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YOUR RELATIONSHIP ADVISOR FOR AGENTIC AI

MEERKAT FOUNDER INTELLIGENCE · FOUNDERS AND STARTUPS

Everyone's a Founder Now. More people start companies. Few reach the investors. Now what?

Four years of generative AI have made starting a company easier than ever, and more people do it after a job ends. Here's what the data shows about where founders come from, who they know and how to build a path to capital.

By Mary Shea, PhD · Co-Founder and Chief Growth Officer, Meerkat

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+39%

GROWTH IN PEOPLE STARTING US COMPANIES AFTER GENERATIVE AI ARRIVED

53%

OF NEW FOUNDERS LEFT A JOB FIRST, UP FROM 38% BEFORE GENERATIVE AI

1 in 10

NEW FOUNDERS HAVE A VERIFIED TIE TO A VC INVESTOR

141

NEW FOUNDERS FOR EVERY NEW VC PARTNER, UP FROM 87 BEFORE GENERATIVE AI

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The founder boom is here. The path to capital didn't widen.

About 231,000 people started a US company in AI year 3, 39% more than the year before generative AI. The share with a verified tie to a VC investor didn't move.

01

More founders, more by necessity

In AI year 3, 53% of new founders had left their last job before founding, up from 38% the year before generative AI. More of them came from employers that were shrinking.

02

AI founders multiply

Founders of AI-named companies rose sevenfold, from about 2,000 to 14,700 a year. AI took 65% of US venture dollars in 2025.

03

Access didn't grow

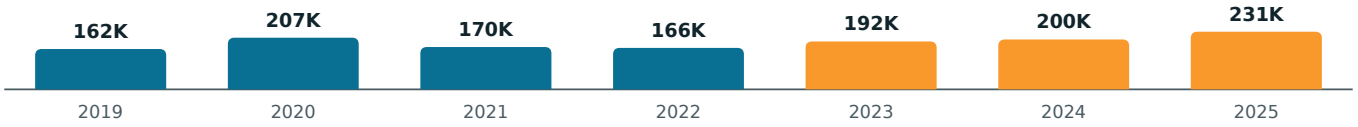
About one in ten new founders have a verified tie to a VC investor, the same as before generative AI. Venture firms appointed 14% fewer new partners.

Why read this report

This report reads US career records from November 2022 to October 2026 to show who starts companies, where they come from, who they know and what to do next. Each AI year runs November to October. Outside figures from NVCA and PitchBook are cited where used.

People starting a US company, by year started

Thousands; years run November to October; amber marks the years since generative AI hit the workplace



How this report was made

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Mary Shea, PhD, Co-Founder and Chief Growth Officer, Meerkat. Mary set the research questions, directed the analysis and is responsible for the conclusions.

DATA

Meerkat's relationship graph: 600 million professional profiles and 2.7 billion evidence-backed relationships, including about 112 million US profiles. Extracted November 16, 2026.

BUILT WITH CLAUDE OPUS

Claude Opus is an AI model from Anthropic. Under Mary's direction, Claude queried the graph, ran the calculations, drafted the text and produced the charts.

01

PART 01

Four AI years.
What changed.

THE FOUR AI YEARS

What changed after November 2022

Four signals about US founders, year by year.

