

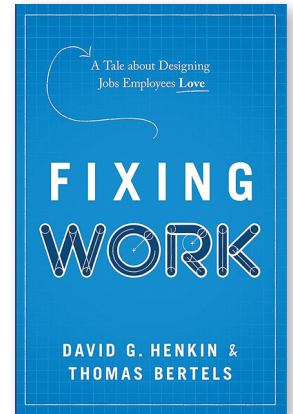


# Executive Book Summaries<sup>®</sup>

## Fixing Work

A Tale About Designing Jobs Employees Love

by **David G. Henkin and Thomas Bertels**



### Contents

Introduction

Page 2

The Hard Way

Page 2

Show Me the Numbers

Page 3

Breaking the Mold

Page 3

Wind in the Sail

Page 4

Show Me the Money

Page 5

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Low levels of employee engagement, high turnover, low productivity, and unclear accountabilities are symptoms that tell us this: in many organizations, work is fundamentally broken. At the heart of this is a failure to design work for humans.

Written in the style of a novel, the book *Fixing Work: A Tale About Designing Jobs Employees Love* reveals the secrets of designing work in a more meaningful, productive, and fulfilling way. The pages within tell us how to craft better jobs, empower your team to bring their best, and ultimately strengthen the organization as a whole.

Authors David G. Henkin and Thomas Bertels want readers to understand why treating employees like machines kills engagement, creativity, and accountability. By inserting meaningful strategies throughout the tale of our protagonist Jerry's success, Henkin and Bertels show us exactly how to create an employee and customer experience that consistently takes your business to new heights.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why work today is broken and must be fixed.
- The strategies to hire top-notch talent.
- How to make work productive, fulfilling, and meaningful.
- How to create the best customer experiences.

## Introduction

Time and again, research has shown us that everyone wants meaningful work, autonomy, and feedback. Unfortunately, only a few companies have incorporated these insights into the actual design of work to create intrinsically motivating, self-fulfilling jobs.

The vast majority of companies today are stuck in an industrial, assembly-line-era mindset, in which a narrow focus on cost results in highly fragmented workflows and steep, often excessively multilayered hierarchies.

There is a better way. We wrote this book to provide people managers at all levels with a realistic example and practical road map for how to simultaneously improve employee engagement and motivation, organizational effectiveness and productivity, and customer experience and satisfaction.

The story takes place in one company and one industry, but its concepts apply to every company in any industry. We hope you enjoy the journey, gain and apply useful ideas, and reap the many benefits of fixing work.

## Rise and Shine

By the time Jerry pulls into the parking lot of his company, Consolidated Insurance (a midsize insurance company that sells employee benefits programs), he's already running late for the weekly status conference call with the sales leadership program. Cons (the company's humorous, if awkward nickname) provides clients with dental, disability, vision, and now also life insurance benefits.

Bellamy, the sales VP asks for an update on the status of client enrollment, to which Jerry diplomatically responds, "We're looking into it, but we're short-staffed, and we need IT to..." Bellamy cuts him off, "Jerry, I don't care which dog ate your homework. I request that for our call next week, you tell us where we stand and how will address these issues."

As he turns back to his desk, he sees Julia, the best hire he ever made. Julia greets him with her resignation letter. With Julia leaving, he now has three open positions and a backlog of 270 cases.

## Business as Unusual

The next day, Jerry finds out there is a major interface problem with their product and the team has to manually rework all 80 cases. He grimaces. This is becoming overwhelming.

The only ideas that would relieve the pressure in the short run would create even bigger problems in the long run.

## Empty Cans Rattle

Jerry was a decent student throughout his academic career. He mostly steered clear of trouble. His middle school teacher once told him, "Empty cans rattle the loudest. Don't bother blathering all about: say things of value!" That message stuck with Jerry.

Their backlog of cases continues to grow steadily. So, Jerry finally decides to come clean. He knows that Bellamy does not like surprises. Just when he picks up the phone, Tatum, a member of his team reveals that he has fixed the IT issue, and the computer will work everything out by tomorrow afternoon.

Jerry finally drops a voice mail to Bellamy, clearly and politely asking for a bit more time, and sharing ideas on how both could approach the situation.

## Unexpected Encounter

Jerry runs into Mike Cuthbert, the ultra-successful serial entrepreneur who also studied at Georgia Tech around the same time Jerry finished his degree. At some point during the conversation, Cuthbert says, "Well, good pay is fine, Jerry, but in this day and age, maybe you need to think about the jobs you offer as a product itself. How competitive is the product? How well designed is it to meet the needs of the consumer? The employee, in this case."

## The Hard Way

Jerry meets Cuthbert again at the Irish pub. Once the beers are ordered, Jerry takes a breath and launches into the problem at hand, "Okay. I'm dealing with a difficult situation at work. We have more work than we can handle, and the team is stressed. To make matters worse, we just had a start performer leave, and there are so many areas to improve. And maybe on top of it all, I can't seem to get my management to engage or help much!"

