

book reviews



ELIZABETH ZWICKY, WITH SAM STOVER
AND RIK FARROW

MAKING THINGS HAPPEN: MASTERING PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Scott Berkun

O'Reilly, 2008. 371 pages.
ISBN 978-0-596-51771-7

THE PRINCIPLES OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Meri Williams

Sitepoint, 2008. 192 pages.
ISBN 978-0-9802858-6-4

These are both good, accessible books on project management, written from a realistic point of view. They are about the nuts and bolts of managing real projects, not about theories. They're also very different books. If you are just learning to be a project manager, you could very happily buy both.

Making Things Happen is a big book. It's aimed at technical people who are going into project management without a lot of management experience, and it explicitly and carefully deals with the emotional and relational issues involved, as well as with the processes you need to design, plan, and manage. Most project management books carefully acknowledge person-to-person issues, declare them out of scope, and move on. That's a perfectly reasonable approach, but it's of limited effectiveness to somebody who doesn't understand exactly what those issues are. Sure, they could look in "Further References," but are they going to? *Making Things Happen* assumes that the human issues are the crux of the problem, and it tackles them straight on. Partly because of that, and partly because of the smart-aleck, eclectic voice, I love it a lot. It would be my first choice to shove into the hands of most struggling new project managers.

Which is sort of unfair, because I also like *The Principles of Project Management* a lot; there's a whole category of people who would be better off with it. *Making Things Happen* is great for somebody who likes reading, but *The Principles of Project Management* is a clear, no-nonsense book in big, friendly letters, suitable for people who want the largest amount of project management wisdom in the smallest number of words. It covers the bases solidly and realistically. It is also much closer to the system you would need for a PMP (Project Management Professional) certificate, and so it is a good place to start if you need a fast and purely practical way to get a handle on the terms and concepts used by PMP project managers. If you're OK with management, but you need some help with the whole "project" thing, *Principles* is a faster, more focused book.

HACKERTEEN: INTERNET BLACKOUT

Marcelo Marques and the Hackerteen Team

O'Reilly, 2008. 100 pages.
ISBN 978-0-596-51647-5

This is a graphic novel about computer security aimed at teenagers. My household doesn't contain any teenagers, or even any pre-teens (unless your definition of "pre-teen" includes anybody who has yet to become a teenager). But we all love graphic novels and two of the three of us (the two who are past pre-school) are interested in computer security. So we were ready to love it.

Unfortunately, we didn't. The plot is too adult for my daughter (it's about money and computers; there are no dogs, and very little that she perceives as action). Besides, it was frequently interrupted by cries of outrage from her father. Everybody but me gave up by page 30. Strike one for my husband was the kid who mystically knows how to program despite doing nothing on the computer but playing games. (I personally learned to use a debugger entirely to cheat at computer games—let me note that in my social circle that was considered part of the game—but that doesn't seem to be at play here.) Strike two was the idea that his parents would hand him over to a shadowy hacker organization because they'd heard of it on TV, and that's supposed to be a good thing. Strike three was the moment at which the kid tells the cute girl that the webcam she wants to buy is no good—because it doesn't have a Linux driver. "That isn't useful advice! That's knee-jerk prejudice! What's its low-light performance? How many pixels is it? Now *that's* technical! Who cares if it has a driver for an operating system she isn't running!"

There's a lot of knee-jerk prejudice involved. The politicians are evil, the hackers are good, the bad guys are ugly. It's more of a comic book than a graphic novel. The computer security is comic book computer security, the equivalent of the booms and swooping punches that make up completely unrealistic fights in superhero comics. It may well appeal to teenagers, but I'm not sure I want more of those teenagers in computer security; there seems to be an oversupply of dramatic teenagers prone to see everything as a fight between Evil and Good to start with.

The book does provide a reasonably interesting moral story in the comic book mode that involves computers and computer security. It leans, sometimes preachily and sometimes more subtly, on the idea that everybody can do this (it literally says "every sex, race, and ethnic group" at one point). It makes a passionate case for the importance of open source. What it doesn't do is what it says on the back cover; you don't learn how Internet technologies work, how to protect yourself, or how people work together on the Internet, and while they do show people trying to hurt each other online, the online attacks that are shown are not particularly realistic. I must admit that the authors are not the only people who seem to believe that using a webcam to take nude video and demanding blackmail for it is a realistic threat for everybody; the same spammers who send me advertisements promising to increase my nonexistent manhood to the size of the Statue of Liberty also send me fake blackmail notes claiming to have done this.