EACH NUMBER IS A COUNT OF PEOPLE IN US CAREER RECORDS, UNLESS MARKED

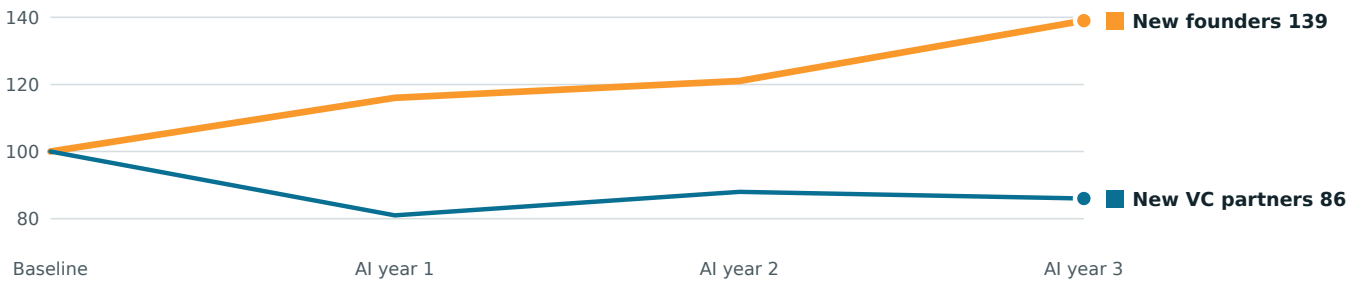
	Baseline	AI year 1	AI year 2	AI year 3	AI year 4
	Nov 2021-Oct 2022	Nov 2022-Oct 2023	Nov 2023-Oct 2024	Nov 2024-Oct 2025	Nov 2025-Oct 2026
People starting a company	**165,783**	**191,626**	**200,425**	**231,146**	**150,481***
Founders of AI-named companies	**2,043**	**5,978**	**8,569**	**14,723**	**10,020***
New founders with a VC tie	**10.4%**	**11.9%**	**10.7%**	**10.5%**	**n/a**
New founders per new VC partner	**87**	**125**	**119**	**141**	**160***

Generative AI hits the workplace, November 2022

*Year 4 is understated: career records fill in as people update their profiles. VC ties are measured for founders through AI year 3.

More founders. Fewer new partners to pitch.

People starting a company and new VC partner appointments, indexed to the baseline year = 100



WHAT IT MEANS

Generative AI made starting a company easier than ever, and far more people took that path. The number of venture partners who decide where the money goes fell over the same years. Every founder now competes with more founders for the same partner's time.

Founders: people who started a role titled founder or co-founder at a US organization. VC partners: general, managing and founding partners and managing directors at venture firms. Source: Meerkat relationship graph, US career records (about 112 million US professional profiles), extracted November 19, 2026.

FINDING 01

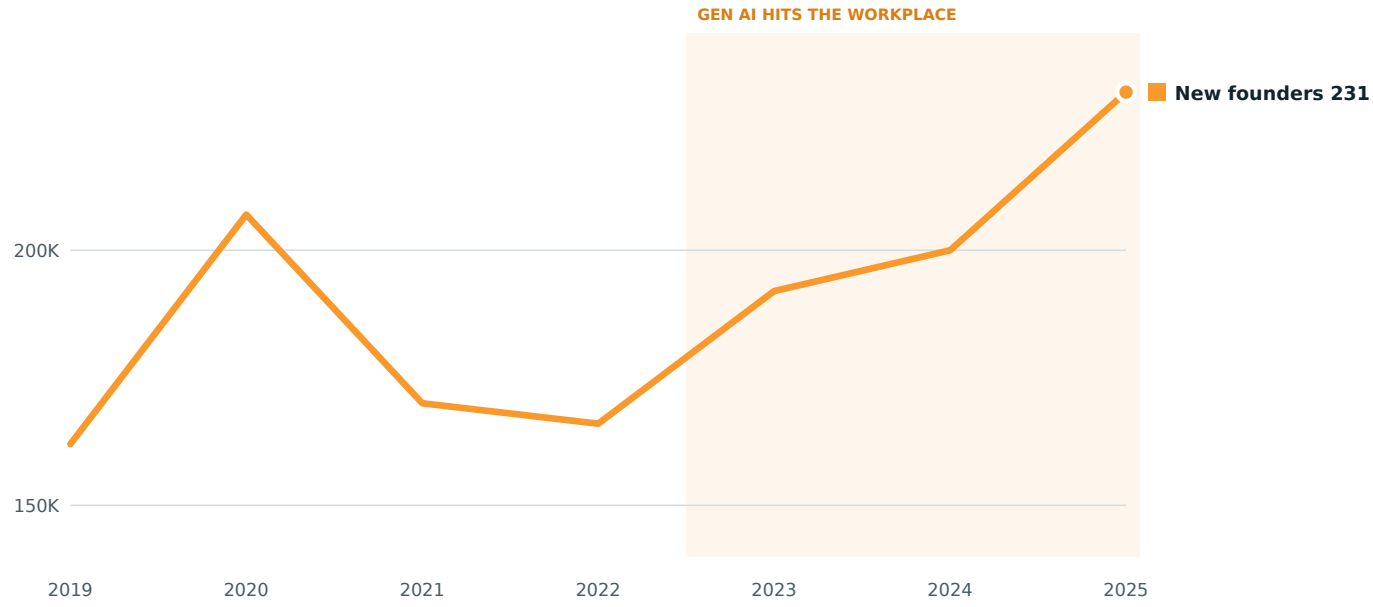
01

The founder boom beat the pandemic peak

More people started US companies in AI year 3 than in any year since 2019, including the pandemic peak of 2020.

