

the one page book review



Title: We-Think
Author: Charles Leadbeater
Publisher: Profile Books
Price: £12.99

This is a book for our age although Leadbeater makes clear that the idea of mass collaboration has been around for centuries. What has changed is the evolution of and access to technology. The internet and social media has allowed communities to grow and flourish in ways that were not possible previously. As a consequence innovation has exploded as the speed of change has increased.

Leadbeater is actually ambivalent about the internet. It has advantages and disadvantages but he makes the point that it is *here*, so we might as well learn to use it. He pulls on a diverse range of sources to make his point. For example, he quotes research into how the operating principles that allowed peasant farmers to share common grazing land can be seen in the high-tech world wide networks of our age. He also goes some way to debunking myths about the efficacy of internet-based information sources. (Have a look at the comparison he makes between Wikipedia and paper-based encyclopaedias, for example).

He lays out the conditions that allow communities to grow organically, and how they create their own self-governing rules to ensure that the community functions effectively. These include the principles by which status and power are earned by key influencers in the community (often through recognition of their expertise or contribution) and also why people will choose to become involved in a community, to the point where they give their time freely and often as additional effort to their paid employment. These principles are worthy of note for anyone who wants to get real commitment from their employees too.

The book is packed with mini case studies, real-life examples and research from a variety of sources. As he moves into looking at the implications for the future, we are required to think about challenging our 'traditional' business models – how do we price our products and services? What is the 'real value' of our output and what are users actually willing to pay? (The emergence of this type of thinking can be seen in the 'smart phone' technologies – one business model is that the phone is a platform for other services and what is valued by the consumer is the ability to place other technologies onto it eg 'apps', as opposed to charging for the hardware or making money on the airtime used).

'We-think' is a fascinating read. If you like this area of work, you can also check out the following titles:

Open Innovation by Henry Chesbrough, Harvard Business School
Crowd Surfing by Martin Thomas and David Brain, A & CB.