

## EX LIBRIS

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I am often asked to name my favourite book, and it's a hard question to answer. In fact, it's the whole literary picture that I find more interesting – how one book contradicts another, and how the debate pings back and forth. Authors rarely write a book unless they have a view, and they probably wouldn't have a view if they hadn't read someone else's. The writer Umberto Eco has a personal library with 30,000 books in it. It's not the size of it that impresses him – it's what's in it that he *doesn't* know. This is what Nassim Nicholas Taleb calls his 'antilibRARY'. Intelligent people know there is always something else to learn.

So, where do we head in search of knowledge? I like originality, and a point of view – usually a contrary one. For original business thinking, Adam Morgan's *Eating The Big Fish* (2009, first published 1999) is hard to beat. More than ten years later, the method is still being used by companies the world over, and the phrases *challenger brand* and *thought leadership* have permeated the working world. It still amuses me that many don't even know the source. Even better, his sequel *The Pirate Inside* (2004) explains how individuals need to behave to be challenging – talking about it is clearly easier than actually doing it.

When it comes to consumer observation, you can't top Mark Earls and James Surowiecki. *Herd* (Earls 2007) and *The Wisdom of Crowds* (Surowiecki 2005) cocked a snook at whole

industries espousing the virtues of one-to-one marketing and the prowess of experts. Nonsense, they say, everyone copies one another and, between them, they make a better fist of getting things right than the experts do. I'm with the crowd on this one.

Organizations are notoriously dysfunctional, and if you want to know how to solve the problem, ask some termites. *National Geographic* senior editor Peter Miller sets us straight in *Smart Swarm* (2010), showing how animal colonies are so much better organised than we can ever be.

Need to come up with a decent idea? Pay attention to all the oblique stuff and don't take the direct route, says John Kay in *Obliquity* (2010). Trying to plan something? Forget it, everything is random, says Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2005, 2007), and just because you have seen 999 white swans, seeing one black one can blow the whole theory (see his *Foiled By Randomness* and *The Black Swan*). I have yet to meet anyone who finished either of these books, but they truly are original, and well worth the ride.

For a full-throttle dust-up, it's fun to read whole books that go hammer and tongs for each other. Philip Rosenzweig's *The Halo Effect* (2007) points its fury at the classics *Built to Last* (Collins & Porras 1994), *Good to Great* (Collins 2001) and *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman 1982). They are nothing more than storytelling, he says. *The Spirit Level Delusion*

(Sowdon 2011) calmly denounces *Affluenza* (James 2007), *The Selfish Capitalist* (James 2008) and *The Spirit Level* (Wilson & Pickett 2009), as the rantings of a bunch of champagne socialists, armed only with a few pages and some re-drawn graphs. It's a funny thing – I liked the originals, but as soon as I read the contradiction I liked that too. It's all in the debate.

Actually, work is completely over-rated, according to the hilarious *Hello Laziness* (Maier 2005). A director of EDF energy, the author was fired (and later reinstated) for reading a newspaper through a whole board meeting. Pat Kane's *The Play Ethic* (2005) says the work ethic is a fallacy, and *The Seven-Day Weekend* (Semler 2003) says if we can answer emails on a Sunday then we should certainly be able to go to the cinema on a Monday. *ReWork* (Fried & Hansson 2010) says that, if you have to go to work, then don't do it like all the other companies do because it's nonsense. As a self-employed person, I find myself agreeing wholeheartedly.

Three final thoughts: statistics have to be treated with extreme caution and are almost always rubbish, according to *The Tiger that Isn't* (Blastland & Dilnot 2007) – an important thought for journalists and the PR industry. Business language needs constant attention and is frequently ludicrous, as analysed by Princeton University professor Harry G. Frankfurt in the superb *On Bullshit* (2005). And, for sheer originality, I am a great fan of *The Philosophy of Branding* (2004), in which Thom Braun gives us a whistle-stop tour of the great philosophers, and imagines what their

approach would be if they were brand managers. Slightly mad, and quite brilliant.

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