People starting a US company

By year started, thousands; years run November to October



39%

More people started a company in AI year 3 than in the year before generative AI

1.25M

US founders in seat today

50%

Of US founders in seat today started after November 2022

WHAT IT MEANS

The pandemic year of 2020 set a record for new founders. AI year 3 broke the record. Half of the founders running US companies today started after generative AI hit the workplace, so most of your competitors for customers, talent and capital are as new as you are.

Founders in seat: a current founder or co-founder role with no end date. This includes solo businesses and side ventures, not only venture-backed startups. Source: Meerkat relationship graph, US career records (about 112 million US professional profiles), extracted November 19, 2026.

FINDING 02

More founders start after a job ends

The share of founders who left a job before starting rose by 15 points.

Where new founders were when they started

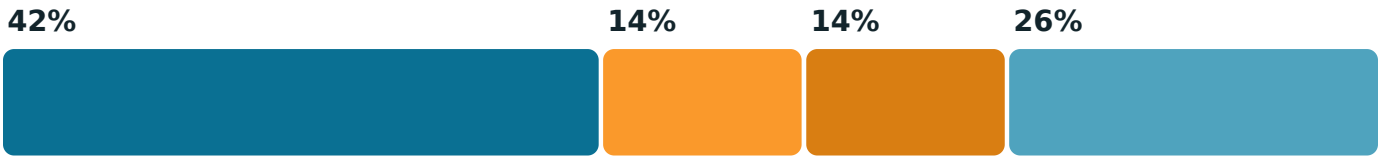
Every 100 people who started a company, before generative AI and in AI year 3

Baseline year: November 2021 to October 2022



Another 13% had no earlier role on record.

AI year 3: November 2024 to October 2025



Another 6% had no earlier role on record.

53%

Of new founders had left their last job, up from 38% before generative AI

27%

Of founders who started within a year of leaving came from an employer that shrank, up from 15% before generative AI

14%

Of new founders started within three months of a job ending, up from 10% before generative AI

WHAT IT MEANS

Founding has become the next step after a job ends. The rise in founders who left shrinking employers points to layoffs as one driver. Many of these founders start without the investor relationships that a planned launch would have built.

5% sample of new US founders (about 18,000 in the four years shown). Shrinking employer: headcount on record fell 5% or more in the year the founder left. Recent headcount figures may be understated. Source: Meerkat relationship graph, US career records (about 112 million US professional profiles), extracted November 19, 2026.

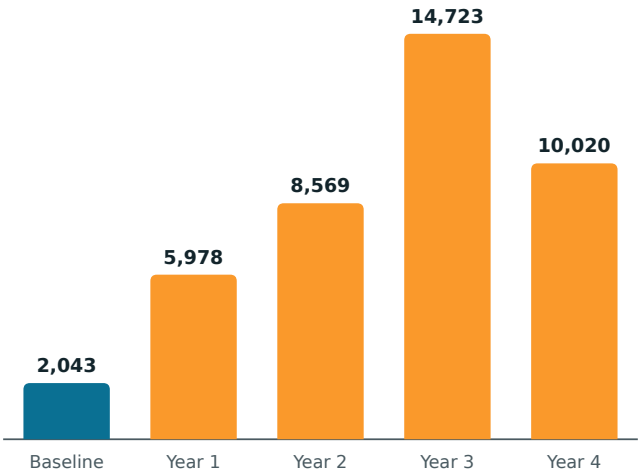
FINDING 03

AI founders multiplied sevenfold

Founders of AI-named companies grew faster than any other group, and they're where the money goes.

