Why work isn't working
and what you can do about it

# Business
# Reimagined

Dave Coplin
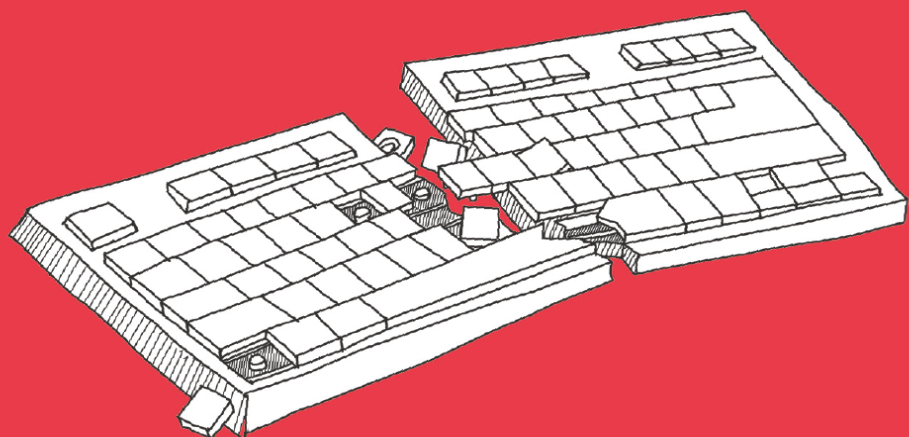
# Sample

· · · · **Sample** · · · ·

**www.harriman-house.com/businessreimagined**

# **Business** Reimagined

Why work isn't working
and what you can do about it

Dave Coplin

Illustrations by DocktorBob

Set in Segoe and Dante MT

**Hh** Harriman House

'As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it.'

**– ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY**

*For John, boldly go into your future*
*(and set your phaser to "stunning")*

As a buyer of the printed book of *Business Reimagined*, you can download the full eBook free of charge. Simply point your smartphone or tablet camera at this QR code or go to:

**ebooks.harriman-house.com/businessreimagined**

# Contents

# About the Author

DAVE COPLIN is the Chief Envisioning Officer for Microsoft UK and an established thought leader in the UK. He has worked across a wide range of sectors and customers, providing strategic advice, leadership and guidance around the impact of technology on a modern society both at work and in play. Dave is passionate about turning the base metal of technology into valuable



Author photo © CTK Photobank/Rene Fluger

assets that affect the way that we live, learn, work and play and in so doing, move the focus from the technology itself to the actual outcome. Dave has contributed to a range of media articles, conferences and forums all relating to the goal of making technology less "visible" and more valuable in our daily lives.

**www.theenvisioners.com** | @dcoplin

# Foreword
# by Ben Hammersley

**T**HE WORLD OF work is in a state of flux: there's an awful lot of uncertainty at the moment around how we should be working. If you believe the people that I write about and talk about and hang out with, the ones who claim to be making the future, the way we work and the places that we do it in are due an enormous amount of disruption.

Offices themselves, the architectural manifestation of work, are considered by many to be unnecessary; the view is that we have really cool cafés to work in instead. Offices have become a place of satire or even derision. Ricky Gervais only had to call his show *The Office* and we got the point without even seeing it.

Work and where we do it and how we do it really isn't cool any more, isn't worth talking about unless there are bean bags or table football tables. For many, paying attention to the way we work conjures up images of very dull men with clipboards and stopwatches. It's just not something that we want to do.

But I think we *should* be talking about work and the future because in fact it is incredibly useful, indeed it is necessary in this time of great change to look at these things; not in the "Hey everybody, let's live in Los Angeles and Skype in from the beach" way, but to examine the history of how we got here, the current trends and what is going to work in the future.

We need to examine the way that modern technologies have affected our lives and the way we work. We need to examine whether or not the way that we deal with those technologies, the way that we use them, the way that we buy them, the way that we handle them on a daily basis actually fits our expectations and needs.

In short we need to look at how we're being asked to work by the world at large and whether our existing systems might actually be preventing us from becoming more productive.

We have all heard the spiel, for example, about how having a completely open-plan office will foster huge amounts of collaboration or encourage huge amounts of knowledge-

sharing; about how it will create a great deal of value for companies and for ourselves.

This isn't actually true.

