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Colin D. Ellis.
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CULTURE HACKS

26 IDEAS TO
TRANSFORM
THE WAY
YOU **WORK**

COLIN D. ELLIS



This book is dedicated to my Uncle Brian,
who tragically died of the COVID-19 virus
as I started to write it.

His stories would have filled ten books
and had you laughing for weeks on end.

'A good laugh is sunshine in the house.'

– William Makepeace Thackeray

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CONTENTS

- Introduction **1**
- Business as usual... but better **7**
- How to use this book **11**
- Culture Hack #1: Reduce your email **13**
- Culture Hack #2: Make time for teamwork **21**
- Culture Hack #3: Plan in procrastination **29**
- Culture Hack #4: Transform your meetings **37**
- Culture Hack #5: Go on a field trip **45**
- Culture Hack #6: Be honest, always **51**
- Culture Hack #7: Manage stakeholders uniquely **58**
- Culture Hack #8: Induct and onboard to impress **66**
- Culture Hack #9: Fail visibly **73**
- Culture Hack #10: Create a book group **80**
- Culture Hack #11: Hold a hobby expo **87**
- Culture Hack #12: Stretch for (postural) success **95**
- Culture Hack #13: Bust your bureaucracy **103**
- Culture Hack #14: Break out the board games **111**

CULTURE HACKS

Culture Hack #15: Start a podcast **118**

Culture Hack #16: Hold a showcase **125**

Culture Hack #17: Write a white paper **133**

Culture Hack #18: Chat with the chief **140**

Culture Hack #19: Go to the movies **148**

Culture Hack #20: Hold an Airbnb offsite **155**

Culture Hack #21: Volunteer as a group **163**

Culture Hack #22: Leave the laptop at work **171**

Culture Hack #23: Job swap **179**

Culture Hack #24: Record a culture video **187**

Culture Hack #25: Hold an interdepartmental sports day **194**

Culture Hack #26: Create a culture club **202**

Thanks **208**

About the author **210**

Soundtrack **212**

Endnotes **215**

Index **225**

INTRODUCTION

We should start with the basics – all the best books do. They don't assume that you have all the answers or that you have one fixed view of something. And when it comes to workplace culture, it feels like there are a million views, all of which continually collide, making little sense – so changing said culture is put in the 'too hard' basket.

To fix something, you have to understand it first.

My son came to me one day and said that his stomach hurt. I was filled with love and empathy, and I sent him to the sofa with a comic book and made him a peppermint tea. After I delivered it to him, he showed me a scratch on his stomach where he'd walked into his desk.

I'd delivered a cure for a problem I didn't understand.

This is what generally happens when people deal with workplace culture issues. The solutions are often things like:

- implementing the latest management method
- switching to open-plan offices
- restructuring
- providing technical training courses
- process redesign

CULTURE HACKS

- building an innovation hub
- offering new collaboration tools, and
- implementing new policies.

However, the root causes of the issues are actually things like:

- poor behaviour
- poor performance
- unclear strategy, and
- needless bureaucracy.

As you can see, none of the solutions address the root causes. As a result, organisations tend to give up on change and go back to the command-and-control method while they wait for the next management system to come around in five years' time.

So, what is culture? Culture is the sum of everyone's attitudes, behaviours, skills, traditions, stories and beliefs. Everyone's. Culture doesn't belong to the senior executive team (although their actions have the power to destroy it) or to the People and Culture department (although it's generally the custodian of it).

If the new finance manager loses his temper on day one, it affects the culture. If the warehouse team wins an award, it affects the culture. If the members of the sales team are laughing while they work, it affects the culture, as does the IT team not answering your phone call.

The issue with culture is that most people want to change it, yet don't believe that it's within their power to do so. I recognised this when I was 27. I don't remember the day, but I do remember the job I was doing (I was a project manager for a newspaper group) and what my then boss told me. He said, 'This is the team that you have. It's up to you to make sure that you co-create

something where everyone can work well together to hit the targets we have. If you don't, we'll fail'.

I remember feeling a sense of responsibility that I'd never had before. And so, as a highly extroverted individual, I did what anyone with my personality would do – I took the team to the pub. It was a team of introverts. That went well.

Two weeks later, I sat down with my boss and had a bit of a whinge. 'These guys are idiots. They don't want to do anything that I suggest. They just sit there quietly.'

My boss looked at me and asked, 'What have you done differently to engage with them, to create a sense of shared purpose and commitment to what we have to do?'

I told him, 'I took them to the pub twice, and suggested we go go-karting'.