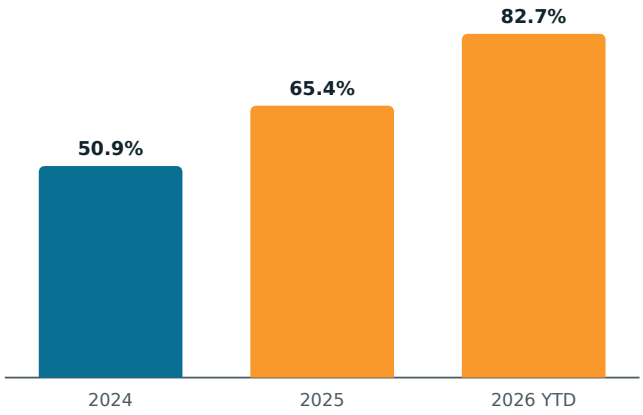
Founders of AI-named companies

US, by AI year; year 4 still reporting



Share of US venture deal value going to AI

PitchBook data



7x

As many people started AI-named companies in AI year 3 as in the year before generative AI

5.4%

Of new founder roles are at AI-named companies, up from 1.1% before generative AI

1.8x

Rate at which AI-named founders have a VC tie, compared to all founders

WHAT THE FUNDING DATA SAYS

AI took **65.4%** of US venture deal value and 39.4% of deal count in 2025. Through the third quarter of 2026, AI took a record **82.7%** of deal value.

NVCA 2026 Yearbook, PitchBook data; PitchBook-NVCA Venture Monitor, Q3 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

AI is where the capital is going, and AI founders are more likely to know an investor. Founders outside AI compete for a shrinking share of venture dollars, which makes every warm introduction count for more.

AI-named companies: company names that include AI, .ai, artificial intelligence, agentic or GPT. Many AI companies don't use those words, so this undercounts AI founders. Source: Meerkat relationship graph, US career records (about 112 million US professional profiles), extracted November 19, 2026.

FINDING 04

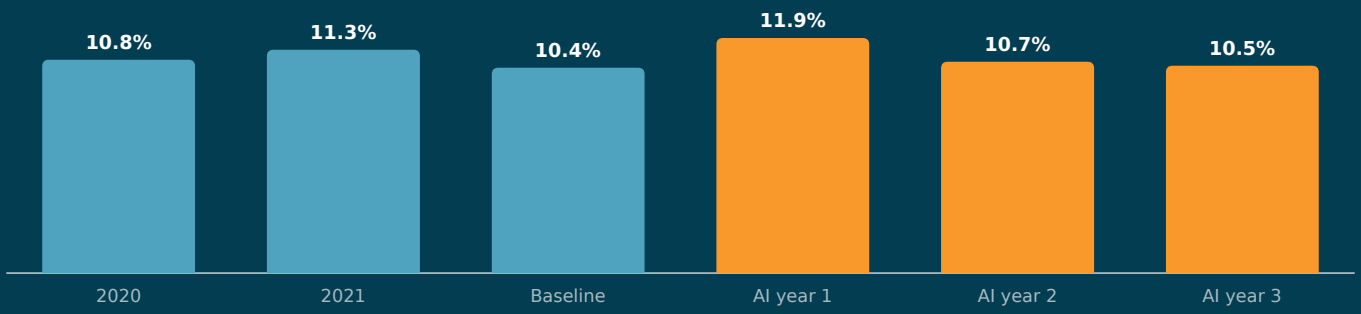
More founders. The same access.

Founders multiplied, but the share who know a VC investor stayed flat at about one in ten.

What counts as a verified relationship. A tie Meerkat can evidence from records: two people worked at the same company in the same period long enough to know each other, served on the same board, or one recommended the other. The count shows relationships on record, not everyone a person knows.

New founders have a verified tie to a VC investor

By year started; years run November to October



89%

Of new founders have no verified tie to anyone at a venture firm

141

New founders for every new VC partner in AI year 3, up from 87 before generative AI

3.2%

Of 2025 US deals took 67% of venture dollars (NVCA)

WHAT THE FUNDING DATA SAYS

US venture deployed **$320 billion** across 15,352 deals in 2025. Deal count barely moved, while 101 first-time funds closed, the fewest since 2007.

NVCA 2026 Yearbook, PitchBook data

WHAT IT MEANS

The money hit records, but it flowed to fewer, bigger deals and to established firms. The number of founders who can reach an investor through someone they know didn't grow with the boom. For most founders, the first job of fundraising is finding the person who can make the introduction.

