

A Book without a Plan – Analogies to Business Development

If you wonder how somebody can be so crazy as to invent a business consulting method that is based on book writing and carried out by creative writers who technically have no clue about business, this article will provide answers. It explains the analogies between book writing and business development. This will not only help you rethink your own business decisions from a new perspective but also shift your focus to your strengths.



A few weeks ago, a dear mentor of mine, former VP of a global corporate and now business angel, posted an article on LinkedIn entitled “a goal without a plan.” Below the text is an image of the front of a black Porsche 911, cut in half (vertically), that now serves as the base of a glass desk in his personal workshop.

In the post, the author explains the analogies between the task of constructing the desk and modern software development. As he states: “I set myself two conditions: it had to be the front of a Porsche 911, and the parts should not be modified in any way.” After many loops of iterating, he arrived at the result that is now visible in the picture he posted alongside the post: an easy and functional solution that allows for continuous improvements and is easy to maintain.

So, he reached his goal and he got there without ever having a fixed plan in mind. What he did have, however, is “a lot of agility, creativity, motivation and patience.” The reason why I am stressing this is because he explicitly mentioned these resources (strengths) alongside the constraints he set himself for the

challenge. In other words: He was *aware* of these strengths that allowed him to take the risk of not sticking to a detailed plan. Otherwise, he could not have voiced them.

The post (even just the headline) immediately caught my attention. First, I really thought he was talking to me personally and my (never-ending) business model development because the notification reached me via messenger. Only then, when I saw the "Read more" link, did I learn that the headline belonged to the post about the Porsche desk challenge.

Still, it was no accident that I immediately felt caught by the headline because I knew it had a lot to do with my own iteration process and with the core of my business. It still took several more weeks to figure out why the analogy between software and do-it-yourself desk building was so revealing. And in fact, the pieces of the puzzle only fell together when I looked at my living room desk this morning. As you can see in the picture, it shares many, if not all, features of the Porsche challenge.

About three years ago on a cold and dark winter evening, I discovered a pile of books in the middle of a big pile of bulky waste in the neighborhood while walking the dog. I first thought the pile consisted of real antique books but when I inspected them more closely, I realized that it was a small table with a drawer. I quickly walked the dog and then returned to rescue the furniture item before anybody else could have done so. I love books and no matter how old or dirty the item was, I knew I needed to take it home and use it for something.

As it happened, I was thinking about a new solution for my living room table at the time. When I say "thinking about a solution" I mean that I hardly ever just buy new furniture. Usually, I look through old furniture parts and building materials in my basement to put together something that suits my needs – both design-related and functionally while also satisfying my creative needs. So, I first tried to just put the small table next to the couch but it quickly became clear that I needed something of lesser height and with more surface area.

I then got one glass plate from the basement and performed the process in exactly the same way as the Porsche 911 challenge reveals and I ended up with a solution that is just as functional and beautiful (according to my perspective and taste) as the desk solution. I even (almost) met the constraint of not changing or adding any parts. The only thing I did was put 4 rubber knobs

underneath the construction to neither hurt the plastic books nor the wooden floor.

If this answers the question of how my own approach to problem-solving equals the one of agile software development, I am now moving to the part that answers the question of how this is related to book writing and business development. The first message is a metaphorical one: While others love cars and put their fragile glass plates on a 911, I place my plate on books because I love them. So, books are at the center of what I do and my message is that anybody trying to build a business better do so by building on stuff you like and therefore are eager to spend a lot of time with.

When it comes to loving books, there are obviously two ways of how books can be fun, except for just buying them and/or looking at them (in the shelf or underneath a glass table construction). These two ways are 1) reading books, 2) writing books. The former is usually considered easier than the latter which is why most people shy away from the latter. This is already a parallel to the modern-day business world because many people prefer consuming over producing, i.e., being employed instead of employing themselves by innovating.

Those who enjoy the building part in life and in business and have the talent to write will probably gain as much pleasure from writing books as from reading them. I am one of these people and having written scholarly books, non-fiction books as a ghostwriter, as well as fiction and autobiographical books, and journalistic pieces, I can at least say that writing is something I can handle at rapid speed and on a fairly high-quality level for various different audiences. All of these components: the content, the writing skills, and the audience are crucial aspects of writing.

Analogies between Books and Business

What I am now going to share are my key insights of the analogies between book writing and business development.