Cuthbert responds, "You can only do a good job if there is a good job to be done. For a job to qualify as "good," meaning intrinsically motivating, it needs to meet three criteria. The first one is that you have autonomy – you are able to make decisions and use your own judgment for how

# You can only do a good job if there is a good job to be done.

and when to do the work. The second one is knowledge of results – a fancy term for feedback. The third one is that you experience the work to be meaningful.”

---

## Show Me the Numbers

Jerry drowns amid the sea of urgencies at work but taking inventory of the work in his department nevertheless should be done right away.

At the weekly meeting he scheduled with Julia’s team, Jerry asks everyone to walk him through what they all do in a typical week. He makes a list of tasks everyone usually does and asks them to give an estimate of how much time they spend doing each of these tasks.

After working on the numbers, he realizes that his team spends a lot of time on things that have nothing to do with moving the case forward, such as the sales forecast. This helps them replace time-consuming tasks with real work.

---

## Scraping the Barrel

None of the candidates Jerry interviews seem to be excited about the job. Cuthbert was right when he said, “These jobs, as they are presently designed and structured, are hard to sell.”

Jerry has 3 open positions to fill immediately. He realizes the candidates he interviewed are looking for something more meaningful than just a steady paycheck. He decides to make an offer to Meredith and Walter anyway.

---

## Hot Potatoes

After weeks of procrastination, Jerry finally decides to give performance reviews. He ends up collecting honest feedback from Ryan, Lee, Hannah, and Eric about every problem they’ve faced and realizes how everyone really hates their job.

To resolve this, he decides to form an exploratory team to

really take a hard, no-holds-barred look at how his team does things – everything from workflows to task management – to see if it’s possible to design a better way of doing things.

Jerry notices that his department spends less than half its time doing the actual casework and asks his assistant to set up a meeting to review the numbers.

---

## The Gift

Jerry meets Cuthbert for coffee the next morning. He tells Cuthbert his team only spends 45% of their time on core work.

Cuthbert asks, “You get reports too, right? Which ones do you use the most?” “The weekly priority list,” Jerry says, “each person spends up to 15 minutes on these each day.”

“So, that’s give or take a thousand hours,” Cuthbert calculates and tells Jerry to get rid of these reports to free up time. “But what about the core work?” Jerry asks. “Use your first team meeting to get everybody aligned on the current state. Create a swim lane chart that shows who does what,” Cuthbert clarifies.

Cuthbert also talks about the concept of the “definition of done,” an agreement among the design team as to what “done” looks like. He asks Jerry to, “define work in a way that once you’re done, your employees would fully agree with these statements.”

Jerry and his team begin to minimize all time-sucking tasks.

Later that day, they find out that they missed an important deadline for their new client Northpoint due to another IT hiccup. He tries to sort this out with Elrod, the IT guy, but Elrod isn’t exactly helpful.

---

## Breaking the Mold

“Plenty of back and forth between the teams,” “We’re working in the dark half the time,” and “There’s more handoffs since not everyone knows the life system,” are a

few recurring complaints Jerry hears from his team.

To this, he poses a bold, hypothetical question, “What if everybody in this group was able to do the whole process? That way there wouldn’t be any handoffs?” When everyone objects due to a massive increase in the workload it would create, Jerry comes up with an idea, “We stop doing sales reports. Based on the capacity analysis we pulled together, that should free up a chunk of time. No more reports for Sales. It’s not in our mandate anyway, and it doesn’t affect our clients’ outcomes.”

This gets everyone on board! He decides to communicate this decision with Bellamy and remembers the advice of Grace Hopper, a brilliant computer programmer, mathematician, and outstanding pioneer of her day, “If you get a good idea, and it’s a contribution, I want you to go ahead and do it. It is much easier to apologize than it is to get permission.”

---

## Wind in the Sail

Having communicated this with Bellamy, Jerry continues, “We have been thinking a bit about how we can change how we work so that we can be more efficient. One of the ideas we have is to create small teams of three people (I call it the pod) that ‘own’ a case from start to finish. We’ve got good people to pilot it, and I think we should give it a try!”

To this Bellamy says, “Nice sales job, Jerry. Let’s try this approach with Northpoint. If it works, I’ll discuss this with one of my guys. But what do I get out of it?” Jerry responds, “Faster and better – and with greater accuracy! Our faster speed and quality will hopefully mean happier clients.”

---

## Going Far

For the first time in weeks, Jerry arrives at the office in good spirits, feeling elevated by the support he received from Bellamy the day before.

He communicates his strategy of 3 people handling a case from start to end and says, “To get clients to provide the information we need – which is a major challenge – I’ve asked Bellamy whether we can talk to clients directly instead of having to go through the account manager and the broker, and he agreed.”