5% sample of new US founders. VC investors: people at venture firms with investing titles. Source: Meerkat relationship graph, US career records (about 112 million US professional profiles), extracted November 19, 2026.

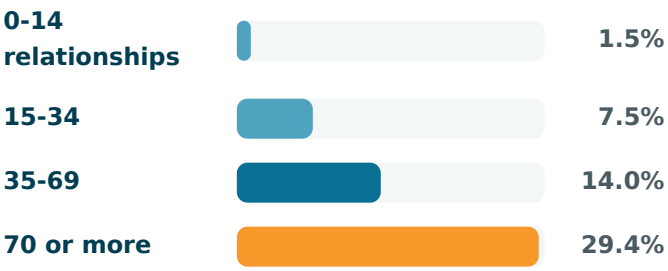
FINDING 05

Networks open the door to capital

Founders with the biggest networks are 20 times as likely to know a VC investor as those with the smallest.

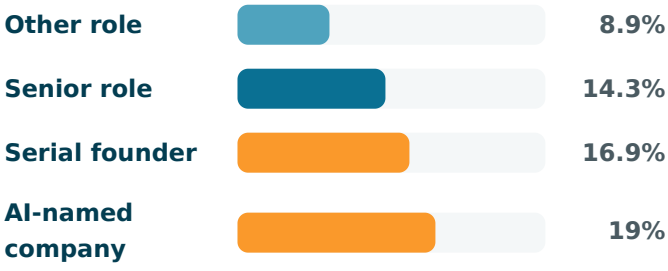
Has a VC tie, by verified relationships

Founders who started in AI years 1-3

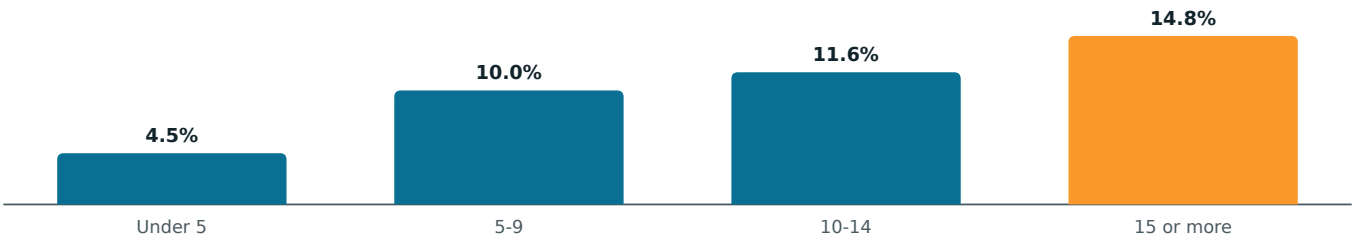


Has a VC tie, by last role before founding

Founders who started in AI years 1-3



Has a VC tie, by years of career before founding



20x

VC tie rate for founders with 70+ relationships, compared to those with fewer than 15

1 in 3

Founders with 70+ relationships know a VC investor

9%

Of new founders are serial founders, up from 7% before generative AI

WHAT IT MEANS

Access to capital tracks the network a founder brings, not only the idea. Serial founders, people from senior roles and founders with long careers reach investors more often because they've worked alongside them. Those relationships can be mapped and built.

5% sample of new US founders. Senior role: director, VP, head, partner or C-suite. People with fuller profiles show both more relationships and more roles, which accounts for part of the pattern. Source: Meerkat relationship graph, US career records (about 112 million US professional profiles), extracted November 19, 2026.

