

Business books**FT business books: September edition**

Former PepsiCo chief reveals all and how to tackle the burnout epidemic — here are this month's top titles



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‘My Life in Full: Work, Family, and Our Future’, by Indra Nooyi

When Indra Nooyi became chief executive of PepsiCo in 2006, she was only the 11th woman to run a Fortune 500 company. You might expect, then, that her post-retirement book would explain how an accomplished woman can juggle it all.

Not a bit of it. Nooyi has produced a candid account of how grinding it was to rise through companies like BCG, Motorola, ABB and PepsiCo while trying to support her parents, husband and two daughters.

Her surprising and compelling memoir covers her journey from a Hindu Brahmin household in what was Madras, through Yale and into corporate America.

Nooyi refers only obliquely to the racial and gender prejudice she faced, focusing instead on the importance of mentors and family in a career.

It is a vivid portrait of the miseries of attempting to be “the ideal worker” — working into the night, dashing to airports at 4.30am and skipping a neighbour’s funeral to rewrite a slide deck. On one occasion her younger daughter wrote her a note: “I will love you again if you would please come home.”

This candour is unexpected. As PepsiCo’s chief executive, Nooyi often seemed defensive, irked by activists calling for a break-up and fund managers mocking her as “Mother Teresa” for pursuing “performance with purpose” — an agenda that now looks prescient.

Time, she concludes, is life’s critical currency and she counts herself lucky that employers gave her paid leave at critical moments: to care for her dying father, bond with her newborn children and recover from a serious car accident.

Here the book turns from memoir to manifesto; a plea for paid leave, job flexibility, predictable hours, pay equity and affordable childcare.

“We must address the work and family conundrum by focusing on our infrastructure around ‘care’ with an energy and ingenuity like never before,” she says. “We should consider this a moonshot.”

‘System Error: Where Big Tech Went Wrong and How We Can Reboot’, by Rob Reich, Mehran Sahami, Jeremy M Weinstein

Written by a technologist, a policymaker and a philosopher at Stanford University, *System Error* charts the problematic rise of Silicon Valley and its obsession with unbridled scaling — even though “scale is what can turn manageable consequences into toxic, unmanageable messes”.

As a result, the authors explain, technologies have developed quicker than the rules that may eventually oversee their use, hurting fundamental human values in the process.

The authors paint a grim picture for our technological future. Still, they assert that humanity is at a turning point: do we want technologies and technologists to govern us? Or citizens, supported by democratic institutions, to govern technology?

In advocating for the latter (at a time when our trust in elected institutions is at a nadir), the book calls for greater focus on tech ethics. It explores how both governments and citizens could think about governing areas such as algorithms, surveillance tools and artificial intelligence.

The suggested solutions include introducing greater transparency, due process and oversight to each space. Government authorities must lead the charge but Silicon Valley should also be tasked with overhauling its corporate culture, the book claims.

To illustrate its arguments, the narrative is peppered with stories of founders and companies, including start-ups and Big Tech — either as examples of quiet heroes or as cautionary tales of what not to do.

System Error does not deliver all the precise answers; rather, it raises questions that the authors believe need to be addressed to avoid a high-tech dystopian future. Part philosophy essay, part political treatise, it concludes that for democracy, “the regulation of our technological future will be its next defining challenge”.

‘The Power of Flexing: How to Use Small Daily Experiments to Create Big Life-Changing Growth’, by Susan Ashford

Interpersonal skills that are hard to quantify yet essential to good leadership — such as the ability to communicate well, to manage emotions and adapt to challenges — are often called “soft skills”.

Now, “flexing” is management professor Sue Ashford’s twist on soft skills. It describes her method of changing the way you behave through a series of daily experiments, designed to improve your effectiveness and influence.

“The most successful people find ways to incorporate learning and growth into their lives continually,” writes Ashford. Flexing, she explains, “helps make it possible”.

The Power of Flexing offers guidance on how to adapt your behaviour, whether it is to confront a new challenge or learn a new skill. It is an ad hoc, flexible system designed to fit around readers' lives and will appeal to those who want to take ownership of their self-development, rather than relying on employer-led training programmes.

The value of the book is in the practical guidance and the stories of real people told throughout. What Ashford proposes is theoretically simple: to adopt a "learning mindset" and use everyday challenges to aid personal growth.

