

HACKING WORK



**BREAKING
STUPID RULES
FOR SMART RESULTS**

Bill Jensen and Josh Klein

PORTFOLIO PENGUIN

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3

(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell,
Victoria 3124, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632,
New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in 2010 by Portfolio Penguin,
a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Jensen, Bill, date.

Hacking work: breaking stupid rules for smart results / Bill Jensen and Josh Klein.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-59184-357-3

1. Organizational effectiveness. 2. Creative thinking. 3. Problem solving. I. Klein, Josh, date. II. Title.
HD58.9.J463 2010
650.1—dc22
2010017336

Printed in the United States of America

Set in Whitman

Designed by Pauline Neuwirth, Neuwirth & Associates. Inc.

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Dedication

To the underground army of benevolent hackers
who are saving business from itself,
one bad act at a time.

—Bill and Josh

To my folks, for giving me the courage to love what I do and to do
what I love. They taught me to hack the right way—with courage
and respect—and I thank them for it.

—Josh

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PREFACE

PSSSSSST . . .

For several years we have foraged in the back alleys of business, arranging clandestine meetings with the bad boys and girls of work. Empty cans of Red Bull, pizza crusts, and shredded nondisclosure agreements littered our meeting places.

“Pssssst. How do you *really* get everything done? What are your work-arounds? The ones that keep your company afloat, keep customers happy, teammates employed, and keep you doing your best? We want the world to know about the power of benevolent hacking.”

Who are we, and why do that? We’re just two guys who have dedicated our professional lives to finding work-arounds to corporate bullshit.

Bill’s day job is making it easier to get stuff done. Over the course of two decades, he has asked over five hundred thousand people around the world what makes their work so hard and complicated. C-suite dwellers love his findings on simplicity. Bill advises executives and their troops on how to work smarter by making work simpler. He has consulted with many of the biggest companies in the world, local and federal governments, even the U.S. Navy SEALs.

But Bill’s most important advice has always hit a brick wall. His

research has consistently found that the number one source of work complexity is built into every company's infrastructure—the tools and processes we are supposed to use to get our work done. They are designed to help the *company* succeed but are not built for the success of the *individuals* who do the work.

Business's failure to deal with this obvious problem is one of its biggest problems. Yet the reaction from most graybeards has been decidedly chilly: "Let's not go there."

"Arrrrgh! How do I get these people to listen?" Bill wondered. Addressing this problem would be game changing . . . a true competitive advantage for every company and the end of so much frustration and wasted effort for every individual.

The answer finally appeared over drinks at a TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference. "Change the approach," said Josh, who had just presented how he had hacked the work ethic of crows by training the birds to bring him money. "If their executives won't listen, let's show employees how to hack around their problems."

From his early days of snarfing Wi-Fi passwords in Seattle to his recent consulting work with U.S. intelligence agencies, Josh has been hacking technologies and putting them back together to great effect. Some years ago, he noticed that this kind of systems thinking could be applied to people and organizations, not just to technology.

As he helped companies all over the world make the most of their technologies, Josh saw firsthand how unwilling people are to question what they take for granted—and how powerful it can be to do so. From megacorporations to start-ups, from investors to students, he found that while everyone talked about innovation, few were willing to pull the trigger that would kill an old business model or to embrace the changes that would create a new one.

Josh's constant questioning of the status quo helped him publish a novel by giving it away for free, got him invited to speak at the most hard-to-access conference in the world by telling them what they were doing wrong, and enabled him to double his salary by quitting his job.

Between Josh's tech savvy and Bill's business background, our back-alley conversations produced straight talk from thousands of people. From those on the front lines serving customers to the geeks in corporate server closets, the workforce told us what they're not telling their bosses.

This book is a tough love letter: There's an underground army of benevolent hackers out there who are saving business from itself, one bad act at a time. This is their story.

Ours: Two guys hacking the future, one day at a time. Finding better ways to get stuff done and having fun along the way.

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WOOT!

We are exposing the cheat codes for work and sharing them with the world.

Once employees know how to hack their work, everything's up for grabs—how we work, when and where we work, how we define effectiveness and success . . .

Everything.

Benevolent hackers see the future and pull us toward it, in whatever ways work best.

Woot! Expression of joy and excitement '80s hackers used to disguise that they had gained root access—the most fundamental level of control—to someone's system. Root was replaced with w00t!

SAVING BUSINESS FROM ITSELF, ONE BAD ACT AT A TIME

If you think you are too small to be effective, you have never been in bed with a mosquito.

—Betty Reese, American pilot

Business is broken. We all know it, even if we're scared to admit it.

Most of us feel screwed, and many of us feel helpless to change it. We have become slaves to our infrastructure—to business's controlling tools, procedures, and mandates. Something's got to give. Something already has.

Richard Saunders is living proof. He works for one of the top banks in the world. One of those institutions that did its job so well in 2008 that it helped dig us into the worst financial hole we've been in since the Great Depression. Yeah, one of those firms.

Richard's job is to provide the bank's clients—law firms and courts holding over \$50 million in escrow for their clients—the reports they need to keep track of all those assets. His team takes thousands of different statements and consolidates them all into simple, easy-to-read reports for clients. It's like drinking from a fire hose so others don't have to.

Then there's his work for the senior team. As the crisis unfolded, they wanted their own custom-made distillations—lots of them. The problem was that nothing in this growing data stream helped serve clients better, increased the value of service provided, or predicted catastrophes. They were just more detailed rearview mirrors the executives used to calm themselves with the illusion of greater control. Even worse: What the execs *really* wanted—useful, insightful analysis—couldn't be easily produced using the software provided by corporate IT.

