

Unconventional Wisdom



Not long ago, a former colleague gave me a book about management. I groaned inwardly. I'm not much for management books, as most are either formulaic "do it my way" manuals or the opposite: "positive thinking will get you where you want to be" books. I'm not willing to subjugate myself to the former, and I don't buy into the latter. But I smiled and thanked her, and when I got home the book went into the magazine rack so it would

look like I'd read it should she visit.

Eventually, I did read it. My respect for my former colleague spiked. *Rework* is by Jason Freid and David Heinemeier Hansson, the (disgustingly) young founders of 37signals, a multi-million-dollar software company. *Rework* is different from other management books. I actually finished it. I've owned my own business and I've been a manager at a corporation, two completely different worlds. *Rework* has wisdom that fits both. Again and again I found myself saying, "Yeah, that's right."

The book doesn't lay out a management plan. Rather, it's a collection of loosely related nuggets, none of which is longer than four pages. It makes great reading when you've got just a couple of idle minutes. It's iconoclastic. It's profane. It's entertaining. And it delivers advice that resonates with my real-world experiences.

For example, the chapter titled "Your Estimates

Suck" begins: "We're all terrible estimators ... We see everything going according to a best case scenario without the delays that inevitably pop up." It ends by advising you to break "your time frames into smaller chunks." In truth, that's the only way I've ever been able to

accurately estimate anything — break the task into the component parts and add up to the total.

Another chapter is titled "Hire When It Hurts." The first line is, "Don't hire for pleasure; hire to kill pain." In other words, don't hire just to make your life easier. Hire when you can't avoid it any longer. That's great advice for anyone who wants to run a lean and profitable business. Employees entail obligations on your part and cost a lot of money. Make sure you're in a situation where they'll earn more than they cost.

Another example: "If you're constantly staying late and working weekends, it's not because there's too much work to be done. It's because you're not getting enough done at work. And the reason is interruptions." How many times today did your cellphone ring? How much time did you waste regaining your focus after each call? Was it worth it? When you're building a deck, turn off the phone. Whatever it is will wait until coffee time, or lunch, or the end of the day.

I'm going to quote from one more chapter, then I'm going to tell you to go out and buy your own book. This chapter, called "Decommoditize Your Product," begins: "If you're successful, people will try to copy what you do ... But there's a great way to protect yourself from copycats: Make *you* part of your product or service. Inject what's unique about the way you think into what you sell."

The chapter ends: "Pour yourself into your product and everything around your product too: how you sell it, how you support it, how you explain it, and how you deliver it. Competitors can never copy the you in your product." Better advice I've rarely heard. To put it in context, a lot of people can design, sell, and build decks, but no one else can do it how you do it. Celebrate what makes you unique and you'll resonate with the kind of customers who appreciate you — the kind you want to work with all the time.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andy Engel".

Andy Engel
Editor

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