Book The Power of Pull

How Small Moves, Smartly Made, Can Set Big Things in Motion

John Hagel III, John Seely Brown and Lang Davison
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Recommendation

"Pull" is the latest business dynamic that soon will be sweeping through an institution near you. At least, that's what business consultants John Hagel III, John Seely Brown and Lang Davison predict. The authors, all members of the Deloitte Center for the Edge, make a solid, well-researched case for their strategic analysis, using detailed, candid accounts from active participants in a world where people use connections, knowledge and resources to solve problems. This is where the book sings: Its numerous colorful examples illuminate the benefits of pull. While this scholarly work provides some useful suggestions, the authors are more successful at defining and breaking down their theoretical information than at offering a how-to guide for using pull at your next business meeting. *BooksInShort* recommends this volume to executives who want to move their companies ahead in the digital age and to unite young technology rats and traditional workers.

Take-Aways

- The "push" business philosophy, wherein an elite minority attempts to anticipate the majority's needs, is outdated and no longer serves businesses well.
- "The Big Shift," a widespread social change, will see firms change their modus operandi three ways:
- First, liberalization and improved technology will remove barriers to entry and facilitate the movement of people, products and information across borders.
- Second, knowledge "flows" will become more important than knowledge "stocks."
- Third, as push's influence wanes, the "pull" business philosophy will come to the fore.
- Pull is the capability to corral valuable people and resources, when needed, to solve problems and handle opportunities. It has three levels: "access, attract and achieve.
- Access data, resources and people by connecting with others who share your passions.
- Attract like-minded individuals by increasing your opportunities to meet them by chance – for instance, at conferences or on social networks.
- Achieve your potential by learning to improve your performance via working with others.
- Pull can change the world by affecting markets and societies on a major scale.

Summary

The End of an Era

"Push" has been a dominant business strategy since the start of the industrial revolution. Push relies on the belief that people and institutions can predict their constituents' demands and design effective systems to fulfill them. Examples include school curricula planners who attempt to foresee what skills students will require later in life, church leaders who try to prophesy their disciples' paths to "salvation" and even weight-loss plan gurus who promise a trim body to anyone who follows

their directions explicitly. Push is a restrictive, zero-sum model that treats "people as passive consumers" and assumes that "centralized decision makers" can anticipate and shape their needs. Company leaders who use a push strategy believe that the more they sow, the more they reap. This small "elite" minority makes decisions on behalf of the majority, and watches as managers try to shape people's tastes and desires. However, the very systems and routines that the push tactic cherishes actually restrain companies' flexibility and adaptability – two values that are becoming increasingly indispensable. Push can't survive much longer in the face of the "Big Shift," a deep, ongoing transformation in society featuring three waves of change that will give individuals power over institutions:

- **"Infrastructural shift"** – This wave is already underway. Technological advances are altering the "business and social landscape," removing barriers to entry. This change began with the invention of the microprocessor and shows no signs of yielding. Societal liberalization and policy changes encourage the flow of "people, products, money and ideas across national boundaries," so competition is increasing, giving consumers more choice.
- **"Knowledge flows"** – As data, people and resources move quickly across the globe, "flows" of information will become more valuable than "stocks" of information. Exchanging knowledge, rather than storing it, fuels business success and upends the value of proprietary information. As access to knowledge proliferates, data from "the edge," or "the fringe," will contribute to corporate growth. Such inputs often have a "transformative effect" on "the core" of business – the nerve center of operations that absorbs the majority of resources, but that is firmly tied to old ideas. The Internet has accelerated this change. Edges naturally spark the flow of knowledge as people try to solve new problems creatively.
- **"Institutional innovations"** – As push strategies shrink in importance, "pull-based companies" that make businesses look and work differently, and ultimately function more effectively, will begin to transform society.

   "Push is seductive. It creates the illusion of great power in an era when power is shifting."

The three waves of the Big Shift won't roll in consecutively or quickly. The entire paradigm change could take five decades. But each wave will play a significant role as the world moves from push to pull. A universal dynamic already found in many modern business success stories, pull is the ability to corral useful, valuable people and resources, when necessary, to solve problems and handle opportunities. Pull has three levels: "access, attract and achieve."

Access

Networking is the age-old conduit through which "introductions, information, knowledge, capital, influence, opportunities, cooperation and collaboration" spread. The ability to find people, knowledge and resources when needed forms the basic level of networking, but access – the first level of pull – extends beyond calling in a favor from a friend. Access relies on connecting people who share similar interests and passions, and who can work together to solve problems deftly with the help of digital technology. The bigger the network, the bigger the pull. For example, in June 2009, political unrest swept through Iran following its controversial elections. Protests erupted. The government cracked down on social media sites to gag the public. Joichi Ito, a computer scientist with an interest in human rights, pulled together an online community consisting of techies and human rights activists. This group worked to ensure that Iranian citizens retained access to Twitter, thus preserving some freedom of speech during that tumultuous time. Unlike push business models, pull networks do not try to predict demand. They simply connect consumers with the products and services they require. This is where human connections can provide invaluable solutions. Some industries use pull by giving consumers access to whatever they need. Consider SAP, the world's fourth largest software firm. Because of its sheer bulk, it inadvertently built barriers into its operations, making it difficult for customers to reach the right person quickly to solve a problem. SAP conquered this barricade by developing NetWeaver, an innovative tool that allows vendors who are at the edge to teach each other about SAP's newest software. NetWeaver now is a lively interactive community of contributors – independent customers and participants who engage in conversations about SAP's products. This helps customers, particularly those with basic questions, while giving SAP engineers, the company's core, time to focus on more complex matters. The SAP example illustrates an important difference between push and pull strategies: While push "platforms" facilitate the service provider, pull platforms prioritize the needs of the customer or end user. Consider "open university" programs, which give students maximum flexibility to complete their courses, or Apple's iTunes store, which creates "highly personalized music experiences" to match each individual customer's needs.