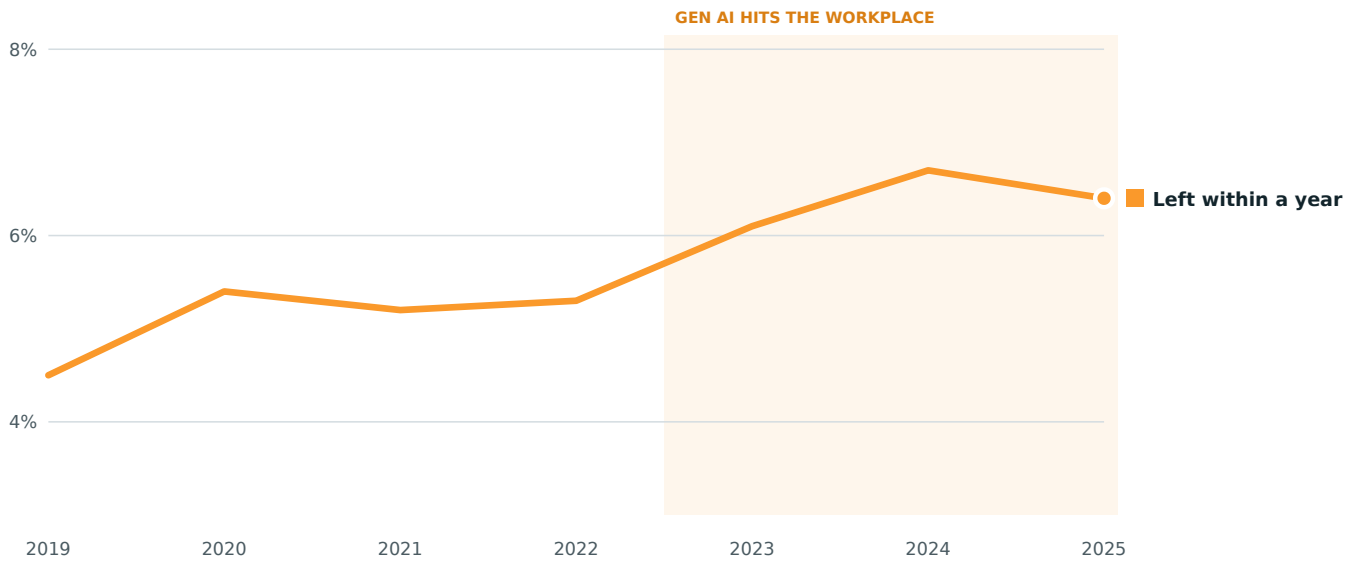
FINDING 06

More founders quit in year one

The share of founders who leave the role within a year rose after generative AI arrived.

Founders who left the role within 12 months of starting

By year started; years run November to October



6.4%

Of founders who started in AI year 3 left within a year, up from 5.3% before generative AI

84%

Of founders who started in AI year 1 were still in the role two years later, down from 88% in 2019

31%

Of new founders hold a co-founder title, down from 35% before generative AI

WHAT IT MEANS

Starting is easier. Staying is harder. More founders build alone, and more of them walk away in the first year. Founders who start with customers, co-founders and investors they already know give themselves more runway.

Left the role: the founder role has an end date within 12 months of its start. Some founders don't update their profiles when a company closes, so these figures are conservative. Source: Meerkat relationship graph, US career records (about 112 million US professional profiles), extracted November 19, 2026.

02

PART 02

Future-proof your startup.

PART 02 · YOUR STARTUP

02

Five moves to build your path to capital

Each move answers a number in this report.

1 Map your path to investors before you raise

Find out who in your network has worked with the investors you want to meet, and how close they are.

89%
of new founders have no verified tie to a VC

2 Ask for introductions, not meetings

A warm introduction from someone the investor trusts opens more doors than a cold email. Make the ask specific and easy to forward.

141
new founders for every new VC partner

3 Add a co-founder or advisors who know investors

Serial founders and senior operators reach investors more often. Borrow their networks.

16.9%
of serial founders know a VC

4 Build with AI, and say so

AI is where most venture dollars go. Show how your startup uses AI, even if AI isn't in your name.

82.7%
of 2026 US VC dollars went to AI

5 Line up customers and capital before you quit

More founders now start after a job ends, and more quit in year one. Start with relationships in place.

53%
of new founders left a job first

Source: Meerkat relationship graph, US career records (about 112 million US professional profiles), extracted November 19, 2026. Funding figures: NVCA 2026 Yearbook, PitchBook data; PitchBook-NVCA Venture Monitor, Q3 2026.

03

PART 03

Future-proof your career.

03

Six habits of founders who keep their options open

Build the network on your current employer's time, before you need it.

1 Meet investors while you're employed

More founders now start right after a job ends. Build the ties first.

14%
started within three months of a job ending

2 Know your number

Count who'd vouch for you, and how many invest.

1 in 3
founders with 70+ ties know a VC

3 Stay close to former colleagues

Career overlaps are the most common verified tie, and former colleagues make introductions.

