

The best books of the week

Business books

Business books: what to read this month

The business of femtech, taming artificial intelligence, and personal efficiency for the 2020s



Isabel Berwick, Leo Cremonesi, Bethan Staton, Mischa Frankl-Duval YESTERDAY

‘Likeable Badass: How Women Get the Success They Deserve,’ by Alison Fragale

So many books aimed at “empowering” women at work cover the same lame ground. We should, apparently, lean in or lean out, speak up, amplify and either be more or less willing to tolerate the kinds of traditional male and other in-group behaviour that went unchecked for centuries — until about 20 years ago.

Alison Fragale is doing something different. A “likeable badass” is a woman who has got the right blend of assertiveness and warmth. Fragale focuses her efforts on practical ways to help her readers secure — and maintain — “status”. This is, crucially, different from being senior or powerful — by focusing on status, you can help to shape how others see you, regardless of where you sit in a corporate hierarchy. You can start shaping your status from day one of your career or a new job — making this a great book to give a recent graduate.

Fragale gives lots of strategies to increase your status, bit by bit: “small deposits” — doing one thing for someone else in a reciprocal manner, for example: sending an email congratulating a colleague or just sending a note to a friend showing you’re thinking of them. If it sounds cynical, it’s not. Fragale includes her own experiences throughout, in a very natural way.

Some of the most useful chapters cover the kinds of work that often fall to women — “non-promotable tasks” around the office or sitting on voluntary committees, school boards and non-profits. She doesn’t advocate saying a straight “no” to these things, but suggests giving a considered view of whether you’re uniquely best placed to do it, plus asking “will this bring joy to my life” — and the extremely on-point “who will I meet?” Fragale’s book is for anyone who wants to know the secrets of getting ahead — or just going through life at your own pace — without being a self-promoter or a hard-ass: someone who no one respects or likes.

She comes across as a thoroughly likeable badass herself — this is a genuinely original and useful book. (And many men would like it, too.) *Isabel Berwick*

‘Hyperefficient: Optimise Your Brain to Transform the Way You Work,’ by Mithu Storoni

When we are faced with limitations, it is in our nature to innovate and develop new tools. But as AI advances and takes over routine tasks, the focus of expertise is shifting towards idea generation, complex learning and problem-solving. This transition requires new ways of measuring efficiency, prioritising quality over quantity.

Noting this change, eye surgeon and neuroscience researcher Mithu Storoni presents a fresh perspective on work efficiency, highlighting the importance of aligning work patterns with the natural rhythms of the body and mind. She argues that traditional models of continuous, high-output work are outdated in the modern digital age, and offers guidance on elevating our mental performance to new levels.

Central to Storoni’s thesis is the idea of the brain having different “gears” that can be adjusted depending on the task at hand. She explains how working in harmony with these mental gears can lead to optimal performance.

For instance, a low-energy mental state is ideal for creative thinking, while a high-energy state is better suited for problem-solving and analytical tasks. By understanding and utilising these different mental states, individuals can be more efficient without succumbing to burnout.

The author provides practical tools and strategies to help readers manage their mental states, personalise their work approach based on their “gear personality” and ultimately achieve sustainable efficiency. The overarching message is that true efficiency is not about working harder, but about working smarter by leveraging the brain’s innate rhythms. *Leo Cremonesi*

‘The Vagina Business: The Innovative Breakthroughs that Could Change Everything in Women’s Health,’ by Marina Gerner

Are vaginas a business opportunity? Yes, argues Marina Gerner in this optimistic, readable account of a growing wave of “femtech” innovations and start-ups. The industry, of buzzy new technologies seeking to improve women’s health and experience, could be worth \$1tn, according to the book, as well as holding the potential to transform many lives.

Gerner defines femtech as innovation that “moves women’s health forward” and “genuinely improves female wellbeing”. The revelations in the pages will be more surprising to some readers than others: for different demographics of women, egg freezing, high-tech breast pumps and period tracker apps are already the norm.

She whips through a range of applications, introducing new products and businesses from an internal device that dilates the cervix for childbirth, to new contraceptives. The book charts compellingly the difficulties female entrepreneurs face in securing investment, especially in “taboo” areas, and issues like medical bias which hold trials back. Gerner’s often personal narration is rich with examples and colourful characters.

Some readers may find the book insufficiently critical, however. While Gerner is sceptical about some technologies, she is breezy about the potential for them to improve women’s lives. This can feel a little incongruous: when reporting on maternal mortality, for example, she describes vast socio-economic and racialised inequalities that contribute to women dying in childbirth. The idea that a new app could be transformative in reducing these tragedies, then, seems a little thin.

Even if you disagree with the optimistic vision of femtech as a “revolution”, the book is a revealing look at an area of technology, and business that will probably become more relevant in many of our lives. *Bethan Staton*

‘Taming Silicon Valley: How We Can Ensure that AI Works For Us,’ by Gary F Marcus

Gary Marcus’s latest publication has been warmly praised by tech commentators. Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen called his case “forceful”; 2020 presidential candidate Andrew Yang said Marcus remains a “principled voice of informed reason . . . on humanity’s side”. Yet this sweeping book offers only a limited, if useful, view of one of the biggest tech issues of our moment.

A scientist and entrepreneur as well as an author, Marcus aims to “lay out tangible steps” towards a “positive AI future”. When he’s doing that, the book is compelling. His pithy summaries of proposed laws are useful, and his “demands” of global governments — including transparency around which data is used to train AI models, a dedicated US AI agency, and greater liability for damage — seem sensible. Many of his examples of AI harms are also eye-opening, and avoid the clichés familiar to so much writing about artificial intelligence.

Yet Marcus says he wrote the book at “lightning speed”, and unfortunately, it shows. Some basic concepts (like AI hallucination) are explained quite fully, but other terms, like “enshittification” (coined by writer Cory Doctorow to describe the decline in quality of online platforms) are dropped in without a gloss. The book is also peppered with long blocks of quoted text, and occasional “I-told-you-so’s”. While these may intended to make the book feel authoritative, they can be off-putting.

Writing a manifesto on AI, even as the field is in flux, is brave. *Taming Silicon Valley* feels up-to-date — but the lingering fog of uncertainty around AI means the book can feel speculative. Marcus seems to argue that we don’t know what AI is capable of, but that it could have severe consequences. He may end up being right — but right now, that’s a hard thing to say with certainty. *Mischa Frankl-Duval*

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