His response was short. 'Maybe – just maybe – you're the idiot?' He said it in a good-natured way (although obviously I disagreed), and then set about explaining what it meant to create a good team culture. These little nuggets of information have served me well for the best part of 20 years, and I continue to share them in the workshops I run with organisations around the world – who are desperate to do what I wanted to do 20 years ago. I've since added a number of other recommendations to the initial advice that I received from my boss, based on my own experience and how the world of work has evolved:

- Get to know each other's personalities.
- Have a vision or purpose that you all believe in.
- Share ideas on what's worked well – from a team perspective – in your previous roles.
- Agree on how you'll work together – when you'll meet and when you'll leave each other alone.

CULTURE HACKS

- Make time for some creative thinking.
- Make it okay to disagree – but never agree to disagree, because nothing gets resolved that way.
- Never fall out with each other in public.
- Make fun a priority, but recognise that everyone's idea of fun is different and that the balance always has to be in favour of productive work.
- Mix socially, because that's where relationships and shared stories are created.
- Don't blindly follow the paths of others. Create your own path and invite other people to follow you.

Across my 30-year career as a permanent employee, but especially in the last 20 years, I made the last point my goal. Whenever I started a new job, I brought something different, something new, something that challenged the status quo – and I don't just mean my humour or sense of style (although they helped!). I brought different ways of challenging the bad habits people had fallen into, and of building morale and ultimately the culture of the team so that other people became desperate to join us. We liked working with each other, we had lots of laughs, but crucially, we got the job done.

In one of the last permanent jobs that I held as a senior executive, I had a goal to change the perception, within the business, of the team that I managed. In my third week in the role, I brought the team together and provided them with the feedback I'd been given from others across the business – which, to my surprise, they hadn't heard before.

We then set about creating a team culture that would fix the root causes of this perception. We didn't buy endless solutions, but we did invest in independent facilitation so that we could have

honest conversations about what we needed to do differently and how we'd hold ourselves accountable. It took two days, and in seven months we'd changed our stakeholders' perceptions of us.

We did it by getting just 5 per cent better every month.

We didn't need to change everything – there was lots that we did well – so we focused on small things that became 'the way that we do things around here'. In other words: evolution, not revolution.

I covered the mechanics of building culture in my book *Culture Fix: How to create a great place to work*; this book builds on those basics to provide you with 26 ideas to help you become 5 per cent better as a team every month.

You can do them all: I have with my teams. There's nothing here that I haven't done or that hasn't worked well – I've left that stuff out (including the exercise where we'd give everyone a nickname!). But you should still ask yourself, 'Can this work for me within my context and my team right now?' Use your common sense.

As there are 26 Culture Hacks in total, you and your teams can try a different one every two weeks for a year. Alternatively, you could pick one thing every month, or you could divide them across different areas within your team so that different people are doing different things. Or you could put them all in a hat and pick one out to try. You decide! Just do something different. It will make the team memorable in a host of great ways and create stories that you'll share for years.

While I love my current job of public speaking and facilitating corporate workshops to help others co-create great cultures, I do miss the buzz of being part of a team that wants to create something unique. You still have this opportunity – don't waste it.

Colin

Melbourne, Australia, November 2020

BUSINESS AS USUAL... BUT BETTER

The COVID-19 crisis began two weeks before I sat down to write this book, and almost overnight, organisational culture changed. Those who had taken the time to define their culture and were continually taking steps to refine what they did and remain vibrant, flourished. Their people were able to seamlessly transition to working remotely in distributed teams, and some businesses were able to pivot to produce different outputs and maintain profitability or service levels.

For everyone else, there was a sudden realisation that things weren't going to be easy. As Ed Catmull said in his book *Creativity, Inc.*, 'There's nothing like a crisis, though, to bring what ails a company to the surface'. I'd like to think that, since those early days of the virus in March 2020 and the subsequent isolation, senior managers have realised just how important it is to spend time and money helping staff to define the culture that they need in order to meet their targets.

Like I said, 'I'd like to think that'; however, culture has always played second fiddle to, well, everything really. As restrictions started to be lifted, organisations rushed to remove development budgets that would have allowed managers to invest in the very things that would safeguard the organisation from this kind of

CULTURE HACKS

event in the future. ‘Culture’s the most important thing’ – until it’s not, of course. More time and money gets spent on the future of work than on the ‘now’ of work, and managers wonder why change is slow and good people leave.

This is a book about cultural evolution. It requires that you and your teams:

- define what you expect of each other in advance
- continually challenge the things that you do, and
- relentlessly ask the question, ‘Can we do this differently?’