While the backlog is still in the 300s, and it will naturally be a while for the team to get up and running, everyone still seems to be doing good. The team starts working on Northpoint.

## New Beginnings

Peter from Northpoint is pleased and positive and he even agrees to connect Jerry and the pilot team directly to their benefits teams, his boss, and the VP of human resources. When Elrod denies opening access to Northpoint, Bellamy even swoops in and says, “It is mission critical for that access to be in place ASAP.”

---

## Lessons Learned

During his next meeting with Cuthbert, Jerry discusses his progress and mentions, “We’re still two headcounts short. And until I fill that supervisor position, we won’t be able to do much more.”

Cuthbert looks up, “Well, you should do away with the supervisor role.” This leaves Jerry confused. After all, there must be somebody to manage the team. Cuthbert continues, “Supervisory feedback is only the third-best way to help employees know how well they’re performing. The second best way is feedback from customers. Now that you have access to the customer, why not let customers provide the feedback? And instead of having a supervisor, why not invest in more training and coaching?”

---

## Bullets Flying

The go-live date for Northpoint has finally arrived. But Jerry bumps into a problem related to a new software his team installs in their systems. But he calmly makes his point and ensures Northpoint goes live without a hitch. His team even fixes a hitch created by Northpoint. When the mission is a success, Jerry thinks back and recalls: improved productivity, satisfied customers, and engaged employees. Yes, it was possible to achieve all three.

---

## All In

Jerry and his team find out that Elrod is working on a proposal (Project Sunrise) to combine all transaction teams including Jerry’s department into a large central team and give the job to cheaper resources. To counter this, Jerry decides, “We need to show that our team is much more effective than the old approach. So, we better start collecting some data and some customer feedback. Well, customer, broker, sales, everyone and everything helps. We need some strong advocates.”

Despite Elrod making a strong case about his proposal at the meeting, Bellamy ends up backing Jerry up for this meeting.

## Show Me the Money

Project Sunrise, however, is still on the table because Gordon and Richard are all about numbers. They just missed the revenue target. The stock is not doing great, so if Gordon can take \$7 million from someplace, he will take it. He won't care where it came from.

On the bright side, Roheela, a talented potential hire Jerry interviewed accepts their offer and joins the team.

Another meeting for Project Sunrise is scheduled for Friday. Jerry meets Cameron, his boss, and Ava, the head of customer service to discuss ways to resolve the Project Sunrise problem. "Well, I'm not sure how to translate it into dollars, but the changes we're implementing are making a real difference. We are seeing cases being completed in less than two weeks. We even took out the supervisors which can help make a great argument for savings."

The session ends up being super productive and Jerry feels more confident attending the Project Sunrise meeting. Jerry even gets on a call with Cuthbert to get his insights. Cuthbert says, "Well, freeing up the supervisors will definitely save you money. And don't forget about the turnover. Didn't you say turnover in the call center was over 100%? What's more, if you make the work intrinsically motivating, turnover becomes a nonissue. Let's assume your friend Customer Service takes at least six weeks, so with eighty people that translates into ten extra heads. I think you have a great argument here. Best of luck!"

During the meeting, Jerry naturally uses all his preparations to win his case and Project Sunrise actually comes to a halt!

## Paths Forward

A little party never hurt anybody, Jerry thinks, as he finishes up preparations for the barbecue he's hosting. He has invited his entire team, plus Cameron and Ava to celebrate what they have achieved so far. Gordon offers Jerry Cameron's role after Cameron submits his resignation.

Before Jerry could accept the offer, he made sure Gordon agreed with one condition – that he could continue the work design journey. Gordon assured him that the main reason he was selected for the promotion was their hope that Jerry would work the same magic for the rest of Client Services.

## Conclusion

"...I need you to do your magic across the entire company," Gordon finishes, offering Jerry the position of the CEO.

Nobody becomes a CEO unless they are a good salesperson first, Jerry thinks. He also realizes that in this new role, he would have to get his peers to buy in to his ideas. Influence without authority. Great!

But then again, an opportunity to change an entire company as head of transformation? That could be fun!



**David Henkin** is an accomplished executive and entrepreneur. The author of several books, he has taught in a top-rated university business school program while also serving as a consultant and executive coach for corporate and nonprofit leaders. **Thomas Bertels** is the president and founder of Purpose Works, a management consulting firm on a mission to make work more productive, valuable, meaningful, and impactful. He has 25 years of experience working with companies ranging from Fortune 10 firms to start-ups to improve organizational effectiveness and transform how work gets done.

*Fixing Work: A Tale about Designing Jobs Employees Love* by David G. Henkin and Thomas Bertels ©2023 by David G. Henkin and Thomas Bertels. Summarized by permission of the publisher, Greenleaf Book Group Press. ISBN 979-8886450774. Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries®. Copyright © 2024 Soundview, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited. For permissions and reprints, please contact [service@summary.com](mailto:service@summary.com). 46SS04C