



The Year Without Pants: WordPress.com and the Future of Work

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A behind-the-scenes look at the firm behind WordPress.com and the unique work culture that contributes to its phenomenal success 50 million websites, or twenty percent of the entire web, use WordPress software. The force behind WordPress.com is a convention-defying company called Automattic, Inc., whose 120 employees work from anywhere in the world they wish, barely use email, and launch improvements to their products dozens of times a day. With a fraction of the resources of Google, Amazon, or Facebook, they have a similar impact on the future of the Internet. How is this possible? What's different about how they work, and what can other companies learn from their methods?

To find out, former Microsoft veteran Scott Berkun worked as a manager at WordPress.com, leading a team of young programmers developing new ideas. "The Year Without Pants" shares the secrets of WordPress.com's phenomenal success from the inside. Berkun's story reveals insights on creativity, productivity, and leadership from the kind of workplace that might be in everyone's future. Offers a fast-paced and entertaining insider's account of how an amazing, powerful organization achieves impressive results Includes vital lessons about work culture and managing creativity Written by author and popular blogger Scott Berkun (scottberkun.com)

"The Year Without Pants" shares what every organization can learn from the world-changing ideas for the future of work at the heart of Automattic's success.

The Year Without Pants: WordPress.com and the Future of Work Details

Date : Published September 10th 2013 by Jossey-Bass

ISBN : 9781118660638

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Format : Hardcover 258 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Science, Technology, Business, Management, Leadership

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From Reader Review The Year Without Pants: WordPress.com and the Future of Work for online ebook

Daniel Rodic says

Thought provoking book on a new style of company and management.

This book follows the story of Automattic, the creators of Wordpress, and their first outside manager, Scott Berkun, who joins the company as it transitions into its first ever layers of management.

Some great insights to chew on, such as:

- a new manager is an experiment, and should be treated as such
- a managers success is getting the best value out of of their team members for the company
- one way to quickly understand how a new culture operates is to observe how it handles new problems that arise; how issues get reported? Who responds? How long does it take? Who decides what to work on first? Who decides how it will be fixed? Who does the actual work? How do you verify its been done properly?
- "Safeguards don't make you more safe, they make you lazy... Keeping things a little dangerous made things safer."
- They key to stop receiving unhelpful emails is to stop sending badly written emails in the first place

These are just my personal takeaways / notes.

Overall, would recommend this book for anyone who is curious about managing (a) multiple offices, (b) a fully remote team, (c) managing with little Heirarchy, no set plans or directives or (d) all of the above!

Eric says

Scott Berkun details his year of working at Automattic, the makers of the ubiquitous WordPress platform. Having come from the relatively staid Microsoft, Berkun evidently found many aspects of the culture at Automattic intriguing. In particular, Automattic's distributed workforce (all its employees work remotely) was a big adjustment (and lent the book its tongue-in-cheek title).

At first, Berkun feared his greatest strength as a leader, his ability to get to the bottom of an issue in a face-to-face chat, would be negated by the remote working model of his new company. Throughout the book, he describes the opportunities and challenges he encountered during his year as leader of "Team Social" at Automattic, leading a small group of software developers spread out around the world.

I recommend this book for anyone who works remotely or would like to. Berkun is no evangelist—he is open about his reservations and unafraid to offer constructive criticism of himself, company leadership, or just about anything else.

It's hard to say whether Automattic's eccentricities as a company (of which there seem to be quite a few) are a cause or symptom of its remote working policies, merely a correlation, or whether both the unorthodox culture and remote working policies stem from some common source—such as the personality of Matt Mullenweg, the company's founder. Nevertheless, this book offers fascinating insights into how the company behind one of the most popular content management systems operates.

Femina Ernest says

"The Year Without Pants" by Scott Berkun, one of the good book which insists " a culture which gives freedom for an employee without compromising company's productive". When Matt Mullenweg, Founder of Wordpress explains about "Participatory Journalism" auto-smile mode of mine :) turned ON. He explains Wordpress's Work culture, growth, falls and transitions from an initial. Some facts like, 15th most popular website, powers 20% of entire websites etc... shows WordPress's power of today. I am not sure, WordPress's cultural values like Transparency, Longevity and Meritocracy are possible working formula for other companies, but it grabs my attention as an interesting one. Few talks about seaside retreats & parties are dragging and as self-boasting. One thing, we all should learn from this book is "Work Remotely". I appreciate that. I am sure, that helps us to build The Best Product.

Marisa Eikenberry says

As a WordPress developer, I picked up this book hoping I would be able to learn more about WordPress, how it came to be, and even more about remote companies. This book gave me all of that and more.

Scott Berkun talks about how he was hired onto Team Social at WordPress as a project manager and how WordPress/Automattic operates compared to other technology and remote companies like it. One of the most interesting things I learned in the first half of the book was that every employee at WordPress spends time doing support (also known as their Happiness Team). This gives each employee the opportunity to learn more about WordPress that they wouldn't necessarily learn in training as well as to really hear the customer. This allows them to better understand the customer when they move into more of a development role.