None of the world’s great workplace cultures settle for ‘business as usual’ (BAU). BAU is where average results and mediocrity live. It’s where innovation goes to die.

This book is about making your ‘business as usual’ continually better than it’s been before.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

Before COVID-19, organisations came up with every excuse in the book to hold back change and maintain the status quo. Here are just a few examples:

- Pre-COVID, any investment in technology required extensive business casing and influencing up, down, left and right. Scepticism had to be endlessly overcome. IT managers cautioned against simply rolling out a tool as a mechanism for culture change, but were told to do it anyway.
- Pre-COVID, flexible working hours were seen as a luxury that only the large technology companies could ‘afford’. People who needed more flexibility were required to justify their request, which then sat in someone’s inbox for weeks

waiting for approval. If it was granted, they were often still required to be online Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. – the very antithesis of flexibility.

- Pre-COVID, busyness reigned. There was little in the way of empathy for people's priorities, challenges or anxieties. Productive time shrank while expectations around outputs rose, and working 60 hours a week became a badge of honour, not a source of concern.
- Pre-COVID, innovation was considered a luxury. 'Hubs' were set up to satisfy those who demanded that innovation be taken seriously, when in reality, it lives inside everyone. People weren't given the time to challenge what wasn't working and the same mistakes were made over again.
- Pre-COVID, poor performance and behaviours were routinely ignored or excused. The safety of others wasn't a priority, or managers lacked the skills to deal with this issue in a calm, measured and empathetic way.
- Pre-COVID, senior managers were good at talking about culture being the most important thing, but made no money or time available to develop it.

COVID-19 challenged this approach and gave managers the opportunity to redefine it in order to recover from the pandemic crisis quickly.

BETTER

Post-COVID, every organisation will face periods of uncertainty, but they also have the opportunity to fix the things that were broken in their 'BAU' culture. This is an opportunity to make a fresh start, culture-wise – and early action will determine

CULTURE HACKS

whether lessons have been learned or whether the same old mistakes will continue to be made.

One of the things that's within an organisation's control is to agree on how people should behave, work together and make time for new ideas. They get to choose how they collectively face these challenges, and whether they emerge from the pandemic period as a more resilient, productive business that does more than just repeat, 'People are our most important asset'.

The humanity that we saw during the early days of isolation is now (rightly) expected within the workplace, as is flexibility, the use of technology and an openness to quickly changing some of the inefficient ways of working and the behaviours of people behind them.

Of course, money will be often be tight in a crisis situation, but making no investment in the things that are expected to carry you through it will be seen as a betrayal of trust and will undermine any emotional capital your organisation may have built up. Inefficient projects and other low-value activities should be cancelled or deferred to free up funds to ensure that the culture can be defined and then evolve in a positive way.

It's critically important that the learnings from COVID and future crisis situations are folded into a newly defined culture – one that values purpose over profit, safety over harmony and productivity over busyness. Research consistently shows that when employees are given the opportunity to define their culture, the organisation gets the results it's looking for. Any other approach will result in organisations continuing to suffer, and not just from the impacts of a pandemic.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

At the start of every chapter of this book, three actions to ‘hack’ your culture appear under the heading ‘TL;DR’, which stands for ‘too long; didn’t read’. In other words, if you read the chapter’s title and think ‘That’s not for me right now’, then you can simply read the TL;DR suggestions and move on to something more relevant to you. Not all of the hacks are going to be applicable to you, (particularly if you still have to socially distance from others), so focus on those that can provide immediate value.

I’ve then made a suggestion in each chapter of one thing you should stop doing. This is related to the hack and either frees up time to do the hack or else it’s a ridiculous waste of your time that you should stop anyway.

Each chapter then contains background on the hack: a mix of origin stories, personal experiences, anecdotes, case studies, research and quotes. I explain the benefits of each hack, although it’s up to you to decide whether you have the determination to go and get these benefits.

I’ve tried to think about all kinds of businesses in all kinds of places, so that there really is something for everyone.

This book was inspired by a YouTube series that I recorded, which can be viewed at youtube.com/colindellis. The videos are

CULTURE HACKS

only a minute long, but they're useful if you want to read the book with my subtle Scouse accent in your head – or for sharing with members of your organisation to persuade them to bring me in to help. 😊

If you enjoy the book, I'd be grateful if you could write me a nice review somewhere, pass the book on or recommend to friends and colleagues that they should invest in their own copy.