So I think the time is right to reassess the way that we work against what it is we're actually trying to achieve. Collaboration is a very good thing and while collaboration tools, computers, the internet and social media are incredibly powerful and valuable, our work should be driven by achieving the best outcomes, not how best we can use the new cool tools.

Many of us – most of us – spend our lives in offices. We spend our lives doing knowledge work sat in front of a glowing rectangle. And too often, in my experience, we are obsessed in the modern workplace with simply getting on top of the problem. Instead we need to start getting to the bottom of it. Let's begin here.

**Ben Hammersley**
**London, 2013**

**www.benhammersley.com** | @benhammersley

*Ben Hammersley is a technologist, writer and broadcaster. He is a contributing editor to the British edition of* WIRED *magazine, the Prime Minister's Ambassador to TechCity, and Innovator in Residence at the Centre for Creative and Social Technologies at Goldsmiths, University of London. His latest book is* 64 Things You Need to Know Now For Then.

CHAPTER 1: **IS BUSINESS BROKEN?** • CHAPTER 1: IS BUSINESS BROKEN? • CHAPTER 1: IS BUSINESS BROKEN? • CHAPTER 1: IS BUSINESS BROKEN? • CHAPTER 1: IS BUSINESS BROKEN?
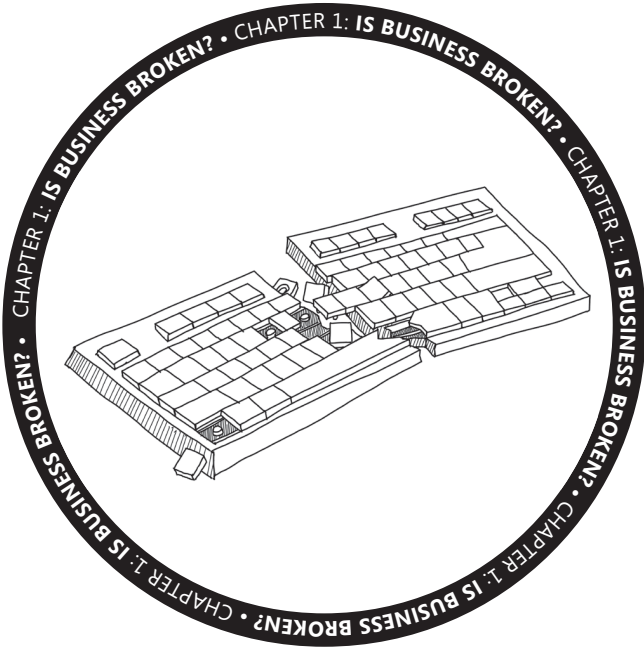
**S**O LET'S GET this straight from the start: I meet all the stereotypes of someone who has dedicated his entire career to IT. I grew up on a healthy diet of *Star Trek* and comic books at the dawn of the personal computer revolution. I was taught (or wanted to believe) that technology could be a force for good in our society, that it would provide a set of tools which would enable us all to make the most of our potential.

And in many ways it seems that we are all living the dream. Our lives have been transformed by the advent of the internet and the web and the ever-faster evolution of connected devices and services. We have come an awfully long way in the last 40 years. In fact, we have come pretty far in the last four. And recent technological innovation, in particular, has tended to impact consumers more than businesses, turning our personal lives into rich technological experiences at almost every turn.

Whenever I am giving a speech as part of my job as a technologist, I ask people to raise their hand if the computer they have at home is better than the one in their office. Every single time, the majority of people have better technology at home. Normal people, not just geeks like me, have embraced technology in incredible ways. We are communicating with friends over Skype, we are playing games online, we are on Facebook, we are streaming movies and music and sharing photos. And we are doing all this increasingly on the move. It is worth pausing for a second to remember that only a decade ago the vast majority of people saw a computer as part of a place of work or study.

The technologists among us would say that the ever-accelerating trends of mobile, cloud, big data and social are transforming the IT landscape. Most of us would simply say that we live in a period where technology has become a normal, necessary part of our everyday lives.

But over the past few years a nagging sense of doubt has entered my mind about all this. I have begun to question the truth of the utopian vision of technology as the ultimate liberator. Like some people, I've been beginning to wonder

whether the very thing that was supposed to set us free might not have instead ensnared us – without truly adding the value it promised.

Because there seems to be one area where technology fundamentally hasn't changed things. Work.