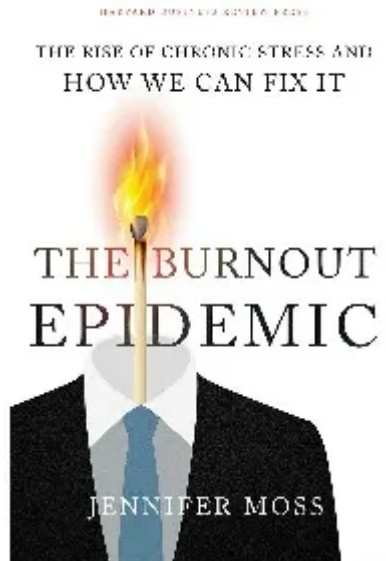
"We all face unexpected, unfamiliar experiences that call for new talents, new insights and new abilities," Ashford writes. The book proposes a mindful approach in dealing with these events — it could be an unexpected promotion, moving to a new country or a sudden illness — to build your resilience and help you grow.

Indeed, Ashford suggests setting "flex goals" to address weaknesses you want to work on. Learning to listen to input from others, for instance, or reacting more calmly to disasters at work.

Once a goal is set you run experiments to test out new behaviours that you think will bring you closer to that goal — such as deciding to step back and consider the bigger picture rather than rushing into an emotional reaction — while also soliciting feedback from others and tracking your progress in achieving the goal.

This book is no quick fix; it is for those willing to embrace a life-long-learning mindset, one which, according to Ashford, is the key to improving your own effectiveness and your relationships with others.

'The Burnout Epidemic: The Rise of Chronic Stress and How we Can Fix it', by Jennifer Moss



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It is time to rethink burnout, says author Jennifer Moss. For years she has studied the problem and worked with organisations to address it, but the pandemic has brought it into sharp relief.

In 2019, the World Health Organization included burnout in its international classification of diseases, describing it as feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job, feelings of negativism or cynicism related to work and reduced professional efficacy.

Moss writes that the health crisis exposed how thinly stretched and worn down people are and how it made burnout far worse. She then examines the root causes of burnout and what really needs to be done to tackle it.

The book, which is clear that burnout is an organisational issue, not an individual one, is designed for leaders who want to get to grips with the problem and do something about it.

Moss says that while developing emotional intelligence skills, such as practising gratitude, contributes to a happier, high-performing work and life experience, these skills are not the “cure” for burnout.

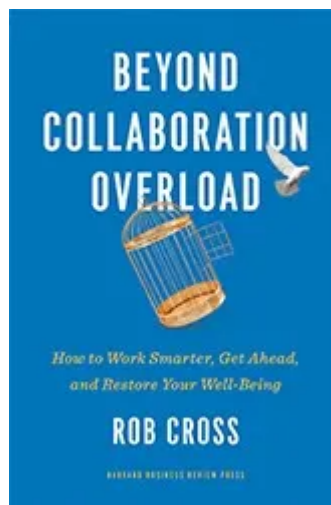
“Burnout can't be stretched out of people in yoga class or sweated out of them at the gym,” Moss writes. “Burnout doesn't care if they breathe better or deeper. And it most certainly isn't prevented by suggesting that maybe if they just listened to the sound of rainfall for 30 seconds instead of 15. This is the psychology of leaders in denial.”

As well as the causes of burnout, chapters highlight the most vulnerable — perfectionists and those prone to neuroticism, for example; how to measure burnout; and how leaders need to be empathetic and take care of themselves.

To be an empathetic leader, Moss writes, requires stepping outside of one's own needs, actively listening to people, prioritising physical and psychological safety, and taking action.

But above all, if you really want to take the pressure off, quite simply “you have to adjust the workload”.

‘Beyond Collaboration Overload: How to Work Smarter, Get Ahead, and Restore Your Well-Being’, by Rob Cross



Collaboration has become a constant of global business. Today, practically everything we do at work is based on co-operation. Much of the unhappiness among executives, managers and employees, however, comes from dysfunctional forms of collaboration that most of us fall into.