If you'd like something regular from me in your inbox, you can sign up for my newsletter at:

colindellis.com/boom

If you do the social media thing, you can stalk, follow or connect with me at various places:

LinkedIn – [linkedin.com/in/colindellis](https://www.linkedin.com/in/colindellis)

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And if you'd like to subscribe to my podcast for regular ideas from business leaders around the world on how they hack their culture, then search for *Culture Makers* on your favourite podcast provider and click 'subscribe'. Or you can find the provider links at anchor.fm/culturemakers.

Right, let's do this.

CULTURE HACK #1: REDUCE YOUR EMAIL

TL;DR

- Turn off the notifications.
- Uninstall the email application from your phone.
- Set up a rule that sends all emails to the trash while you're on holiday.

ONE THING TO STOP

- Emailing people outside office hours.

Is there a business tool other than email that is both essential and so incredibly annoying at the same time? Email is like that family member who makes the very best cakes, but then gets trashed way too early in the party and everyone just wants them to go home (but leave the cakes, obviously).

When used properly, email is an effective method for communicating decisions or confirming conversations. However, it's incredibly annoying in that it's very rarely used properly, leading to hundreds of pointless messages being sent to you every day when a few 30-second conversations would have done the trick better. It becomes a drain on your productive time, and for some people, it's the bane of their lives – they have hundreds of

CULTURE HACKS

unread emails in their inboxes and countless people are waiting for responses that will never come.

If you're looking to blame someone for your email problem, then Ray Tomlinson could be your man. An electrical engineer by trade, Tomlinson was working at the Department of Defense in the U.S. in 1971 on their Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), and he developed a method of sending an electronic message to someone else on the same network.¹

Back in the mid-1960s, engineers at MIT had been using a tool called MAILBOX which allowed users to leave messages on a computer for one another, but Tomlinson's message was the first to be sent to another computer. By the mid-1970s, almost 75 per cent of ARPANET's data traffic was electronic mail – or email, as it became known.²

If you're interested in the technical details of how messages are passed from one computer to another across global networks, Wikipedia is the place to go. With the rise of portals such as America Online (AOL), the popularity of email rose dramatically. It even got its own movie starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan,³ which took a quarter of a billion dollars at the box office – WTF?

As soon as email became mainstream, however, the spammers moved in and Nigerian princes quadrupled overnight. Scarily, some of these scams *still* rake in over \$700,000 every year, according to CNBC.⁴ It's estimated that US\$1250 of productive time is lost per employee every year to opening and deleting spam emails.⁵

FREE UP YOUR FREE TIME

Frighteningly, the number of emails sent worldwide continues to increase. In my book *Culture Fix: How to create a great place to work*, I quoted 2019 statistics on email:

The definitive survey on email statistics is produced every year by The Radicati Group. In their latest report, they found that, 'The total number of business and consumer emails sent and received per day will exceed 293 billion in 2019, and is forecast to grow to over 347 billion by year-end 2023'.⁶

Most organisations are doing nothing to reduce email or to set expectations around email use when people join them. There are acceptable use policies, but these tend to focus on what you can and can't say in emails, rather than how and when email should be used. Without this guidance, employees will conform to what others in the organisation do, and the number of emails sent or received or the time spent writing them often becomes a badge of pride. 'I have a thousand emails in my inbox!' 'I was up until 11 p.m. on Saturday replying to emails!'

This kind of culture can have a serious impact on employees' mental health. The Academy of Management found in a paper in 2018⁷ that, 'Individuals who said they felt an obligation to check professional emails outside of traditional work hours also tended to report higher levels of anxiety and lower measures of well-being'.⁸

Some organisations are trying to do their bit. Car manufacturer Daimler has a routine set up that deletes employees' emails while they're on vacation. This is something that I copied myself to great effect.

CULTURE HACKS

I set up the following out-of-office message:

Thanks so much for your email, however I'm currently on leave until xxxx. If you require assistance, please contact xxxx, who is covering for me whilst I'm away. Please note that your email will be deleted. This is not because I don't view its contents as important, but rather because I can do nothing with it, nor do I wish to return from holiday to a thousand emails, thus affecting my productive time for my first month back.

Thanks for understanding. (Also, you should copy this approach!)

Colin

I then created a rule within Microsoft Outlook to automatically send emails to the trash between the dates that I was away. The result: first day back, no emails!

Volkswagen is another organisation that has taken steps to block emails being sent outside of working hours, but more can be done by others.⁹ France is leading the way by making it illegal for organisations of a certain size to send emails to its employees out of hours. Its 'right to disconnect' law¹⁰ came into force in 2017 to halt the flow of information into inboxes over the weekend. Organisations can face fines and even prison time if they place unreasonable demands on their people. The legislation has been successfully implemented and is now a model being considered by other countries.