A recent study brought this into clear focus for me:

## 'Majority of American Workers Not Engaged in Their Jobs'

This was the headline that caught my eye. What sent me reeling was the detail. The study revealed that: '[s]eventy-one per cent of American workers are "not engaged" or are "actively disengaged" in their work, meaning they are emotionally disconnected from their workplaces and are less likely to be productive.'[1]

Seventy-one per cent? That means that less than a third of workers feel happy and productive in what they do, day in day out, 40 hours a week, 220 days a year.

Surely this cannot be true?

But I would guess that if you work as part of the knowledge economy inside any organisation, small or large, you will know for yourself that there is some foundation to this claim. It seems to be true of lots of companies in lots of countries; I did a bit of digging and found that these figures were replicated in the UK and many other developed nations.[2]

---

1 **www.gallup.com/poll/150383/majority-american-workers-not-engaged-jobs.aspx**

2 **www.blessingwhite.com/content/reports/blessingwhite_2011_ee_report.pdf**

Today we are living with the legacy of a couple of hundred or so years of office work. We have gone from working pretty much for ourselves (or the local lord) as farm workers and labourers, through the factories of the industrial revolution to working for big business with the rise of modern multinational corporations. And somewhere along the way, the way we work got stuck. We have found ourselves at the mercy of command-and-control hierarchies, butting up against principles that were designed for an analogue world and which have become more or less irrelevant in today's digital, connected world.

Everyone seems to agree that technology has changed everything. Then you look around at the world of work and realise that it really hasn't. There *are* superficial differences. Sometimes quite a lot of them. Yet, as we'll see, the underlying structure and principles of most people's working lives are the same as if the technological advances of the past quarter century had never taken place.

But is it technology that hasn't lived up to its promise or we who have failed to change to make the most of what's really on offer?

## WORKING LIKE A VICTORIAN

We are living in a time of huge change but the way we work is still stuck in models first devised at the time of the industrial revolution. Let's take one aspect of work and follow it through by way of illustration.

Today we still reward work done in terms of time – hours worked. This owes itself to the industrial drive for business

efficiency through standardisation: the production-line model of work where people perform a repetitive task or set of tasks contributing to an outcome or product, rather than creating an outcome or product themselves. This was the only way you could have scale. It was also the only way that you could make big, important things like steam trains or omnibuses.

This was a definite shift from the artisanal model of earlier times. What was being rewarded in this new way of work was not the outcome – an artefact sold at market – but hours spent on tasks. Workers received salaries for a working week based on clocking in and out. Companies focused on reducing the cost of labour and increasing the standardisation, all to improve the cost-efficiency and reliability of their manufacturing processes.

And so people became directly compensated for the *process* not the outcome of their work. This shift was very important. It didn't go away overnight. In fact, most of us are still living with it today.

As the industrial revolution came to an end and the knowledge revolution took hold – a development of the mid-20th century – the focus of most companies remained on driving business efficiency through standardisation.

The arena where this standardisation and efficiency took place became the office. It was the new place where workers swarmed around the provision of infrastructure.

In the industrial revolution, towns, cities and even countries prospered around the centralisation of infrastructure and resources, whether it was the dark satanic mills in Arkwright's Derbyshire or the mining towns of the valleys of South Wales.

This model carried on into the knowledge revolution because, in the pre-internet era of work, the only way to get the benefit of large-scale personal computing was in the office, where an IT department managed a network which all workers could utilise.

Offices became the very definition of productivity. But within all of this, the separation that had begun in the industrial revolution between employees and the outcome of their work was only widened.

For a while this disconnect was probably harmless enough. After all, products were being made, services were being offered, and many companies became wildly successful. But the levels of disengagement felt by the average knowledge worker today, and revealed in the studies earlier, should set alarm bells ringing.

Put simply: in a world where the reasons for swarming, standardisation and relentless focus on process are disappearing thanks to technology, continuing to organise our work around these principles is driving the majority of employees quietly mad.

## THE ANTELOPE OF THE OPEN OFFICE

What we have lost in all of this is the fact that we are all, for the most part, professional, independent creative beings, employed by our firms to help them achieve great outcomes. Any process we are focusing on at a given time is just that: a process. If it is taken for the whole, the actual goal of our work – the ultimate outcome for our business – is lost. And that makes a business blind.

Things only get worse from there.

Employee discontent is not, of course, an entirely new problem. There have been efforts over the years to try and inject a sense of creativity into the office space, or to better enable collaborative work. Unfortunately, in the story of how the working world ended up such a disengaging mess, this is the bit where the good guys put together a brilliant scheme to save the day only to end up making things worse.

