

After hours

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Book review



Overhauling management policies for good

Title: **Under New Management: How Leading Organizations are Upending Business as Usual**
Author: **David Burkus** Publisher: **Mariner Books**

Imagine a sudden unscheduled work meeting disrupting your evening plans. After a seemingly endless three-hour meeting, you breathe a sigh of relief as you return to your station, only to be greeted by a beep sound from your computer. Your blood freezes as you realize it's the ping of a new email. You want to ignore it, and yet you can't. Bound by duty, you peek at the monitor. The message is labelled as "URGENT: REVERT ASAP" and includes instructions demanding you to iron out an issue immediately.

David Burkus, author of *Under New Management: How Leading Organizations are Upending Business as Usual*, believes companies should "outlaw email," to avoid these kinds of scenarios. In the first chapter of the book, he quotes Phil Libin,

the Chief Executive Officer and Founder of Evernote, and says "A concept like an email inbox is harmful," and that it inhibits productivity. Essentially, an email inbox is "a list of things that you're behind on, sorted in the wrong order."

Burkus explains that because email is asynchronous, it can be used to communicate at any hour and ignores whatever the recipient is doing at the time. Based on statistics, the average employee usually keeps his or her email open in the background on the computer and will check it 36 times an hour, which takes up approximately 23 percent of his or her workday.

In the book, Burkus includes case studies of firms that have successfully abolished or revised their email policies, such as France-based technology company Atos

SE's transition to a zero-email policy that utilized an unobtrusive social network and message board system that workers could visit when needed. After the system was put in place, Atos reported an increased operating margin, higher earnings per share and lower administrative costs.

Another example is Shayne Hughes' experiment to abolish emails at Learning as Leadership, a California-based organizational development consulting firm, for a week. Hughes found that while employees were sceptical about whether anything positive would be accomplished, they adapted and began to take up more effective "old-school" methods – face-to-face conversations and telephone calls.

Burkus also includes examples of companies who toned down the usage of email

Author interview: David Burkus

and still found success through increased employee productivity.

He brings up research done by the University of British Columbia, comparing two groups of subjects, one who could check emails without limit, the other at fixed intervals of the day. The study found that participants reported significantly lower levels of stress when under restricted email conditions and had better quality of sleep, less distracted and generally felt better about themselves.

“In short, participants were more focused and less stressed when they couldn’t use email,” describes Burkus. “While limiting email may not bring people to their happy place, it will lower stress just as much as being there.”

And if “outlawing email” wasn’t revolutionary enough, the book features 12 more chapters on radical business policy changes, including transparency of salaries, untracked vacation days and a call to fire work managers.

Burkus begins each chapter of *Under New Management* very methodically with a set flow. He introduces a big idea and examples of two companies that have made the most significant changes under this idea. He follows up with supporting research before closing out with case studies of other companies with practices that are not as disruptive or radical, but still capable of yielding positive and noticeable results.

For managers reading the book, Burkus explains that there is “no one great model” that will work for every company. Rather, leaders are urged to use intuition to figure out which business policy would yield the greatest results. Whether you are a manager or not, the information presented is insightful, and could inspire new ways to relieve work-related stress.

David Burkus’s inspiration to write *Under New Management* arose while he was writing his first book, *The Myths of Creativity*, which discusses the myths and misconceptions that people have about creative thinking – particularly in a business setting.

Of the companies covered, he found those that were most successful at bringing out creativity and innovation from their staff operated a little differently from the norm.

“When you dig into the policy (of these successful companies) you find out that it actually is about trust. There is a ton of research on reciprocity. When you trust someone, they are more likely to act trustworthy,” explains Burkus, Associate Professor of Leadership and Innovation at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Before attending graduate school, Burkus worked in the pharmaceutical industry. “One of the things that I thought was really, really interesting was that while they had a decent amount of self-management and autonomy among individual employees, it wasn’t necessarily done at the team level.”

According to research, employees are most productive and engaged when they take control themselves – without the need for a manager’s involvement. Each team at the company that Burkus worked at, naturally, had a manager overseeing operations.

“It was a little odd to me, because they were so close to the idea of

self-managed teams, but for some reason couldn’t see its benefits or didn’t want to do it,” recalls Burkus, who was named in 2015 as one of the emerging thought leaders most likely to shape the future of business by Thinkers50, a prestigious ranking of the world’s top management thinkers.

“I wouldn’t say it was frustrating, or that it would have helped drastically to implement self-management, but it was interesting to see how close someone can be to this new and better way to work without actually making the change.”

Burkus is also an accomplished speaker, and delivered a talk about the benefits of salary transparency for TED in 2016. The video of his talk has been played over 1.6 million times as of this month.

“I think there’s inspiration and there’s instruction. Certainly, a talk and the ability to be face to face and communicate and respond in real time to concerns and reactions from an audience is way better for inspiring someone to make a change or see things differently. The challenge with a talk is that it’s very hard to provide all the evidence, data and sources to help them change all of the way through,” says Burkus.

Burkus is currently studying the networks that humans make, and the way that people organize and interact to form these networks. “I can’t really say with a ton of confidence where that’s going to lead, but it’s something that I’m very interested in and will probably turn into the next project,” he says.