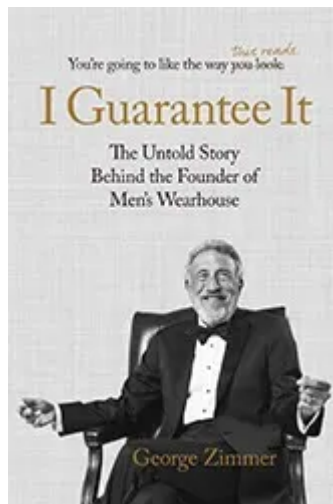
In his new book, professor Rob Cross shows how to rethink beliefs, structures and behaviours to help us adopt new patterns of interacting more efficiently. There is also a plan for dealing with collaboration overload to improve performance and innovation.

The findings in the book come from qualitative and quantitative studies that helped the author to create the “infinite loop”: a diagram composed of two connected circles like a figure of eight. On the left side, he explores techniques to challenge beliefs about our roles, deal with unnecessary collaborative demands and alter behaviours. On the right side, we are presented with the best practices to boost overall productivity and our reputational capital.

Chapters are complemented with exercises and takeaways for overcoming overload and engaging in essential collaboration, such as running efficient meetings.

An important part of the book is dedicated to networking, most specifically the importance of “non-insular networks” (those that encompass a diversity of perspectives, values and expertise). By spanning boundaries, non-insular networks offer rich opportunities to get help with projects, tap into ideas, gain a broad perspective and enable us to see problems and opportunities in novel ways.

‘I Guarantee It: The Untold Story Behind the Founder of Men’s Wearhouse’, by George Zimmer



A brief and engaging read, *I Guarantee It* presents a unique opportunity to hear from George Zimmer, the founder of Men’s Wearhouse, as he tells the story of his rise, fall and return to the retail industry over more than 40 years.

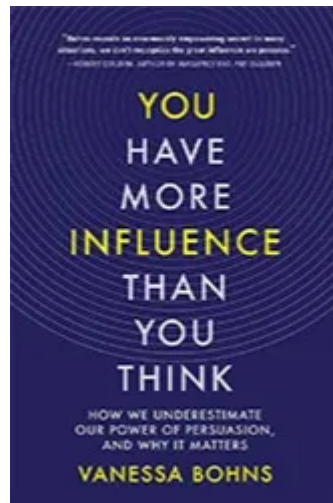
Throughout the memoir, which documents his early childhood to the present day, the author recognises his own privilege, from being born to a wealthy family to his fortune of going to university and getting involved in the progressive politics of the 1960s.

He credits the latter with influencing his concept of a kinder capitalism, in which companies work not only for profit, but also to serve those who work for them. A “fortunate son”, as he refers to himself, Zimmer relays how he took these teachings and put them into practice leading Men’s Wearhouse.

While at times self-aggrandising, Zimmer can allow himself this attitude: he built a store into a multibillion-dollar corporation traded on the New York Stock Exchange. But the writing is honest, an earnest acknowledgment of challenges overcome.

Underneath the personal story, *I Guarantee It* is a tale of the rise and fall of an innovative mind in the retail industry who sought to create a different type of company (and continues to do so to this day as the founder of Generation Tux). Zimmer tells the story of the growth and change of an industry that has been shaken to the ground in the past 18 months — but was crumbling long before the pandemic — and what lies ahead for the future.

‘You Have More Influence Than You Think: How We Underestimate Our Power of Persuasion, and Why It Matters’, by Vanessa Bohns



Most people underestimate how much they influence others, according to Vanessa Bohns.

We do this because we feel invisible. We refrain from asking for things we want because we assume people will say no. We also sometimes make careless, throwaway comments that hurt others because we incorrectly assume our words will be brushed off.

Bohns, an associate professor of organisational behaviour at Cornell University, supports her claims using experiments conducted by her and her academic colleagues. These include getting people to rate how they feel when offered a compliment.

The book contains a lot of positive messages about better understanding your influence and putting it to good use. For instance, it turns out that we all tend to fall short in expressing our gratitude to the very people who would most appreciate hearing it.

There is also a very strong case for us to use our influence less — to *not* say something if it hurts someone who holds us in high regard.

Unlike other books on this subject, which tend to focus on how we can increase our influence, Bohns tries to explain how we can employ the influence we already possess but might not appreciate we have.

Reviews by Janina Conboye, Leo Cremonesi, Amy Bell, Jonathan Moules, Hannah Murphy, Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson and Marta Santivanez

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