They came up with the open-plan office.

Unfortunately, open-plan offices just don't work very well. The theory is nice – remove physical barriers, make it easier to communicate – but the reality is awkward at best. Creative people forced into this type of work environment typically end up inventing new ways of creating barriers between themselves and their surrounding environment. Or they end up giving up on creativity.

Walk into any creative company – an advertising agency, say, or a publisher – and what you will see for the most part is row upon row of headphone-wearing creatives, all attempting to create a sense of personal space whilst remaining within the constraints of the business's idea of an environment that promotes creativity and collaboration.

For many creative industry employees and knowledge workers, headphones have become as essential a part of the corporate survival toolkit as cool laptop bags or hip personal phones.

Technology visionary Ben Hammersley describes this problem best when he refers to the 'hyper adrenalized' state of most open-plan workers. When placed in open-plan offices, argues

Hammersley, we become like antelope on the savannah, spending most of our time feeling vulnerable to the wide open nature of our habitat.

Everything we do is on display. It's hard for us to exert any kind of independent creative thought as we are simply part of a broader herd, surrounded by noise and chatter that only seeks to drive conformity not break it. Worse still, just like on the savannah, predators sit on the sidelines observing the herd, waiting for any individual to show signs of weakness. The antelope realise this and spend a vast portion of their time under significant stress from fear of attack.

Want to know where the power-brokers are on your floor? Look for the individuals who are placed around the edge looking in – facing the herd with their monitors shielded. I guarantee you, the people with this kind of geographic position in an office will be the power-brokers of your business.

Interestingly, the open-plan office again encourages a myopic focus on process over outcome. With everything they do in full view of everyone else, the employees in the middle of the office give up on creativity and settle for "productivity". While still valuable, this offers but a fraction of the full potential that they might actually bring to their employer.

Our centralised environments have effectively become cognitive wastelands, where flair and innovation are lost to the daily battle with outdated processes and forms of communication.

## CAPTAIN KIRK'S INBOX

The modern day curse of email is a superb example of this insanity where productivity or process replaces creativity or work. It's also a great reminder of what happens when an outdated process (not email per se, but email for everything) is kept alive by successive waves of technology that enable its use to be both prolonged and perverted until the potential value it offers has been lost.

From all of the promises of the brighter technological future that *Star Trek* offered me as a kid, I never once recall Captain Kirk sitting on the Enterprise battling with his inbox. Or, for that matter, Captain Picard ignoring his bridge colleagues in favour of a sneaky peak at his communicator to see if that important message from the Romulans had come in.

So why, in the name of Spock, do so many of us now feel slaves to our email? We impulsively, constantly, fanatically check for messages when we should be cognitively elsewhere. We spend our lives on the merciless and never-ending quest for the nirvana of "inbox zero". Many of my friends (and yes, even myself) have, at some point, fallen victim to this way of thinking. We end up treating our mobile devices with disdain, blaming the fact we get email rather than blaming ourselves for checking for messages every five minutes.

It's a classic example of where technology becomes the prison rather than the release.

I'm not calling for the death of email. It remains one of the core foundations of our digital communication toolbox. But we have allowed it – like so many other tools before – to

become the *only* solution when so many other, better choices exist.

After all, when you think about it, email exists for three important reasons:

1. It is precise in its targeting – it is sent to only those recipients we choose.

2. It is primarily asynchronous in operation, i.e. it is not (and was never) designed to be a real-time form of communication.

3. For some bizarre reason, it remains the only communication tool that is consistently cached by devices – i.e. you can access your inbox and send messages even if (God forbid) you are without a network connection. This alone makes it the lowest common denominator of the digital communication world.

Today, every single member of our digital society has an email address. They *may* be contactable by other channels, but if I want to be sure I can reach them, and if the communication is not time-critical, email is the perfect medium.

The problem is, though, that most of the emails we receive don't fulfil those criteria. Our inboxes are full of communications that should have been sent through more appropriate means or should never have been sent at all. Email is not really designed for organisation-wide messages, or for messages requiring immediate attention; nor is its "reply all" button actually meant to be used to supply everyone with an endless stream of jokes, organisational showmanship and pointless grandstanding.

All of the above may have been fine when all we had for communicating digitally was email, but that's just no longer the case. There are dozens of different tools out there, each suited to a different kind of need.