On the whole, it's a perfectly OK teen comic being sold as something deeper and more interesting. If you're going to use it to try to hook your younger associates, try it out on them first; my daughter would rather read *Head First Object-Oriented Design*. (No, I'm not joking. Yes, she is 4. Yes, she is advanced. No, not that advanced. It has dogs in the pictures.)

VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN DIGITAL DESIGN

Ji Young Park

YoungJin.com, 2008. 217 pages.
ISBN 978-89-314-3434-7

Alas, this is another book I wanted to like and didn't. I want to be able to recommend a good, straightforward introduction to the principles of visual design, something up-to-date and computer-oriented but capable of getting across the importance of using white space, some basic facts about colors, and the primary tricks of doing a good layout.

My most recent references on this are aimed at print, because that's just how old they are. So I was happy to see something about design that used Web-based examples.

Unfortunately, this isn't going to help people who don't understand design already. It's written in design speak. Sample back-cover copy: "The task of the designer is to systematically interpret the audience's association with the information to be conveyed, and then translate those associations into visual designs using design principles and tools.") It does occasionally have good hints for Web design, but the basics of design aren't adequately explained. For instance, it talks about layout, and it says that when creating a layout, you should only use black and white. All the illustrations for this chapter are two-color, using black and brown, so they don't follow this rule. It's not clear whether the rule is one given for the specific exercise or is meant to hold for all layouts. (It's not a bad rule to follow, because it lets you think about visual balance without the distraction of color.)

As it is, I have to say my best advice for people who want to know the basics of visual design is to go buy Molly Bang's *Picture This: How Pictures Work*. You may have to look in the children's section, and it won't tell you anything about the Web. But you'll learn a lot about, well, how pictures work, which is the important part. I'm still waiting for something that does that and covers the computer stuff.

NO TECH HACKING

Johnny Long and Jack Wiles

Syngress, 2008. 480 pages.
ISBN: 978-1-59749-215-7

REVIEWED BY SAM STOVER (SAM.STOVER@GMAIL.COM)

I think this book is a must read for pretty much any tech-savvy reader, but not for the reasons you might think. Not because you'll learn the "Überest of the Über," as quoted on the back of the book. Not because it will provide you with everything you ever wanted to know about physical penetration testing. No, the two reasons for reading this book are, one, it's an easy read, and, two, it's fun.

I told you that the reasons weren't what you would expect from a reviewer of security books, but let me explain my position. Let's start with it being an easy read. Obviously, being easy to read isn't high on your priority list for reasons to dive into a book. All too often "easy" means "technically lacking" and, hey, this is ;login: after all—we want our meat and potatoes. But if it's easy for you to read, then it might be easy for someone else to read—such as

your boss, CISO, or maybe even (gulp) your CEO. How many other books on your shelf can make such a claim?

OK, OK, I can see it on your face right now—just because it's easy for someone else to read isn't enough to sell you on why *you* should read it. So let's talk about fun. Why is this book fun, and what does that have to do with technology? Well, the title is *No Tech Hacking*, so maybe there isn't much technology in the book? Well, there's plenty of technology, just not the kind you might be used to. It's technology of the mind, a.k.a. common sense, that fills the pages of this book, and that's what makes it so much fun. I would wager that a lot of people aren't going to learn from this book so much as they are going to *realize*. This book is so full of common sense that, by the time you are done, you're going to look at the world in a different way, which was precisely the intent. Now, that doesn't mean that you might not learn how to open a door with nothing more than a clothes hanger and a wet washcloth, because you just might. But the more important thing you'll walk away with is an appreciation of how other folks might just be using that kind of technology to compromise your organization.

As far as the layout of the book goes, there are 11 chapters plus an epilogue dedicated to suggestions for preventing all or most of the stuff you learn about in the book. As a heads-up, Chapter 6 is a reprint from Mr. Long's *Google Hacking for Penetration Testers*, Volume 2, a practice I normally despise. However, he's very open and honest about it being a reprint, and I think it plays well with the other chapters, so I'm cool with it. Chapter topics range from Dumpster Diving, Physical Security, Social Engineering, to People Watching, to name a few. There are number of spelling and grammatical errors, but nothing too crazy. The tone is light, conversational, humorous, and very engaging. Definitely not an easy book to put down.

