

Business books: what to read this month

Corporate morality, the magic of dishabituating and tackling the tyranny of being constantly on the clock



Andrew Hill, Isabel Berwick, Jonathan Moules, Leah Quinn and Anjali Raval 6 HOURS AGO

‘Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There’, by Tali Sharot and Cass Sunstein

Here is a slightly unsettling thought: to help “resparkle” our humdrum world, we may occasionally have to switch off a mechanism that helps us survive.

“Habituation” — responding less to repetitive stimuli over time — is one way our brains ensure we prioritise new and different occurrences. Being constantly on the alert for non-threatening day-to-day happenings would be exhausting and would make it harder to spot unexpected menaces.

But Tali Sharot, who works at the crossover between behavioural economics, psychology and neuroscience, and Cass Sunstein, co-author of the [groundbreaking Nudge](#), show we can train our brains to safely disrupt routines. “Dishabituating” can help us revel in the good stuff that we have stopped noticing, through simple tricks like quitting social media or breaking pleasurable experiences into smaller chunks. A profound insight comes early: keep learning. “You don’t habituate to the joy of learning because learning by definition is change. One cannot habituate to change.”

Sharot and Sunstein overpromise when it comes to the business insights on offer, though they do point to studies suggesting failure to habituate may be related to innovation. On the dark side, they remind business readers that it is all too easy to become gradually used to lying or accepting other ethical breaches.

But the authors are engaging guides to their field, drawing readers up the scale of seriousness, from wellbeing tips, through modes of believing, via health and safety, to societal risks of unthinking acceptance of evils such as discrimination or evolving fascist regimes.

In the end, though this is an optimistic book. We do possess the neurological and behavioural tools to kick bad habituation. New technology could even power “dishabituation machines”: thanks to virtual reality we could have novel experiences and resparkle our lives without having to leave the front room.

Andrew Hill

‘Never Not Working: Why the Always-On Culture Is Bad for Business — and How to Fix It’, by Malissa Clark

If you’ve ever felt uncomfortable because you are not working, or feel adrift and panicky when faced with unstructured time or holiday time, then you may be a workaholic. Malissa Clark — a recovering workaholic herself — reclaims the term and shows it to be a serious condition, with long-term consequences for sufferers’ mental and physical health. It also ruins the lives of people around those addicted to work, who have to put up with being a lower priority at all times.

The book is an easy-to-read digest of Clark’s own experiences, case studies and research. We go from an explanation of how self-help perfectionism is closely linked to workaholism, for example, to a broader, system-wide look at what leaders can do to eradicate enthusiasm and praise for those who work too hard. Believing that overwork is good for the bottom line has no basis in truth, Clark shows. And the leader who works through illness, or doesn’t take their own holidays, is offering the worst sort of example. “The key here is discipline and consistency. Modelling good behaviour must be so consistent that it becomes a new norm.”

There are charts and tests so readers can measure their own levels of workaholic tendencies, and the seriousness of the condition is highlighted by many case studies of people who have benefited from attending Workaholics Anonymous, a 12-step programme. You don’t have to be a full-on workaholic to benefit from this book: Clark has provided a clear diagnosis of the problems of the “always on” culture we live in — and offers us clear steps towards gaining more balance in our lives. *Isabel Berwick*

‘The World of Work to 2030 — A Practical Guide to Future-proofing Your Business and Your Career’, by Russell Beck

The future is uncertain. This book is a guide to better navigate the coming half decade or so as an employee or business owner. Russell Beck comes to the subject with many years of experience in senior roles, including as an engineer managing large-scale international projects, running a £120mn talent management business and building a consultancy start-up.

Since 2020, he has worked as a thought leader at ImagineThinkDo, a British consultancy business started by his wife, Alison, in 2011. This 232-page book first tries to explain the changing world in numbers and data, highlighting the need for us all to work until we are older, the management challenges of more diverse workforces, more aware of mental health issues and demands to work more flexibly. It then outlines the “megatrends” of the coming years, including urbanisation and rise of countries in Asia, climate change, populist politics and artificial intelligence. A separate chapter deals with what this means for the way people run businesses: most likely employing fewer people directly, and instead getting work done through partner organisations and contractors.

Beck makes clear that he does not have the answers to what work will exactly look like. He is, however, trying to pose the right questions. Each chapter is broken up with boxes containing questions the reader should consider, encouraging them to “pause for reflection”, absorbing the thicket of information being delivered. The book concludes with pointers about how to future-proof your career — building networks, embracing life-long learning and creating a personal brand. Much of this can be gathered elsewhere, but it is quite a comprehensive summary of current thinking. *Jonathan Moules*

‘Languishing — How to Feel Alive Again in a World That Wears Us Down’, by Corey Keys

Born into a neglectful upbringing, sociologist Corey Keyes spent much of his early years feeling the dunce hat was bolted to his head. Adopted by grandparents, he felt he’d been given a fresh chance at life, and became the first in his family to attend university. So he made it his life mission to understand why some people languish, while others flourish.

Keyes defines languishing as a distinct state. Unlike a depressed person, a languishing person doesn't feel "hopelessly sad". When languishing, Keyes says, one feels a "restless emptiness" and is "disconnected from your community". He lays out a mental health continuum in which a lack of mental illness does not automatically mean psychological wellbeing.

Languishing can affect anyone at any stage of life: from teenagers in higher education feeling the weight of parental expectations to lonely new parents to pensioners searching for meaning after decades-long careers.

Languishing is a compassionate, research-packed guide, encouraging all of us to delve into an emotional audit of our lives. Can we say we are truly flourishing? How meaningful, playful and interconnected does our life feel with the society around us?

Keyes encourages us to be life-long learners, to build warm trusting relationships with those around us and, where possible, to accept the twists and turns of life. Most interesting is his assertion that, in a world where church attendance and religious devotion is falling, spirituality plays a role. Keyes, a devoted yogi, stirs us to find a spirituality that makes sense for us. Is this community the answer to a world that is languishing? *Leah Quinn*

'Higher Ground: How Business Can Do the Right Thing in a Turbulent World', by Alison Taylor

Being a chief executive of a publicly listed company these days is no easy task. Despite growing pay packages, the number of spinning plates keeps rising. Day-to-day decisions are fraught with risk.

Ethics in business used to be about bribery and fraud. Today things are more complicated. How should CEOs respond when employees protest, about everything from racial injustice and climate change to corporate messaging on geopolitics? What happens when the public increasingly target individual companies, and shareholder demands appear never ending? How to manage this when economic and geopolitical uncertainty is at heightened levels?

NYU ethics professor Alison Taylor addresses these thorny issues, seeking to spell out how to best handle corporate responsibility amid so much noise. Her guide is peppered with real-life examples of companies that are in the news everyday. "I've never come across a company that gets everything right, and I cannot name a good or bad business — only better and worse ones. In real life, organisations evolve constantly," she writes.

At the heart of this book is a simple message — make core products as well as you can, own up to and clean up messes, do no harm and treat human beings with respect — from employees to customers. Taylor pushes corporations to be more “candid and realistic” about their impact.

“Corporations find themselves in a tense, ambiguous position . . . It’s impossible to be all things to all people for long,” she says. “Before promising to make the world better, do your very best to make your business better.” The book built on these lessons is a smart and surprisingly quick read on managing issues that could topple corporate leaders without them realising. *Anjali Raval*

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2024. All rights reserved.