This book wasn't as technical as I thought it might be, mainly due to the fact that while Scott Berkun worked with developers every day he is actually a designer. It provided a different perspective for me that I wasn't expecting.

If you want to learn how large remote companies function and how remote work is changing companies as we know it or even a WordPress developer that wants to learn more about Automattic, I'd highly recommend picking up this book.

The only reason I give 4 stars is due to missing words, awkward sentences, etc. that really could've been fixed with a more thorough editing. (I did read this on Kindle so this may have had something to do with the missing words.)

Lloyd Dewolf says

Wow, is it weird to read a book about your company. I was employee 10, worked at Automattic for 5 years, and left Automattic about six months before Berkun left.

I wish I had this book to read while I was at Automattic! It would have shaped my thinking!

Of course, this is going to be my favorite Berkun book, but I need to withhold two stars because of my bias.

Berkun earns back the two stars because of the pithy prose, but I'll again dock a star for the awkwardness of it all -- are there other business leadership books of this style? has anyone pulled off keeping themselves in it? Berkun comes off as machiavellian, when I don't think he really is.

The book is full of incredible project management and business leadership insights that will stand on their own through the tests of time.

Wendy says

I'm still trying to corral my thoughts about this book as I just finished it last night, but what's top of mind is that the book seemed to straddle two identities: a business book with the requisite take-aways and applications for other business people to learn from and a biographical sketch or first-person profile of Automattic and WordPress.com. It leans more heavily in my opinion on the latter.

I think the book would have been stronger had it focused on one or the other, but I found it an interesting read nonetheless. Disclaimer: part of that interest comes from the fact that I've been a WordPress user and fan for years and also now work for Automattic. The origins of WordPress and history of Automattic might therefore have been more interesting to me than to the average reader. :)

Berkun includes a fair amount of general business information and things that I think could be applied by managers and workers in other companies but I think he's right on that much of the magic of Automattic (and it *is* magical) lies in its culture and that's not something that can be easily replicated.

aimee says

If sometimes you wonder whether everything possible hasn't already been written about startups, business, software startups, software businesses and so on (ad nauseum), you wouldn't be alone.

Certainly, the industry which examines this seems pretty healthily active. Books, lectures, blawgs, twits, you name it, the space is pretty full.

And so it might seem strange that I'm about to recommend a book on this very subject.

But I am, wholeheartedly. I'm endorsing this, yo :)

Scott Berkun's fifth and latest book, *The Year Without Pants*, is fantastic. In it, he chronicles the year-plus he spent as a team leader at Automattic, the company behind Wordpress and Wordpress.com. He was something of an experiment when was brought on by founder Matt Mullenweg: up until he arrived, the approximately fifty-strong team organised themselves loosely around whatever lines seemed best. However, it seemed like it might be the time to try an experiment and set up smaller, more discrete teams within the organisation as it began a phase of rapid expansion.

Berkun 's role was to lead one of these, and also to lend his expertise, experience and observational skills to what would happen next.

Which he did, and the results are all there in this wonderfully readable little book.

Well, little in page count - it still took me a while to get through it (in one sitting, mind you!), as I wanted to be sure to take in all of the rather large amount of information it nevertheless contains.

And I took a bunch of notes, of course, which I now have to figure out how to give to people in the most constructive way possible. Heh.

The book brims with anecdotes - because, as business are wont to forget, it really is all about the people - as well as advice and learnings. Some of these came from Berkun's time at Automattic, others he had already learned, or was testing.

All are extremely useful - although he points out, wisely, that none of it should be taken for gospel (something too many other people forget) - both for larger and smaller organisations. No, we can't all be an Automattic, or work at one. Many of us don't want to. But we can learn some great lessons not only about software, but about how to manage teams, how to manage businesses, and how to manage ourselves. And, of course, how maybe, just maybe, 'work' doesn't have to be soul-crushing :)

I found the Automattic creed(1) particularly inspiring (it mirrors almost exactly many of my personal goals, ethics and beliefs). Other great advice includes 'build the user interface first' and, well...bah. I'm not going to say anything more, actually.

Go out, get the book, and read it. It's too delightful not to. And then leave it on the desks and dining room tables of your bosses, juniors, friends, families and enemies.

And while you're at it, reading 'The Myths of Innovation', another Berkun book. Simply brilliant stuff :)

Sidenote: how I initially described this? 'Simultaneously inspiring and depressing'. Inspiring to see what can be done, and depressing because of how seldom it is. Sigh.

(1) <http://ma.tt/2011/09/automattic-creed/>

Andrea says

It's interesting that a book about the author's experience working for a company with a distributed work model focuses so much on his time spent with his team during in person meet-ups.

