

Book Review:

Rework

by Jason Fried & David Heinemeier Hansson

Overview

Are you looking to energize your company's employees, liberate them to do incredible work, and make your business more successful? This book was written with you in mind, telling its readers to cut out everything unimportant to build and keep a small, profitable, focused company. Authors Fried and Hansson run the Chicago-based software development firm Basecamp (www.basecamp.com), and though their software is a hit, this book has been even more successful, routinely hitting best-of business lists. I was curious to see why it has been so successful, and wondered how well their lessons apply to other types of business.

Simple, Straightforward, Great

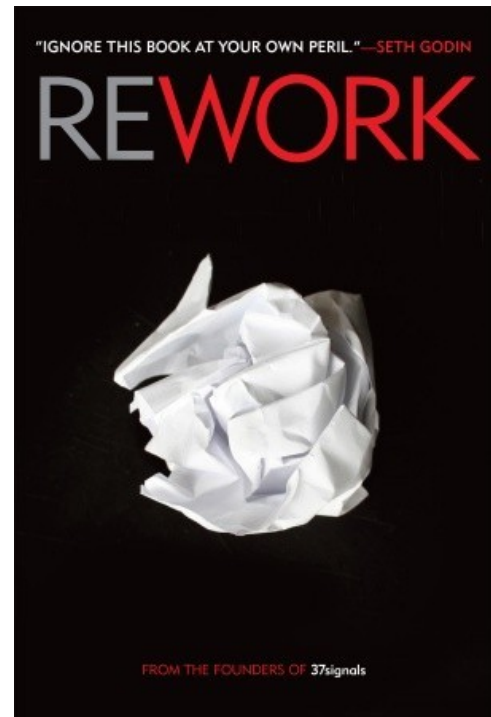
Though the authors avoid any kind of overarching tagline, they preach a consistent message throughout this short book: limit distractions as a person and an organization, and focus on quality. The book is broken down into ten categorical chapters, each of which has a number of directives on how to improve business quality and output. For instance, their section on hiring advises small companies to have a core employee do a task for two or three months before hiring someone else to do it. That way, you know exactly what to expect from that role, and also whether you actually need another employee to make it happen.

This hiring advice embodies much of their philosophy: don't grow faster, hire more people, or take on more functionality than you need to. Resist trying to do more than other companies; instead do less than other companies but do it so much better.

Though the delivery may seem similar to other business books, I found this book to be very refreshing. It made me want to not only get back to work, but gave me several actionable tactics to directly apply to my work. For example, the authors emphasize trying to find ways to make your by-products more valuable. This is now obvious for lumberyards, but what about organizations where the work is largely office-based? I came up with ideas while reading this book, and I bet you would too.

But We Don't Make Software

One possible limitation is that the authors make computer programs, and there might be limitations on their insight into other businesses. When they advocate hiring employees that live in other states or on other continents, the application might not be clear. In that case, the authors would likely argue that



even manufacturers can hire some people to work remotely, but in general the advice is geared to small businesses.

That's not entirely a limitation, as that's actually the point of the book: small teams are better, and companies should fight to keep their groups small and avoid creating bureaucracy whenever possible. They also find examples from a variety of industries to illustrate their ideas.

How to read this book

This book resonated with me, but the structure seems to defy the book's own advice. It's effectively a large to-do list. To make the lessons more impactful in your own work, I recommend reading it through once—it's a very quick read. If you then think you would really benefit from integrating these lessons in your work, the challenge becomes how to do just that.

First, find one or two pieces of advice that you can begin applying to your own work (for me, it's "Sell your by-products" and "Building to flip is building to flop"). Then, keep the book around and look up the section you need when you're confronted with some kind of decision you're chewing on. I think this makes sense for when you're confronting a crisis, or thinking about a new hire.

I enjoyed this book, and I hope you do too. Let me know if you have a response, a question, or a book suggestion.

Terence O'Neill is the Entrepreneurship Librarian at Michigan State University, where he works to connect entrepreneurs to resources that will better inform their business decisions. Through a background in libraries and community education, Terence has worked to support business and innovation internationally and throughout Michigan.

Have a book you want reviewed, or another comment? You can reach Terence at oneillt@msu.edu.