So, now we know that it's easy and fun, and if you put those two things together, you have an extremely powerful weapon in your hands—powerful because your eyes will be opened to how social engineering and physical security are easier vectors than a 0day buffer overflow, and powerful because the knowledge is something that can easily be applied to everyday situations. Furthermore, you now have a book that you can put in the hands of just about everyone in your organization and they'll benefit from it. After all, everyone has some degree of common sense, right? Right?

SMALL FORM FACTOR PCS

Matthew Weaver and Duane Wessles

O'Reilly, 2008. 275 pages. ISBN 978-0-596-52076-2

REVIEWED BY RIK FARROW

I've been interested in do-it-yourself PCs for over 25 years and was excited about seeing a book dedicated to making things with small PCs. Weaver and Wessles do a good job of covering how to do things with some of the small, but Linux- and BSD-capable, devices that have appeared since about 2000. I've bought two Soekris boxes. I remember the struggles I had just getting started, as there is no documentation for installing an OS included with the boxes. If you ever wanted to play with Soekris boxes or build a MythTV on top of a Via M-1000, this is the book for you.

I found the authors' instructions on installing OpenBSD 3.7 on a Soekris net-4501 spot-on. I liked that they point out just how hard it is to set up MythTV, and they suggest that it will take at least a week of fussing to get it to work (which it will). Their writing is clear and their advice is good. (Pay attention to notes that appear in the page margins!) The biggest weakness of this book is that it appears to have been started in 2006—notice that they cover installing OpenBSD 3.7 instead of 4.3, the current version.

There are other issues. The authors decided to use the lowest-end Hauppauge video capture card, yet a quick search of the MythTV wiki warns against doing this, promising jerky playback and dropped frames. A margin note does suggest that this was a mistake. The authors also have two projects that use laptop (2.5-inch) hard drives in systems designed to be always on, but I had learned from the Soekris mailing list that laptop hard drives are not designed for always-on use and will die within the first year most of the time.

As long as you are aware that you will want to go online and check hardware choices, the authors do a very good job of explaining the assembly of their projects, the installation of operating systems for Compact Flash-based systems, and how to set up the software for their projects, such as an LCD messaging sign using a gumstix processor with Bluetooth for wireless. If you have built small-form-factor PCs before, you will already have figured out a lot of what the authors cover. But if you are new to the field, this book will certainly help get you started.

SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Peter Merholz, Brandon Schauer, David Verba, and Todd Wilkens

O'Reilly, 2008. 186 pages. ISBN 978-0-596-51683-3

REVIEWED BY RIK FARROW

When I got this book, it came with a sticker that said “Galley Copy, Subject to Change.” I immediately tossed in on a pile of books that were unlikely to get read: Why read a book that will be changed before it gets released? At some point, I found myself wondering about the silly sticker and discovered that *Subject to Change* was the snappy title, and it actually had some relevance to the topic of the book.

I can sum up this book by writing that the authors strongly suggest that you base your designs on the experience the users of anything you design have with your product. Your product can be a Web site or the latest consumer, must-have appliance, as the iPod once was. And I do agree with them. All too often, products are designed around a set of cool ideas and implemented by programmers, engineers,

and marketing folk, and wind up failing badly. Instead of focusing on the end-user experience, they produced a product with more features than the competition's. The authors point to the Diamond Reo, a competent MP3 player that preceded the iPod and flopped. The iPod succeeded not because it had more features, but, rather, because it did just the minimum of what users needed and no more. By moving the management of music to a program on a computer (iTunes), Apple put the most complicated part of the experience on the device with the most capable interface for handling it.

This book is aimed more at corporations than individuals. And mention of the authors' company is a frequent appearance, making the book itself a subtle bit of advertising. But the information is worthwhile and the suggestions for determining what the experience of users will be and how to insert this knowledge into the design process, even when you face an entrenched marketing/engineering “axis of evil” that wants to build what they think will work, are priceless.

Mastering Project Management. Scott Berkun. Making Things Happen. Mastering Project Management. Other resources from O'Reilly.
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