

The Geek Way – The radical mindset that drives extraordinary results

– Andrew McAfee

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Short Summary

The Geek Way was written about by a few universities including Harvard Business Review. It seemed like an interesting concept so I read it and am writing a book about it.

My full book summary is here → [The geek way.docx](#)

This book is written about how silicon valley companies are lately outperforming non-silicon valley companies and that one of the common denominators is that they are managed by geeks.

The book says there are four characteristics of geek companies; Science,

1. **Science** - Conduct evidence based arguments so that the group makes better decisions and predictions and estimates.
2. **Ownership** - reduce bureaucracy, take away opportunities to gain status that aren't aligned with the goals and values of the company
3. **Speed** - accelerate learning and progress plan less and iterate more; organise projects around short cycles in which participants show their work have access to peers and models deliver to customers and get feedback
4. **Openness** - sharing information and being receptive to argument revaluations and changes in direction.

My favourite concept by far was on science. I love that arguments are settled with data.

I've always loved openness with Google's 'default to open' and the 'Working out loud' concept. I also think it's far more efficient as folks can read what's being documented and add thoughts as they go.

The point around ownership was brilliant although. I don't think it's just ego that drives bureaucracy.

Having spoken to a few people I think it's mainly 'cover your a**' going on as well as a response to historical scar tissue. This means organisations who have had a bad experience in the past and have decided to fix it with bureaucracy.

The only other point on bureaucracy which I think is worth pointing out is that if there is some bureaucracy, there should be accountability and if something goes wrong... blame. If this isn't in place, the bureaucracy should be removed.

So what?

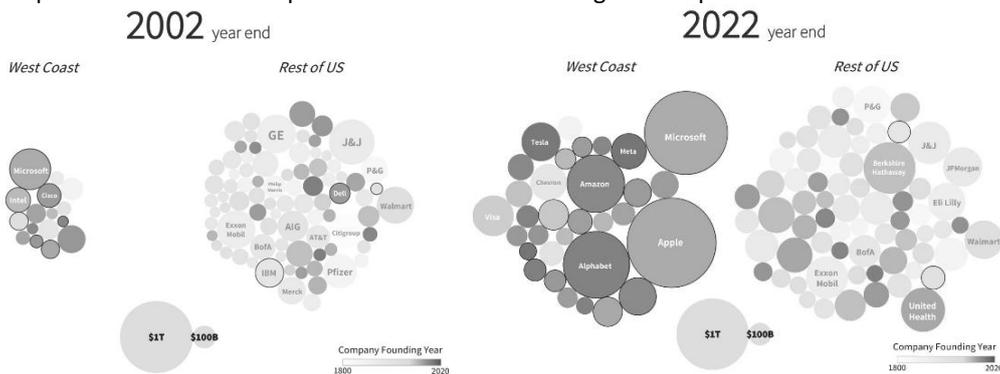
You don't need to read this book as I've written it up for you but I suggest the key points you take away are:

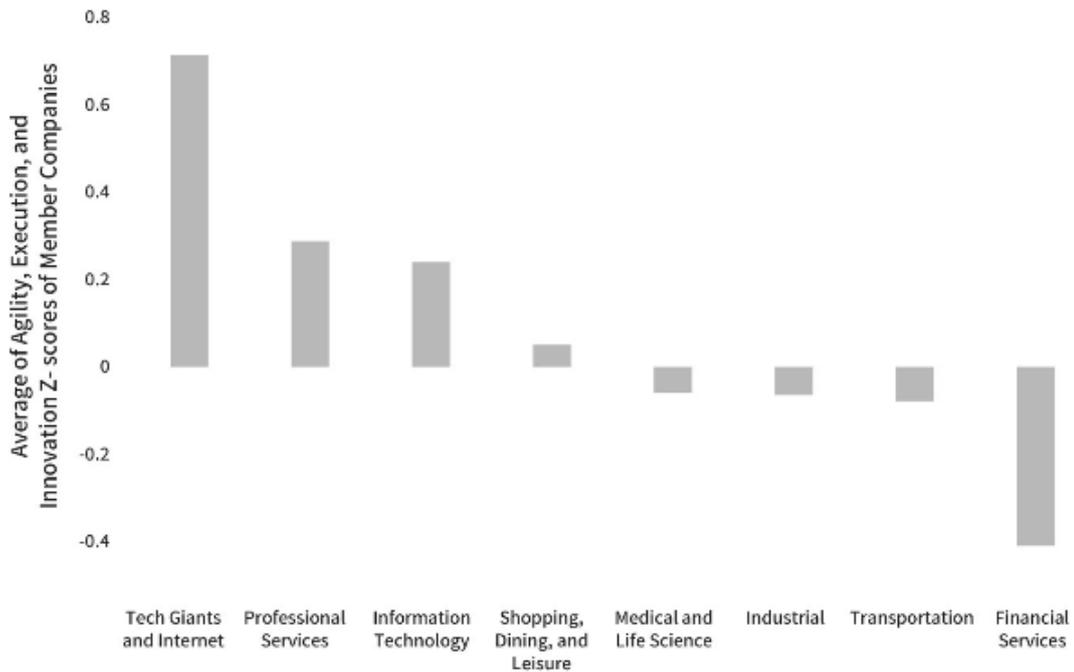
1. Settle disagreements with data
2. Work out loud
3. Be critical about bureaucracy, remove it where you can and encourage ownership.