1) Big Picture Thinking

Books, at least if you want to publish them, cannot be located somewhere out of space. You need to locate them in relation to the bigger picture of social/economic/political/global issues. This is

needed in order to show in how far the book is relevant to the larger audience. People also want to know how a topic that they are interested in relates to other topics they might know of. If this embedding of a topic does not take place, any writing will remain isolated and thus not make sense. Only the reference to the surrounding issues helps determine which contribution a book seeks to make.

Business key terms: vision, strategy, C-level, business development

2) Scope

Did you ever think about writing a book but never started or completed the task? In many cases, the reason why this happened is related to the fact that books are considered "huge projects." They run counter to the present-day trend of short content, little background, quick to deliver. Books allow the author to not just focus on the outcomes and conclusions of thoughts but actually explain them by coming up with logical arguments. In analogy to the world of sports, books are marathons, or at least long-distance runs, not sprints. So, writing them takes a minimum level of endurance and the willingness to run the distance.

Business key terms: Long-term goals, business/process engineering

3) Problem-driven

No matter what kind of book we are talking about – all books solve some kind of problem. This even holds true for novels and science fiction. These fictional books satisfy emotional needs, i.e., people want to be entertained or helped in some way. For business books, authors offer specific answers to specific problems. In the most general sense, books solve the problem of information scarcity on a topic (at least they used to). Whatever the problem might be, books promise written answers for a particular target audience.

Business key terms: Out-of-the-box thinking, value proposition

4) Depth of knowledge

There is no doubt that just filling pages is no indicator of whether or not someone actually offers new findings. There is one test,

however, that I at least see as an indicator: If people never finish a book that usually shows they do not understand their own models/arguments deeply enough to come up with a clear and original answer. In many cases, however, there is a mixture of resistance to learn how to develop long and coherent arguments plus the hidden awareness that they lack the comprehensive know how that would be needed to write a book.

Business key terms: deep learning, knowledge management, HR development

5) Focus

The title of a book is program, i.e., it describes the topic as specifically as possible. In other words: Nothing in a book should be outside the topic boundaries. This constraint is the most necessary criterion for a book to be finished. While big-picture-thinking could theoretically be borderless, the topic forces the author to remain focused. This also determines the research agenda. In times when information is available without upon one click, at any time, around the world, the focus on the topic provides necessary boundaries. Focus also refers to the information to be presented. Again, this is genre-independent. In research projects as well as in other non-fiction and even fiction books – authors will always try to focus on presenting the strongest arguments to support their theses.

Business key terms: Prioritization, focus

6) Connecting the Dots

Chapter outlines of books can help writers structure their thoughts prior to writing. But they are usually artificial frameworks that keep shifting very much in the process of writing. In other words, they are "plans" which might not even be necessary for arriving at the goal of completing a book. What is crucially needed in order to do so is connected thinking. Books are not just isolated essay collections. Since focus is key, all parts of a book need to relate to the overarching subject and they need to be arranged in a way that they complement each other with respective transitions between chapters and paragraphs. This requires connected thinking, both horizontally (different arguments on the same level of abstraction)

and vertically (arguments relating to the big picture as well as to smaller details).

Business key terms: matrix organization, knowledge transfer

7) Creativity

There might be highly analytical writers who say of themselves that they are not "creative" at all. The point is, however, that the act of writing is an act of creation. That means you are putting together words in such a way that they express your thoughts. It is not up to me to explore here how exactly this happens cognitively and which talents might be conducive to this. What I want to highlight is simply that creativity is an inherent part of writing, no matter which kind of text one is producing. And this also implies that writers do not start a sentence by consciously knowing which exact word follows after the other and how the sentence will end. They simply start with one word and the others keep flowing. And just like the psychological phenomenon of flow is subjective and hard to be enforced, there is an inexplicable part about writing that resists rational explanation so far. So, writing is immanently agile in many ways. Your goal is to express something (in the case of a book, it is something bigger) and the exact path to this goal (the exact words) will come naturally in the process.

Business key terms: innovation, design thinking, agile project work

8) Patience

Some believe that the activity of writing a book in and of itself requires patience. I personally believe that most patience is needed when the crucial writing part is done and the revision starts. In the revision, you need to show the opposite of big picture thinking. You need to zoom in and focus on every single letter and comma in a text that needs correcting. This might take endless loops of editing and the final text might look very different from the first version. You need patience to make it through these revision cycles and you need to be able to concentrate on details, no matter how much of a big-picture-thinker you can otherwise be.