So why if we have all this choice do we find it so hard to change?

## EXPERIENCE VS. INNOVATION

As humans we are pretty much defined by our past experiences. This is as true for us as a society as it is for us as individuals. When confronted with new technology, offering new experiences, we typically end up using it much the same way as the old technology it has replaced.

One of the best examples of just how hard it is for humans to adapt to the opportunities afforded by new technology sits unassumingly below our fingertips every single day. The QWERTY keyboard layout is one of the classic designs of our time, and yet its main reason for existing has long since passed.

The QWERTY keyboard layout was invented in 1867 and, although the exact reasons for its creation are somewhat contested, both sides of the argument concede it was a solution to a problem we simply no longer have. Depending on who you believe, Morse code telegraph engineers needed to minimise mistakes, or office typists needed to stop the mechanical heads on their typewriters from jamming when they typed too quickly. QWERTY proved perfect and caught on. And we have been stuck with it ever since, even though it has

been proven to be slower, clumsier and less intuitive than any number of alternatives invented since then.

We are surrounded by incredible advances in personal computer technology. Most of us walk around with more computing power in our pockets than was on our desks a few short years ago. We live in a world of touchscreens, voice and gesture interfaces … and we still type like we're in the 1880s.

As I said, it is not as if the QWERTY keyboard layout has not been improved on many times since its inception. Perhaps the most famous alternative is the DVORAK keyboard, designed just 80 years ago, when mechanical typewriter engineering had progressed somewhat.

Unlike its predecessor, the DVORAK layout was primarily built for speed. Its middle row of letters – the home row – uses all five vowels and the five most common consonants: AOEUIDHTNS. With this layout, the home row letters perform around 70% of all the work, making it possible to type 400 of the English language's most common words without leaving the row where your fingers naturally rest.

With the QWERTY layout, the home row provides just 32% and 100 of the most common words.

All these advantages, and yet the DVORAK never caught on. There are several reasons why QWERTY still rules supreme – standardisation being one of the most powerful – but the basic underlying cause is simply human inertia. In other words, we like what we know and we know what we like.

The subtext to this is incredibly important, especially for those of us in the technology industry. It means that in all the

challenges facing an unreformed and unproductive working world, technology itself is in many respects the *least* of those challenges.

If you cannot help people to change, technology changing all around them won't make the slightest difference.

## THE PROBLEM OF PRODUCTIVITY

Our definition of productivity – office-bound, process-focused, unimaginative – lies at the very heart of our problems here. We've applied technology to solve the problem of productivity, we've created processes to solve the problem of productivity and we're even using offices to solve the problem of productivity.

Productivity is in danger of becoming the curse of the modern day workplace. We have become transfixed by improving productivity to such an extent that we are starting to forget the other attributes that most people bring to their organisations every single day. We spend our working days locked to a single period of time and a single physical location, batting communications back and forward in a sort of nightmarish game of digital ping-pong. Success is defined by the number of individual processes we complete not the outcomes of the organisation.

The massive risk here is that in a world defined by its processes and not its outcomes, working *smarter* is not an option and the only feasible alternative is simply to work *harder*. This, in a nutshell, is the core of why I think work isn't working.

# CREATIVE BUSINESSES ARE THE FUTURE

Chasing the dragon of productivity undermines our potential contribution as employees and robs organisations of the potential for innovation. Chaining ourselves to processes and the open-plan, bums-on-seats style of collaboration makes it much harder for us to tap into the incredible potential of people. But why is this important for organisations – and why now?

It's important because the industrialised world is reaching a point of parity, where improving the quality or quantity of products and services is less and less able to provide organisations with the competitive advantage they need to be successful (or even survive). In this "post-informational" world, as it's been called, our attention must now turn to creativity.

What is most important now is the ability of organisations to think differently about what they do. What counts is how they adapt to new opportunities and innovations.

The problem is, of course, that this is a world that our past experiences have not prepared us for. Our office spaces are neither conducive nor relevant to it. Our process-driven work culture is too rigid and narrow for it. And employees are simply not equipped with either the latitude or the cultural ability to adapt to it.

## HOW CREATIVITY WORKS

Psychology helps us understand what we need to do to promote this new level of creative connectivity. As business psychologist Tony Crabbe points out, creativity tends to divide into three general categories of activity:

1. intellectual ambling

2. connecting brains

3. deep thinking.