Brooke Barnhardt says

I'm very happy that this book exists as proof that remote working really does work. I hope that other companies and leaders will be inspired by it to experiment with different work models. I thought it was inspiring that Wordpress agreed to hire Scott Berkun in the first place since he wasn't like their past team leaders (not from a development background). They also don't use emails, but instead blogs called P2s. Wordpress doesn't really have deadlines or set schedules which definitely has pros and cons. Innovation comes from experimentation, and they are gaining a lot of knowledge through their experiences. Since I

already know that remote working works, I didn't learn as much from this book as others might, but of course I would recommend it to anyone. It is interesting to hear of another company's remote working policies and experiences. They face the challenge of not having an office at all, but they do get to go to some pretty amazing places and see high levels of productivity coupled with high relaxation.

Mark Polino says

I'm pretty stingy with five star reviews. To get five stars a book needs to be something that I think I will come back to. It has to have the potential to become an old friend. The Year Without Pants fits that perfectly. In the book Scott Berkun trades his speaking, writing and consulting life for some time working at Automattic, the creators of blogging platform Wordpress. I've done the consulting, industry, consulting dance and it's both fun and scary to be responsible for what you recommend. Its even more fun in The Year Without Pants because Wordpress is not a normal working environment. It a highly distributed, independently motivated environment.

Berkun does a fabulous job of relating what worked and where he made mistakes. The stories are relatable and funny. I felt like i was the silent extra member of Team Social. There is a great human/everyman quality to his writing. He doesn't try to force what worked at Microsoft on Wordpress or what worked at Wordpress on another company. He fits bits and pieces of what has worked other places into the unique Wordpress culture.

I came away with a new appreciation for the effects of corporate culture and the trade offs that culture decisions create. These were thing I knew, but Berkun manages to articulate them in a clear and approachable way.

The Year Without Pants is easily the best nonfiction book I've read all year and it's better than most of the fiction. If you buy a single book this year, buy this one. You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll take your pants off.

Andra says

The first half of this book is very good, with high-level observations on workflows, team interactions, processes and questions that can help tackle the real issues behind the challenges of a new way to work (distributed, with fewer processes and friction and a lot more empowerment and personal responsibility).

The second part is a bit more descriptive, going into details of how things worked on a daily basis at Automattic, but also during complex projects.

I had a lot to learn from it and it's definitely a good read for anyone who wants to understand how to better shape working environment and how to let go of old models that don't fit our current needs.

Helder says

When I read a book, I typically take a few good ideas from it and move on. Now, imagine a book where you feel directly inside the story, told from the first person perspective, where you actually feel you are there, sharing with the author and laughing with him. Imagine a book where you not only feel inspired but you

actually want to take action, not after having finished to read but during the process. For me, Scott Berkun's "The Year Without Pants" is such a book. I read many business related books but this one is the best business related book I've read this year. I am an information worker, and the story narrated here has convinced me that there are better ways to practice what we call work. Work can be fun, work can be different, and it can be meaningful. This is the story of the time Scott spent in Automattic, the company behind Wordpress.com. This is a candid view of the way things work at Automattic, the way remote work is possible, the way the time burden can be effectively replaced by a results based approach and how a "Welcome to Chaos" way of working can actually be an interesting way to produce results.

Jon says

Strongly recommend this to any non-technical dev team leads, and of course, anyone looking into remote working. Some great insight - I took a lot from it.

Gail says

I generally can't stand reviews posted by folks who didn't finish the book, but this is one of them. I struggled through the first fifty pages and simply could not engage (even though I can count on one hand the number of books I've failed to finish). The book felt like a decently (but not well) written journal about one person's work experience with a bunch of ho-hum colleagues. No interesting characters, no exciting insight into the company. I wasn't planning to post a review, but I recently started "The Everything Store" and am totally hooked after just the prologue and first chapter. Maybe it's Wordpress, maybe it's Berkun, but I don't think this one's worth the effort required to read it (unless you have some specialized interest in tech or memoirs or something). Of course, if the book turned a magic corner at page fifty, I wouldn't know.

Tadas Talaikis says

"Thousand tickets closed over the same period." Right, haha, from my own experience, when you get an idiotic answer from tech support, you simply ditch it. It is rare thing to find a business with professional technical support. Last great one was from Stripe: a simple frontend issue, but they quickly gathered the team (!) of three people on weekend (!) and solved it. I was amazed, no one works on weekends! Usually there sits some idiot from distant country who knows nothing about the industry or even technical details.

I like Wordpress, all my sites run it, but why I don't use Jetpack? Because it sucks. It is heavy, complex (code wise) and there are many compatibility issues with other plugins, too costly for questionable features. Like Richard Koch, author of "80/20 factor" once said in his blog, there is the new factor: **simplicity**. I rarely see really good programs, most often all of them suck, because programmers are too busy writing countless lines of "code", not thinking why they do it. Result - we all become slaves for computers, wasting hours if not days of time for doing various useless, no value producing things.

Why this title for a book - "year without pants"? There is **nothing** about it, just random thoughts.