Business key terms: Defensibility, long runway

9) Simplicity

Closely related to the task of correcting is the ability to express your thoughts in a simple manner. Readers of philosophers or of old-fashioned science works might doubt this point but even philosophers who might not have chosen the simplest language in their writing still managed to break down highly complex topics into amounts of text that fit between two book covers. What I am thus emphasizing here is the importance of clear language and its relation to clear thinking. Language refers to a sign system and these signs can also consist of pictures and symbols. The important thing is that whoever reads the book needs to have a chance to understand it without being forced to put too much effort into the task. And there is no excuse for not expressing things in a simple manner just because the audience "supposedly" consists of smart intellectuals. Especially the smartest people on this planet recognize genius in simplicity.

Business key terms: complexity reduction, easy communication

10) Perspective

Writing is usually intended for readers (unless we are talking about a personal diary). This means that you need to have an idea of who you want to reach with your writing. In order to then satisfy this audience with the content and possibly style of your writing, you need to be able to put yourself into the position of this audience to a certain extent. I am writing "to a certain extent" because the writer first needs to be aware of his own position and not leave it. Strong arguments need a strong awareness of one's own position and therefore of one's own limitations. If this is clear, one can temporarily shift one's perspective to the audience to understand and satisfy their needs (e.g., learning, entertainment) with the proper language and content.

Business key terms: role changes, job rotation, agile teams

Appendix

How story writers can be consultants who help companies grow

Writers, especially if they are experienced in writing books, master all the skills above. But there is one particular aspect that drives them – their curiosity, their perception, their learning – and that is stories. Writers have a natural instinct to chase interesting stories. Now the question obviously is what “interesting” means? And the answer is: There is no one answer because there are infinite ∞ phenomena (topics, things, places, people, events) in the world that raise the subjective attention of writers.

What turns these phenomena into stories first is the subjective meaning writers attach to these phenomena. The variables that cause a writer to devote attention to something are not different from the general criteria that influence the perception of human beings. In media theory, these variables have been studied and summarized in the so-called News Value Theory starting as early as in the 1920s. Since then, multiple lists with variables have been published. I am listing the ones by Galtung and Ruge here:

1. Frequency
2. Schwellenfaktor
3. Eindeutigkeit
4. Bedeutsamkeit
5. Konsonanz
6. Überraschung
7. Kontinuität
8. Variation

9. Reference to elite nations
10. Reference to elite people
11. Personalization
12. Negativity

The latter four are presented separately because, in contrast to the first eight, these are culture-dependent. This means that these values only make sense within a certain culture. Let us assume that you are traveling for the first time in Asia and a big headline of a politician (10. elite people) is shown on the front page of a

newspaper. You will most likely guess that this is important but you can only make sense of it if you have cultural background knowledge of the country. The same holds true for corporate cultures. If you used to work for a startup in the past where explicit and open feedback was practiced, you might not devote much attention to a critical discussion which, at your new corporate employer, is perceived of as highly confrontational (12. Negativity).

All these criteria determine the likelihood that an observation becomes a story. As opposed to conventional business analysts who use quantitative tools to "observe," i.e., measure different variables, observation and analysis for writers take place intuitively. This is why writing is always subjective because the visual and verbal input is processed in the blackbox of the writer's brain (and heart). This makes it impossible to derive any findings that pass the common tests of reliability and validity. Still, the crucial advantage is that they are able to observe more holistically at a given point in time than any standardized data collection process.

Holistic perception here is related to the aspect of connecting the dots above. But that is only part of the story. The other major difference between quantitative and qualitative observation methods is the human factor. While in most situations in business, one tries to eliminate the emotional factor, for stories, emotions are essential. Again, this relates to the news values above. Many of them involve clearly subjective value judgements (e.g., Surprise, Negativity) that correspond to particular emotions.

In contrast to other formats of business reporting, for a story to stick with the reader/viewer/recipient, there need to be emotions involved. This is a century-old finding of Aristotelian rhetoric according to which even the simplest story needs to consist of the following components:

1. Ethos (Authority)
2. Pathos (Emotional appeal)
3. Logos (Logical argument)

This overview of the elements of a good story is also connected to the aspect of dramaturgy. That means that the three elements above need to be presented in the given order to have maximum impact. Obviously, this is relevant for the sender (speaker, writer) who crafts a story. But this is also relevant for the recipient (reader, audience) in case this recipient consciously observed what exactly is drawing his attention. If someone is writing a book about a company, for example, the findings that draw his emotional

attention during the research should not be presented in bulk at the beginning of the book he is about to produce.