Attract

Attraction, the second level of pull, means drawing previously unknown – but appropriate and useful – resources and people toward you. Generally, when this happens, you call it luck. But it isn't truly random and it probably is due to something you've done. Call it "serendipity" – accidentally stumbling across a solution you didn't know you were seeking. In the Big Shift, serendipity in the form of chance encounters proves invaluable. Learn to manage the "funnel" of serendipity by staging more frequent scenarios where chance encounters are likely to occur. Serendipity can help connect people and their "tacit knowledge" – that is, the things they know but can't explain by writing them down, such as how to ride a bicycle. But it's hard to know that you're looking for someone's tacit knowledge until similar interests draw you together and you start talking. Conferences unite people with compatible concerns, giving them access to each another and creating environments for deeper connections. This is serendipity, but it is managed or "shaped." Individuals choose to attend conferences with like-minded people, thus setting up the potential for "chance" encounters. Yossi Vardi, a multimillionaire and technology entrepreneur, maximizes his attraction and serendipity. His success, kind personality and status as a pivotal figure in the tech industry draw like-minded people to him like magnets. He values every connection in his network. Emulate Vardi. Mold your serendipity to fit your needs by uniting three essential ingredients:

- **Settings** – "Serendipitous environments" refer to real and virtual locations for like-minded people, including conferences, online social networks, "connection platforms" like SAP's NetWeaver, and even old-fashioned "push-based institutions" that are willing to become platforms for networking.
- **Systems** – "Serendipitous practices" are actions people do in online networks to garner and prolong the attention they get from others, such as increasing "findability," learning new things and working from a "beginner's mind," a Zen concept for being open-minded.
- **Attention** – "Serendipitous preparedness" refers to the ability to jump at new opportunities. That requires a temperament that embraces the unexpected, an ability to listen and consider ideas fully, and the skills to build valuable connections and associations over time.

Achieve

Achieve, the third and highest level of pull, means using access and attraction to reach your potential. It focuses on learning ways to advance and speed up your performance by working with others. The "diminishing returns" of "performance improvement" associated with the Big Shift era means you must work harder and harder just to stay even, getting more and more stressed along the way. Find a way to work better and turn that worry into enthusiasm – for instance, by turning your

passions into your profession so you're earning money and pursuing your dream at the same time. This kind of excitement, ideally, will spur you to work even harder. Think of professional surfers: Their lives might sound glamorous, but they work in dangerous conditions and few of them make much money. However, they are zealous about surfing. They spend hours in the water each day, and afterward spend more time studying film and connecting online. Your challenge is to find something that excites you, too. It doesn't require major life changes; it just needs to be the right venue for your skills and passions. Pull will eventually "redefine all jobs," even the most mundane ones, in ways that concentrate on problem solving. This will accentuate performance improvement and instill employees with passion. Institutions must motivate their employees to remain competitive. Real or virtual places, or "creation spaces," can provide environments that let contributors work together to develop relationships for their mutual gain. Existing creation spaces began and developed on the edges of society, although some are now universally known. For example, surfing has mutated from an individual sport where participants pursued 10-foot waves to a team sport where passionate surfers ride 60-foot waves. Surfing communities developed and joined forces in remote locations – at surfing competitions around the world and online through videos, movies and conversations. In another example, online gamers collaborate to develop the computer game World of Warcraft. The game has 12 million players around the globe. Each player's participation extends the virtual world depicted in the game. The originators of successful creation spaces must carefully organize, design and plan their arenas before participants begin "self-organizing" and changing it to fit their needs. All spaces need room to evolve, but the founders of a creation space can't plan that evolution. Successful spaces share some other commonalities, such as diligent attention to three parts of the space. First, members must be able to join easily and receive "real-time feedback" so they can move ahead in the community. Second, the space must allow two forms of interaction: team communications and free-flowing communications. Third, the space itself must provide room for growth.

Putting Pull into Practice

Pull won't happen overnight. It will take decades to transform society, but your individual journey can begin today. Start by uniting your passion and your profession, which will make it easier for you to work harder. This new focus will provide you with "trajectory," a goal around which everything else can coalesce. Businesses and governments also need new trajectories so they can look ahead. Talent development provides an excellent starting point for them, although it might sound like recycled rhetoric. In fact, leaders must put finding and developing top employees – the right kind of employees – at the center of their vision. Improve your "pace" of learning so you can keep up-to-date while everything else changes. Rely on your networks and your use of serendipity to attract important people and benefit from their attention. Move to the edges where you can develop "leverage" by drawing passionate people into action, and connecting them to each other and to leaders who will support them. Pull can mold markets, business and society at large. It starts with "shaping strategies" – plans to change working relationships across wide swaths of independent organizations. These strategies (where pull has its greatest impact) access resources, use positive motivators to attract large groups of people and businesses, and emphasize long-term goals and strategies.

About the Authors

John Hagel III is co-chairman of the Deloitte Center for the Edge. He wrote *Out of the Box* and *The Only Sustainable Edge*, among other bestsellers.
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