3x
VC tie rate with 15+ years of career, against under 5

4 Take a senior role before you found

Senior operators reach investors more often than other founders.

14.3%
of founders from senior roles know a VC

5 Join a board or advisory role

Board ties reach investors and executives.

25%
of founders with a board tie know a VC, against 10% without

6 Put your AI fluency on the record

Build with AI and show your work. It's where investor attention is.

1.8x
VC tie rate for AI-named founders

Source: Meerkat relationship graph, US career records (about 112 million US professional profiles), extracted November 19, 2026.

04

PART 04

What comes next.

PART 04 · WHAT COMES NEXT

04

Predictions for the next 6 and 12 months

Each projection extends the four-year trend in the data. None is a forecast for a single company.

In 6 months

BY MAY 2027

About 115,000 people start a US company.

Basis: about 231,000 a year in AI year 3.

About 8,000 people start AI-named companies.

Basis: 8,569, then 14,723 a year.

More than half of new founders start after a job ends.

Basis: 53% in AI year 3, up from 38% before generative AI.

About one in ten new founders has a verified tie to a VC.

Basis: 10-12% in every year since 2020.

AI takes more than 65% of US venture dollars.

Basis: 65.4% in 2025 and 82.7% through Q3 2026.

In 12 months

BY NOVEMBER 2027

More than 240,000 people start a US company in the year.

Basis: 192,000, 200,000, then 231,000 a year.

New founders per new VC partner stays above 125.

Basis: 125, 119, then 141 in AI years 1-3.

More than one in four founders who left a job came from a shrinking employer.

Basis: 23%, 26% and 27% in AI years 1-3.

Six percent or more of new founders leave within a year.

Basis: 6.1%, 6.7% and 6.4% in AI years 1-3.

Fewer than 120 first-time venture funds close.

Basis: 101 in 2025, the fewest since 2007 (NVCA).

Source: Meerkat relationship graph, US career records (about 112 million US professional profiles), extracted November 19, 2026.

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YOUR RELATIONSHIP ADVISOR FOR AGENTIC AI

Companies come and go. Relationships are the asset that stays with you.

More people are starting companies than ever, and more of them start after a job ends. The data in this report shows what opens the door to capital: founders with bigger networks, senior experience and prior companies reach investors far more often. Those relationships can be mapped and built.

ABOUT MEERKAT

Meerkat is your relationship advisor built for agentic AI. We provide clients with rich relationship graphs and enriched contact data so they can quickly find and act on warm-path introductions. At Meerkat, we believe that as AI commoditizes outreach and access, earned trust is your most important asset.

Name the investor you want to meet, and we'll show you who opens the door.

Request a demo **trymeerkat.ai**

AI does the work. Meerkat knows who opens the door.

ABOUT THE DATA

How this report was built

Every count comes from Meerkat's relationship graph unless marked as outside data.

Who built this report

Research and analysis by Mary Shea, PhD, Co-Founder and Chief Growth Officer of Meerkat, who set the research questions, directed the analysis and is responsible for the conclusions. Built with Claude Opus, an AI model from Anthropic, which queried the graph, ran the calculations, drafted the text and produced the charts under her direction.

Source

Meerkat's relationship graph: 600 million professional profiles connected by 2.7 billion evidence-backed relationships, built from licensed and public sources, including about 112 million US profiles. Data extracted November 19, 2026.

Founders

People who started a role titled founder or co-founder at a US organization. This includes solo businesses and side ventures, not only venture-backed startups.

Before founding

From a 5% random sample of new founders with common first names: the most recent other role before the founder role, and whether it had ended. Shrinking employer: headcount on record fell 5% or more in the year the founder left.

Access to investors

A verified relationship with someone in an investing role at a venture firm. This is a proxy for access, not a measure of funding raised.

Venture firms and partners

Firms with venture in the name, plus about 50 named US venture firms. Partners: general, managing and founding partners and managing directors, excluding venture, operating and non-investing partner titles.

AI years

Each AI year runs November to October, beginning November 2022. The baseline year is November 2021 to October 2022.

Outside data

NVCA 2026 Yearbook, PitchBook data; PitchBook-NVCA Venture Monitor, Q3 2026.

Coverage

Some of the strongest relationships may not appear in any source.