That's not to say, of course, that email is 'bad' when it comes to communication. It's just not the best form of communication for many messages. It's best used to confirm conversations or decisions or to provide information. It's no good for discussions, expectation-setting or performance management. However,

these last three are the things that people want to avoid doing face-to-face, so they use email.

Some messages that you receive keep you up all night thinking about either their content or, worse, how to respond. Some are so badly conceived and written that you can't fathom what's actually being asked. Ashlee Vance's biography *Elon Musk* found the same was true of the Tesla founder: 'He's been known to obsess over typos in emails to the point that he could not see past the errors and read the actual content of the messages.'

We've all been there.

But seriously, if you're *actually* looking for someone to blame for your email problem, then you need to find the nearest mirror and take a good long look in it.

One government director that I used to report to said to me once, 'Colin, why is it that you don't have any emails in your inbox and yet I have hundreds?' I said to him, 'I rarely send them, whereas you can't go five minutes without dashing off your latest thought to a million people, who then "Reply All"... forever.'

Not automatically sending an email is a habit that has taken me years to perfect.

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

Email became a business tool for me in 1997. Prior to that, the jobs I had required me to use the telephone to communicate. When I was given my first email account, I wasn't told how it should be used, and I fell into the trap of using it to avoid conversations or to email my latest stream of consciousness.

I didn't give any thought to the person receiving the email, the structure of it or even why I was sending it in the first place.

CULTURE HACKS

My process was thus: have thought – write it down – think of the people who might be interested – copy them all in – click ‘send’.

Some of these emails were important, but given the quantity being sent by myself and my colleagues, it became hard to determine which these were. There were no immediately obvious flags showing which emails I’d been copied into and which had been sent specifically to me, so all were opened (or not).

This only got worse over time, particularly with the introduction of the BlackBerry and then the smartphone. For the first time in my life, I was ‘always on’. I’d had a laptop and a modem before, but nothing that I could put in my pocket that would continually alert me to its presence.

My last seven years as a permanent employee were spent working as a senior executive in government, where email is king. There is a strict ‘cover your back’ policy, so everyone really does get copied into everything – and don’t get me started on meetings (that’s later in the book!). I found it difficult to keep up.

Others found likewise. There were times when the office was like a cross between an aviary and a clock shop, with whistles, bings and dings going off everywhere, and as soon as people got a notification, the phone would come out of the pocket.

Adam Alter, in his book *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*, wrote that 70 per cent of people check their email every six seconds. If you don’t think you’re one of those, ask yourself, why do you have notifications enabled on your phone?

Email notifications serve one purpose only: to distract you. In fact, all notifications serve that purpose, but especially email. Once you hear the ‘ping’ (or whichever ridiculous noise you have enabled) or see the little box rise from the deep (or drop in

from the top) on your laptop screen, you can't help but be drawn to it. And once your eyes and thoughts have been drawn away from what you were working on, it can take as long as sixteen minutes to refocus – and that's if you don't get distracted again in the meantime.¹¹

This constant onslaught of emails is not only demoralising, it has been proven to have an impact of minus 10 points on your IQ!¹² Having tons of email in your inbox makes you dumb: fact!

In the face of the steady flow of email, I decided to turn off the notifications, and if I'm honest, it took a few weeks to get used to. I'd developed an unnecessary attachment to my own popularity and so kept pulling my phone out in the hope of a notification, before realising they were off. I then fell into another bad habit: relentlessly opening my email client.

So – having checked the company policy first – I uninstalled the email client from my phone. All of a sudden I wasn't 'on' all the time. Not only that, but I wasn't receiving or sending emails out of working hours and thus expecting it of others.

Senior managers often forget that they have a responsibility to set the example to others when it comes to communication. They should be role models of how to deliver a message, and that includes the times and ways in which the communications are delivered. While managers don't own the culture that they're part of, they have the ability to destroy it through their actions. Expecting staff to be 'always on' is one way in which they can have a negative impact.

Another problem with having so much email to contend with is that some messages are ignored or responses aren't provided. This is disrespectful to the people who sent them (the same is also true of not returning phone calls), but it's a symptom of having too many messages to deal with.

CULTURE HACKS

You can change your approach to email: you just have to want to do it. The decision to delete the email program from my phone changed my working life, as I regained control of my productive time. Pick a hack, stick to it, and make email your servant, not your master.

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