Detailed Summary

- Introduction: The misunderstood revolution
 - Geeks drove the computer revolution but business geeks have taken the standard corporate culture of the industrial era and given it an upgrade
 - The geek way is a set of solutions for thriving in a faster moving business world. They're cultural solutions not technological ones.

- The geek way leans into arguments and loathes bureaucracy. It favours iteration over planning, shuns coordination and tolerates some chaos. It's practitioners are vocal and egalitarian and they're not afraid to fail, challenge the boss or be proven wrong. Instead of respecting hierarchy and credentials they respect helpfulness and chops
- To understand why the geek way works so well we're going to draw on research from the young field of cultural evolution. Cultural evolution insights haven't yet spread to the business world. So there's a huge opportunity to be at the forefront of applying them
- I'll spend a lot of time explaining how the business geeks run their companies. But I'll spend at least as much time explaining why these approaches work as well as they do. With that understanding any company that wants to can quickly get geekier.
- Chapter 1 – The fourfold path to geekdom
 - Geek way includes four norms: Behaviours that a groups members can expect of each other
 - Speed – iterate rapidly
 - Ownership – more personal autonomy, empowerment, responsibility, fewer cross-functional processes and less coordination.
 - Science – experiments, generate data, debate how to interpret the evidence
 - Openness – sharing information and being receptive to arguments, revelations and changes in direction.
 - Because of these four norms, geek companies are more freewheeling, fast moving, evidence driven, egalitarian, argumentative and autonomous than those of the typical industrial era corporation
 - These cultures fuel impressive performance, and they empower people and give them autonomy.
 - A bunch of geeks have figured out a better way to run a company, as a result they're taking over the economy.
- Chapter 2 – Dialed in: The performance and culture of geek companies





- The towns of silicon valley feel like sleepy suburbs, but in the twenty first century they've become the worlds epicentre of capitalist value creation. The valley has more fast growing innovative world changing companies than any place else
 - The standard explanation for this remarkable performance is that silicon valley is the centre of the us tech industry, but instead focusing on the growth of an industry called tech, mystery is about the rise of a corporate culture called geek
 - Recent research indicates that there's a distinct geek corporate culture with high levels of empowerment and autonomy, it fosters innovation agility and execution
 - Whether you're a fan or foe or competitor of geek companies, it's valuable to spend time understanding how they became so dominant. My argument is simple: the cultures they've created are critical enablers of their success
 - People want to work in healthy environments and we now know how to create them thanks to two very different communities: a new cohort of geek business founders and leaders and scientists asking and answering questions about human behaviour and cultural evolution.
- Chapter 3 – Ultra and ultimate: A new way to think about us
 - Humans are ultra social
 - It's our communities that keep us alive and allow us to build space ships
 - Increasing observability and decreasing plausible deniability are core to the geek way and enable them to be successful
 - Humanities superpower is at the level of the group, not the individual.
 - Ground rule for geek companies: Shape the ultra sociability of group members so that the group cultural evolution is as rapid as possible in the desired direction.
- Chapter 4 – Science: The press secretary versus the iron rule
 - Humans are overconfident
 - Because of our overconfidence and inner press secretaries, we're bad at evaluating our own ideas. And we are excellent at evaluating the ideas of others.
 - The geek norm of science is all about arguing. It also specifies how to win arguments: with evidence. Not seniority or charisma or past performance or rhetoric or philosophising or appeals to morality or aesthetics but evidence.
 - For the norm of **science**, the ultimate geek ground rule is **Conduct evidence based arguments so that the group makes better decisions and predictions and estimates.**
 - Business geeks need to be careful about arguing so they don't fail to create psychological safety.
 - Survey for your organisation:

- We rely on evidence to make important decisions
 - We don't conduct a lot of tests or experiments
 - Senior people here frequently override data driven recommendations based on their judgements or gut instinct
 - At this organisation debate is seen as a normal and healthy part of making decisions
 - The more important a decision, the more likely we are to spend time debating and gathering evidence about it
 - We don't have a data driven culture
 - In debates people here support their positions by saying things like 'trust me I'm the expert' or 'I've been in this area the longest so I know best' or 'I'm the boss so we're doing it my way, instead of presenting data and analysis
 - People here are reluctant to bring up evidence that doesn't support their bosses views
 - People here frequently change their mind and change course after being shown new evidence
 - When we can't agree on how to proceed, our usual approach is to run a test or experiment to help us decide which way to go.
- Chapter 5 – Ownership: Tearing down the giant machinery operated by dwarves
 - Companies often become excessively bureaucratic.
 - Often the bureaucracy is driven by status. Folks want to be asked to advise on lots of decisions so create lots of bureaucracy to enable them to do this.
 - Geeks fight this by stopping coordination, collaboration and communication and instead creating ownership.
 - Cross team communication is seen as harmful as it can lead to a soft form of bureaucracy to ensure that their autonomous teams remain aligned with the company's overall goals, geek companies rely on a bureaucracy that's powerful yet tightly constrained. It's job is to oversee the work translating the companies high level vision and strategy into team level objectives and key results
 - For the norm of **ownership** the ultimate geek ground rule is to reduce bureaucracy, take away opportunities to gain status that aren't aligned with the goals and values of the company
 - Survey for your organisation
 - There's a lot of red tape in this company
 - We have a bias for action over planning and coordinating
 - The best way to succeed at this company is to help it accomplish its stated goals
 - I am free to act autonomously in the areas that are most important for my work
 - I have to coordinate my work with many other teams across the company
 - Bureaucracy prevents us from moving quickly to seize opportunities
 - I spend a lot of time in cross functional meetings and other coordination activities
 - I am rewarded for taking the initiative
 - I have to spend a lot of time asking for the resources I need to do my job
 - It's clear to me how my work fits in with the overall strategy and goals of the company
- Chapter 6 – Speed: From lying to learning
 - Most large projects are finished late and their problems don't become apparent until the end. This is known as the 90 percent syndrome
 - The liars club is a major cause of the 90 percent syndrome. Liars say they're on time when they're not. They hope that someone else gets found out first. This liars club thrives on observability and high plausible deniability.
 - The liars club is combatted by iterating quickly, getting feedback from customers. Iteration and feedback are observable which breaks up the liars club
 - Another benefit of speed is that it accelerates learning. Setting up projects to generate lots of models via modularity and lots of generations via fast interaction so we can learn
 - For the geek norm of **speed**, the ultimate ground rule is to accelerate learning and progress plan less and iterate mor; organise projects around short cycles in which participants show their work have access to peers and models deliver to customers and get feedback

- The geeks see the long time scales of many industrial era companies as a profound vulnerability. The two keys to exploiting it are a faster cadence and high levels of observability.
- Survey for your company
 - Many of our recent large projects have experienced significant delays
 - We have a short cycle time for delivering something to internal or external customers and getting feedback from them
 - We don't have a culture of experimentation or learning from failure
 - Customers are discouraged from requesting changes in the middle of a project
 - When a project starts to fall behind schedule that fact quickly becomes obvious to everyone involved
 - It's easy for people to see what work others are doing and learn from them
 - We often make big changes while in the middle of a project
 - We break big projects up into small modular pieces that we can finish quickly
 - We believe that extensive up front planning is a good way to avoid unpleasant surprises down the line
 - When we have a choice between analysing possible solutions and building something to see if it works, we choose analysing.
- Chapter 7 – Openness: A better business model
 - Many companies have model 1 norms: Be in unilateral control over the others, strive to win and minimise losing, suppress negative feelings. These sound sensible but they're actually corrosive because they create a culture of defensiveness and undiscussables
 - Model 1 strangles and squelches the things that the business geeks are adamant about. It crates corporate cultures that are the opposite of freewheeling, fast moving, evidence driven , egalitarian, argumentative and autonomous
 - The business geeks avoid defensiveness by embracing a norm of **openness** which we can define as **sharing information and being receptive to argument revaluations and changes in direction.**
 - The geeks realise that the two goals of 'strive to win and minimise losing' are incompatible – that in the long run, winning necessitates conducting experiments, taking risks and placing bets , not all of which are going to succeed.
 - Common knowledge (an extreme form of information sharing) is organisation truth serum
 - For the geek norm of openness the ultimate ground rule is 'welcome challenges to the status quo and increase common knowledge in order to combat defensiveness and undiscussable topics'
 - The ultimate definition of a norm is that its any behaviour where non compliance leads to punishment via social rejection.
 - Openness holds a special place among the great geek norms: it's a distributed self correction mechanism.
 - Survey for your organisation
 - Senior leaders here are willing to be vulnerable and admit that they were wrong or that they don't know the answer.
 - Managers and executives here don't want to hear any bad news.
 - Managers and executives here expect to be obeyed without question
 - We emphasize winning and suppress negativity
 - There are lots of taboo topics here
 - People here frequently challenge the status quo and speak up when they disagree with a course of action
 - Being associated with a failed effort does not harm your career at this company
 - When people disagree with each other they do so respectfully
 - People here rarely admit that someone else has caused them to change their mind or follow a different course of action
 - People here think their colleagues can handle candid feedback and constructive criticism.
- Conclusion: Vitality if not immortality

- No one thinks they've discovered the final answer. No one thinks they've worked out how to be permanently successful
- Human wants are misaligned with the goals of the organisation we're part of. Liars clubs and bureaucracies are evidence of this.
- Organisations want people to pursue org goals but individuals want to pursue their own goals
- A lot of effort is spent up[holding the norms of science, ownership, speed and openness.
- Whatever happens next is unlikely to follow the industrial era business playbook because it doesn't work as well as the geek way.
- Companies need to throw out their playbook if they want to compete with the geeks.