort Meetup: August 24
- ✓ Challenge Submission Deadline: August 25
- ✓ Investor Pitch Day on August 26-27

Graduation Celebration: August 31

April 2026

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
29 Application Deadline	30	31	1	2	3 Easter	4
	← Internal Application Review →			← External Application Review by Selection Committee →		
5	6 Easter	7	8	9	10	11
	← External Application Review by Selection Committee →				Compile scores & invite to interviews	
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
	← Interview 30 Semi-Finalist Teams (10/day) →			Send 20 Acceptances		
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
	Offer Acceptance Deadline			Virtual Orientation + Challenge 1 Begins "IP Strategy"		
26	27	28	29	30		

May 2026

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1	2
3	4 Team Lunch + Challenge 2 Begins+ Workshop: Communication Skills	5 Workshop: Business Model Canvas	6 Workshop: Market Segmentation	7 Workshop: IP Strategy/Prior Art Search	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
		← Mentorship →				
17	18 <i>Victoria Day</i>	19	20	21 Cohort Meetup: Challenge 1	22	23
		← Mentorship →				
24	25	26	27	28 Cohort Meetup: Challenge 2	29	30
		← Mentorship →				

June 2026

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
31 Submission Deadline: Challenge 1 & 2	1 Challenge 3 Begins+ Workshop: Prototyping Strategy	2 Workshop: Design Sprint	3	4	5	6
7	8	9 10 Mentorship		11	12	13
14	15	16 17 Mentorship		18	19	20
21	22	23 24 Mentorship		25 Cohort Meetup: Challenge 3	26	27

July 2026

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
28 Submission Deadline: Challenge 3	29 Challenge 4 Begins+ Workshop: Go-To-Market Strategy	30 Workshop: Sales Success	1 <i>Canada Day</i>	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
← Complete GTM Workbook Draft →						
12	13	14 Mentorship	15 MSSF Workshop: Financial Modeling	16 Mentorship	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
		← Mentorship →				
26	27	28	29	30 Cohort Meetup: Challenge 4	31	
		← Mentorship →				

August 2026

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
						1
2 Submission Deadline: Challenge 4	3 <i>Civic Holiday</i>	4 Challenge 5 Begins+ Workshop: Pitching to Investors	5	6 ← Complete Skeleton Pitch Deck →	7	8
9	10	11 Mentorship and Pitch Coaching (Skeleton Pitch Deck)	12	13	14	15
16	17	18 Mentorship and Pitch Coaching (Full Pitch Deck)	19	20	21	22
23	24 Cohort Meetup: Challenge 5	25 Submission Deadline: Challenge 5	26 Investor Pitch Day 9AM-2PM (Teams 1-10)	27 Investor Pitch Day 9AM-2PM (Teams 11-20)	28	29
30	31 Graduation Celebration & Leaderboard Reveal (20 teams)					



\$30,000 Startup Survivor Pitch Competition

Startup Survivor

\$30,000 Pitch Competition



Startup Survivor

\$30,000 Pitch Competition

- **Top 5 Teams** invited to Pitch Competition during **McMaster Entrepreneurship Week** in November 2026.
- Public event at LR Wilson Hall with 200+ people in attendance.
- 5-min startup pitches and Q&A with **Investor Judging Panel**.
- **Cash Prizes**
 - \$15,000 First Place
 - \$10,000 Second Place
 - \$5,000 Third Place
- Acceptance into **The Forge Incubator Lite Program**: Mentorship, service providers, 250+ startup discounts, etc.



Application Process

Startup Survivor

Application Process

Watch Video Recording of Customer Discovery Workshop:

[Startup Survivor Workshop-20260226_174733UTC-Meeting Recording.mp4](#) Password: Survivor2026

Application Process:

Part 1 of 2: Complete customer interviews and fill out [Customer Discovery Excel File](#).

Part 2 of 2: Submit Application Form: <https://wkf.ms/4tkV7mS>

Application Deadline: March 29, 2026 at 11:59 PM EST

Startup Survivor

Helpful Resources

1) Customer Discovery Workshop Video Recording



2) Customer Discovery Guide

Startup Survivor
Challenge 1 | Customer Discovery

Innovation doesn't start with an idea, a widget, or a prototype. Innovation starts with a **problem**.

In Challenge 1, we want you as founders to *forget about your solution*. Most of the time, founders come to The Forge with solutions but very often change these solutions after they do proper customer research. We want you to keep an open mind and avoid jumping to a solution. This challenge will teach you customer discovery methods to help you understand the problem you are trying to solve on a deeper level – through the eyes of your customers.

For example: The entrepreneurial journey for Airbnb founders Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia started in 2007 when they were attempting to travel from New York to San Francisco for a conference.

The problem? They could not find a cheap hotel room. All the affordable, inexpensive hotels in San Francisco had been quickly snapped up leaving only premium establishments at a minimum cost of \$300/night – completely out of their budget. As Brian and Joe asked other conference attendees about their journey to find a hotel, they discovered a strong pattern.

Goals for this Challenge

- Identify what is the problem
- Who is having this problem
- Understand whether this problem is important
- Identify patterns that cross from one customer to the next

Instructions

- Attend Startup Survivor Workshop to learn about the Customer Discovery Process.
- Based on your current knowledge about the problem you wish to solve, fill in the template 'Problem Statement Canvas' in the Excel file.

Ask yourself:

- When does the problem occur?
- Who has the problem most often?
- What is the root cause of the problem?
- What is the measurable impact of the problem?
- What do customers do now to solve the problem?
- What are the disadvantages of the alternatives?

It's okay if you don't know the answers to some of the above questions. Customer interviews will help you answer them!

3) Sample Interview Qs

McMaster University THE FORGE

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Example of Customer Discovery Interview Guide

Below is a sample interview guide for gathering qualitative research. This is a real guide that was used in an in-person interview setting. Remember, the only way to do this type of research is either face-to-face, video call, or phone call. Surveys are not an adequate way to gather high value qualitative research.

Context: This startup is looking to develop a better product/process for tuning drums. We encouraged them to interview drummers and other stakeholders. Please see interview guide below.

Tell me about yourself as a drummer.

- How often do you play?
- Do you ever play professional venues?
 - If yes, how often?
 - If yes, is this an important source of income for you? If yes, how important?
- Do you or have you ever taught drumming?
 - If yes, where and how long? (School/private tutor/online channel/etc)
 - If yes, is this an important source of income for you? If yes, how important?
- How many drum kits do you have?
 - How many toms and sizes in each setup?
 - What brand of drum heads do you use? Why?
 - Are you planning to buy more? Why or why not?
- How do you transport your drums when playing outside of your home?
- How did you first get into drumming?
 - How old were you?
 - Did anyone encourage you to start drumming? (school/parents/friends/etc)
 - Were you inspired by other drummers? If yes, which ones?
- What are the steps you took to learn drumming?
 - Did you study drumming at school?
 - Did you get a private tutor?
 - Did you watch tutorial videos online?
 - Did a friend teach you?
 - Did you read books?
 - Other steps?
- Can you tell me about your experience buying your first drum set?
 - How did you know what kind of drum set to buy?
 - Did you research online? What websites?
 - Did you have a professional music store rep advise you?
 - Did you have a teacher/tutor/friend advise you?
 - Other?
 - Where did you buy it?
 - Did you buy it in a professional music store?
 - Online/Craigslist/Kijiji?
 - From a friend/other contact?
 - Did you buy any accessories?
 - If yes, which?

Startup Survivor Program Manager

Contact for questions and application support

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