Poor Richard. What to do? Work twenty-nine hours a day, ten days a week, to manually create these reports and the much-needed analysis? Get stressed out, skip family time—all to soothe the shattered nerves of his senior execs? No way. He hacked the system.

Knowing that the software was written in the programming language Visual Basic and connected to a simple database, he used Microsoft Access to link to the database's back end. Getting the database password was easy enough. "I just called the software vendor," Richard says, "softened him up, and he readily gave it to me. Once I had that, I was able to tap into the database and pull all the data I needed—and make massive changes on the fly."

Would the bank's auditors and IT security guys freak out if they knew that Richard had hacked their system and had almost full access to all customer data? You bet. But since his hack, Richard has become incredibly productive and is the companywide authority on these types of accounts. He's now the go-to hero with all those senior execs because he's been able to give them a lot more than just data dumps—and he's preempted a ton of problems for clients along the way.

If they only knew the full story. Says Richard (not his real name, of course), "As a result of this hack, I keep senior management off our backs, so we're able to keep doing more for our clients with less."

He's not alone in believing that he has to change the rules for getting things done if he's going to increase his productivity and achieve

better results for the firm. Many in our workforce are coming to the same conclusion.

Evers Pearce, a university employee in Oxford who had his budget slashed to nothing, is another example. Instead of accepting this edict, he funded his projects with £37,000 by selling on eBay what he was supposed to be throwing away—furniture, engine parts, construction waste—and wrangled the income back into the finance system.

Elizabeth is a manager whose bosses would not approve her customer satisfaction project—even though the entire senior team deemed it crucial—because the payoff wouldn't be realized for at least four financial quarters. So she secretly videotaped customers voicing their complaints as well as their wish lists for enhancing the company's product lines and posted it on YouTube. Within days, there was enough public outcry that senior management reversed their decision and approved her project.

One new hire, Matt, so disagreed with his employer's assessment process that he Googled "performance assessment" and created a seventeen-question mash-up that matched *his* career goals—not just the company's goals for him. His manager and the HR department were shocked and pissed off, but he had spent months refining his performance tool. He'd done his homework, seeking advice from one of the gurus in the assessment field whom he'd contacted through LinkedIn. With the support of his co-workers, Matt stood his ground, and management ended up using his assessment in conjunction with their own.

What's even more telling about this challenge to the status quo is that it came in the midst of an economic crisis and a horrible job market. "My career path and my future can't be just about keeping *this* job," says Matt. "It's the mix of projects I work on, and how I improve my own performance at each successive job. I'm better at what I do—for my company and customers as well as for me—because I hacked their assessment process and helped create one that worked for *me*."

These are not isolated incidents.

Change is coming, and it's coming in every workplace, in every industry, from every generation across the globe.

We're outing the biggest open secret of the working world: Today's top performers are taking matters into their own hands. They are bypassing sacred structures and breaking all sorts of rules just to get their work done.

We're exposing the cheat codes for work and sharing them with the world.

Every day in every workplace, benevolent rule breakers like these are ensuring that business succeeds despite itself. They are reinventing how to approach productivity and how to consistently achieve *morebetterfaster* results.

They're hacking work, and you can, too.

Business's love of lingering bureaucracy, legacy technologies, and deeply embedded procedures is killing us. More and more of us are finding that our work tools and structures are completely out of sync with what we need to do our best. Most of our daily needs, dreams, desires, and goals are far ahead of our employers' technological, procedural, and social adoption curves.

The bad guys in this story are not economic turmoil or traumatic market shifts; nor are they your boss or even your company. The bad guys are the tools, processes, procedures, and structures we all use to get work done.

Business's infrastructure is not keeping up with us. That which was supposed to help us now dictates too much of what we *can't* get done. Our tools have become more bossy than our bosses.

What makes this story so urgent and timely isn't just what a pain in the ass all this is, or even that it's costing us our jobs—it's that it's so devastating at the same time there are quantum leaps everywhere *but* work. Even though business spent \$1.5 trillion on info tech in 2010,¹ the tools we have outside of work are leapfrogging past what we use on the job.

When a twelve-year-old can gather information faster, process it better, reference more diverse professionals, and get volunteer guidance from better sources than you can at work, how can you pretend you're competitive? When you have more empowering tools in your mobile phone for your personal use than what your company provides or approves for your projects—how can you work within, or be saved from, devastating market forces?

You can't.

So what *can* you do? Start hacking.

Start taking the usual ways of doing things and work around them to produce improved results. Bend the rules for the good of all. That's what benevolent hackers do.

What was once shunned as bad is now the new good, because it challenges outdated tools and procedures that refuse to budge. We've uncovered what nobody wanted you to know: You no longer have to play the game the way your company insists you do. The illusion of corporate control is being shattered in the name of personal efficiency.

Once employees know how to hack their work, everything's up for grabs—how we work, when and where we work, how we define effectiveness and success . . . everything.

Want to work smarter, not harder? Start hacking.

Want to be a better manager, leader, or entrepreneur? Embrace the hackers around you and learn from them.

Want to leave a legacy and make a real difference? Start hacking.

Benevolent hackers are on a mission: to save business from itself, and you from business.

Come join our thriving underground army of heroes. You will hack work-arounds big and small, high-tech and no-tech, risky and safe, enduring and ephemeral. You will improve the productivity of your company, yourself, and everyone you touch.