*Intellectual ambling* is a solitary activity where the brain is allowed to wander, ruminate and explore. Fundamentally, the brain is a connection-making machine. Any new learning or creative insight occurs when a new pattern of connections is made. However, it is easy to stop these connections from happening. Think of a time when you were trying to solve a really difficult problem, or come up with a great idea. Often we get the feeling we are not far from our solution. What's happening at that point is the brain is grasping, straining to hear the weak signals from distant synapses. In fact, vision is such a dominant sense, when we are close to an insight, the brain floods the visual cortex with alpha waves to shut it up so it can focus on making the connection. This means that, for about 0.3 of a second before we have an insight, we tend to go blind!

Our current workplaces, which prioritise activity over thought, reaction over reflection make intellectual ambling counter-cultural. Even more significantly, the noise and distractions make listening for insights extremely difficult: either from the chaos of meeting after meeting, or the incessant flow of email

after email, or the office chatter going on around us. We have effectively created insight-preventing workspaces.

*Connecting brains.* Creativity happens when new connections between ideas are made. Why do those ideas need to be in a single head? Connecting brains is a social activity that involves discussing, sharing and brainstorming with others. The notion that we will increase creativity if we allow people to work with others, to share thinking and perspectives is not new. In fact, you could argue, the primary objective of the open-plan office is to facilitate serendipitous encounters between people and ideas. The more diverse the connections, the greater the propensity to make new connections, and therefore the more likely it will be that innovations will follow.

But again, the current workplace runs counter to this, and not simply in the antelope-effect of open-plan offices that we discussed earlier. The problem is we surround ourselves by like-minded people working on similar problems. Where possible, we need to broaden and extend the cognitive gene pool of our organisations. We are less likely to make new discoveries or to discover truly disruptive innovation when we are stuck in open-plan teams or organisational pods of people who are more or less doing exactly the same kind of work as us and see the world in exactly the same way. "Group think" is a classic symptom of our problem. If the intent is to generate some genuinely new thinking, it is going to happen much less often with people who see the world the same way as you.

*Deep thinking* might not sound the most "creative" type of approach; it is more grunt than flair, where solutions are ground out through concerted intellectual effort. Deep thinking needs time and focus. The problem here is establishing both

the time and the environment that even allows *deep thinking* to take place. According to experts, it takes the average human around 15 minutes to achieve "flow state" thinking, the place where our cognitive powers are at their most powerful. Yet the chances of finding 15 contiguous minutes in our current working environments without interruption from meetings, emails or other distractions are so rare that we are unlikely to ever harness this incredible power. Multi-tasking has become the order of the day for all employees, and yet studies have increasingly proved that focusing on multiple tasks simultaneously makes us 30% less effective than if we focus on each one in turn.

So the proposition of this book is that the workplace is no longer fit for purpose. In a world that requires greater creativity we need to take a more flexible approach to both the workplace and the work we do. Successful businesses will be those that can provide the physical *and* cognitive space needed for their employees to flourish, with employees becoming creative individuals committed not to aimless productivity or repetitive processes but on helping their organisations achieve their aims.

How will we get there? We're going to have to start reimagining business.

# Business Reimagined

## Why work isn't working and what you can do about it

### Dave Coplin
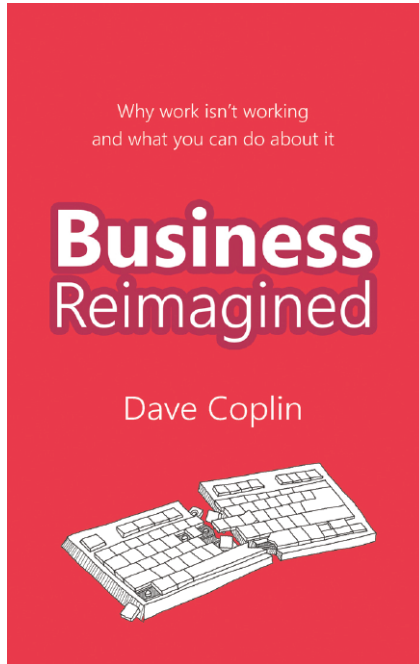


Available direct from Harriman House and all good booksellers. To order a copy of the print or ebook edition go to:

**www.harriman-house.com/businessreimagined**

Paperback: 9780857193315
eBook: 9780857193322