

# Contenders for patron saint of start-ups

Luke Johnson [The entrepreneur](#)

Who are the patron saints of entrepreneurs? Technically Saint Homobonus, a 12th-century Italian merchant, is the patron saint of business. But I'm referring to those intellectuals from the humanities and social sciences who have been the greatest advocates for the entrepreneurial life.

Close to the top would be Joseph Schumpeter. He was an Austrian-American economist who understood, perhaps better than anyone before or since from his profession, the importance of the individual founder. As he described it in his book *The Theory of Economic Development*: "First of all there is the dream and the will to found a private kingdom . . . Then there is the will to conquer: the impulse to fight, to prove oneself superior to others . . . Finally, there is the joy of creating, of getting things done, or simply exercising one's energy and ingenuity . . . Our type seeks out difficulties, changes in order to change, delights in ventures."

Schumpeter popularised the term "creative destruction", which describes how progress happens when the existing economic order is overturned. This leads to waste and chaos – bankruptcies and unemployment for those displaced by new technology – but also innovation and material advancement. And those who lead this endless charge are the entrepreneurs, forever challenging the status quo, trying to make a profit by offering something better, faster, newer.

Another candidate would be the novelist Ayn Rand, who wrote bestselling works such as *Atlas Shrugged*. She promoted the concept of a rugged form of individualism, as epitomised by her fictional heroes Howard Roark and John Galt. Each battled against the forces of collectivism and corporatism. Rand was an émigré from Russia, and forever found the appearance of Manhattan a demonstration of the power of human enterprise. In *The Fountainhead* she wrote, "I would give the greatest sunset in the world for the one sight of New York's skyline. The shape and the thought that made them. The sky over New York and the will of man made visible. What other religion do we need?" I find her books pretty unreadable, and many of her beliefs eccentric. But she has many devotees among practising capitalists, including Alan Greenspan, ex-chairman of the Federal Reserve.

As for politicians, I think the greatest promoter of entrepreneurs was Benjamin Franklin. He was possibly the greatest public proponent of the Protestant work ethic, which helped make America the most entrepreneurial nation on earth. As well as a statesman he was also an inventor, businessman and a prolific writer. One of his 13 virtues, which he had devised by the age of 20, was "Industry. Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions." Every entrepreneur I've known has followed this maxim unconsciously.

A less-celebrated, but nevertheless influential 19th-century politician was Richard Cobden, a British manufacturer who led the anti-corn law protests. He was one of the first enthusiasts for free trade, and believed that: "The progress of freedom depends more upon the maintenance of peace, the spread of commerce, and the diffusion of education, than upon the labours of cabinets and foreign offices." It is a shame today's politicians do not agree more with his perspective on world affairs.

Among philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche was a fierce proponent of humans living to their full potential, and taking risks in life. He wrote, “The secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and greatest enjoyment is – to live dangerously.”

Another serious contender would be Adam Smith. Although he is better known as an economist, he was actually a professor of moral philosophy. Many regard him as the father of free-market thinking, and his book *The Wealth of Nations* is one of the first great expositions of industrial capitalism. There he introduced such concepts as the division of labour, the menace of monopolies, and the metaphor of the “invisible hand”.

Entrepreneurship is an eccentric profession, if it can be even called such a thing. Yet its supporters have included some of the finest minds of the past few hundred years. All entrepreneurs should take sustenance from their wise words.