

Praise for FlexAbility

This book is a must-read, with great examples, thought-provoking analysis and practical strategies that help leaders to 'reset' and thrive at work.

Brooke Young, Director, Young Consulting Group

Karen has a way of articulating and simplifying the overwhelming, self-sabotaging thoughts, feelings and behaviours that plague even the most stoic of leaders. Refreshingly practical and gently encouraging, *FlexAbility* is a must-read for any leader looking for a pragmatic, reassuring, positive and immediately executable playbook for everyday success.

Amanda Kramer, Head of Marketing, Homely.com.au

FlexAbility couldn't be arriving at a better time for so many in our communities. The long-term drain on resilience for so many around us has been significant.

To change our environment starting with ourselves is key, and *FlexAbility* provides useful and well thought through approaches and activities to move forward, as we chart a path from the interim normal of today to a future where hope and optimism fills the gaps of uncertainty and anxiety.

Mike Schneider, Chair, Love Me Love You; Board Member, Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia; Managing Director, Bunnings Group

This is such a relevant and helpful guide to 2022 and beyond! The current working environment is full of traps – we are always on, but expectations feel higher than ever, and we risk achieving less and feeling less purposeful. It seems counterintuitive – if not blasphemous - to think that we can become more effective and more at peace with ourselves, but *FlexAbility* provides a guide that will help every business leader be more aware of their wellbeing and effectiveness.

Duncan Phillips, Chief Executive UK & Ireland, IVC Evidensia

In this hyper-relevant book for today's world of work, *FlexAbility* provides high-performing leaders with a comprehensive and pragmatic guide to protecting wellbeing by learning to influence what matters most. Dr Morley deftly combines research with real-life stories to bring to life the challenges of leading during a pandemic, along with the solutions for doing so successfully.

Dr Kelly Windle, Vice-President Organisation Capability, Bluescope

The intense disruption of the past two years has placed significant and untold demands on leaders across all organisations. *FlexAbility* couldn't be timelier. It provides valuable, evidence-based insights into the challenges faced by us all, together with accessible and practical advice to help us identify what matters to each of us, as well as clear guidance to enable us to reimagine and reshape our lives for the future and for the better.

Diana Vernon, Principal, Methodist Ladies College, Melbourne

FlexAbility is an outstanding piece of work. Living a 'rich, purpose-filled life, doing meaningful work, while prioritising your wellbeing' is within everyone's grasp. I wish I'd written this work. It is a game-changer.

Mark Butler, Clinical Psychotherapist

I thoroughly recommend this book. It is engaging and highly relevant to today's working pressures when so many I know are exhausted. The evidence-based approach, coupled with practical examples and rich and thought-provoking content, really help develop a more personal sense of how to achieve direction, change and balance. Finally, a book that offers practical and relevant advice about how to bring direction, change and balance back to working life.

Dr Jessica Triay, Clinical Unit Head Endocrinology, Bendigo Health

FlexAbility should be the essential guide for leaders on how to turn around burnout. Reset and recovery will become the way of surviving the increasingly demanding workplace we find ourselves in, and this book is the blueprint for ensuring we, and the organisations we work for, survive.

Kerrie Akkermans, CEO, Girl Guides South Australia

I found this book to be one of the most refreshing self-help books that I have read in a very long time. The concept of *flexAbility* is simple yet life changing in a world where we all have to navigate and find our own new work-life balance. This much-needed book supports workplace change, together with empowering the highly motivated professional with easy, usable tools.

Dr Tina Soulis, Founder & Director, Alithia Life Sciences

What a timely analysis and valuable tool *FlexAbility* is, packed full of useful insights and support for high-achieving leaders in today's working environment. After working with Karen for a number of years, it's no surprise that she's developed such a clear, compelling and practical guide for leaders.

Emily Phillips, Manager Regional Services, Melbourne Water

Karen Morley



FlexAbility

HOW HIGH ACHIEVERS
BEAT BURNOUT AND FIND FREEDOM
IN AN OVERWORKED WORLD



MAJOR
STREET



**MAJOR
STREET**

First published in 2022 by Major Street Publishing Pty Ltd
info@majorstreet.com.au | +61 421 707 983 | majorstreet.com.au

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A catalogue record for this book is available
from the National Library of Australia

Printed book ISBN: 978-1-922611-24-6

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-922611-25-3

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Cover design by Tess McCabe

Internal design by Production Works

Printed in Australia by Ovato, an Accredited ISO AS/NZS 14001:2004

Environmental Management System Printer.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

‘[M]y life feels... [l]ike time confetti – one big, chaotic burst of exploding slivers, bits and scraps.’ – Brigid Schulte¹

Let’s face it, overwork seems here to stay. The promise of a post-pandemic ‘reset’ that would reduce the pace of work for knowledge workers, and make flexible work practices mainstream, has a hollow ring to it. Instead, life feels even more like time confetti.

Rather than COVID-19’s remote work experiment creating a ‘great reset’,² expectations of overwork have increased. Feelings of anxiety have intensified. Burnout has blown out to the extent that more workers experience it than not.

I know that I fell for the ‘great reset’. Three to six months after the start of the pandemic, I thought that we were heading for a fundamental rethink about how, when and where we work. There seemed so much promise.

We’d pivoted to remote work in record time. Years of difficulties and false starts in trying to increase flexibility and encourage working from home were overturned overnight. Commutes were slashed, freeing up swathes of time.

Organisations successfully functioned from individuals’ homes. And not just a few workers and not just intermittently – entire workforces, for months.

We learned that remote work could be done.

Two years into the pandemic, however, some CEOs are still hellbent on getting everyone back into the office. They believe that the office is the only place where productive work happens. Some say that flexibility compromises the company's culture, even though their employees, when asked, say they want to work flexibly. It's flexibility that's at risk of being compromised.

It seems like a case of the more things change, the more they stay the same. The remote work pivot has shown, in particular, just how fundamental overwork is to modern workplaces. To show up to do a 'normal' day's work isn't enough; neither is showing up today to do the same amount of work you did yesterday.

As Rahaf Harfoush writes in her book *Hustle and Float*, modern management principles are faulty:

*'Frederick Winslow Taylor was actually fired by Bethlehem Steel for failing to produce tangible results. It turned out that after a brief spike in performance, forcing workers to produce more in less time exhausted them to the point that their overall productivity was damaged in the long run.'*³

Taylorism didn't work in factories on production lines and it's even less suited to modern knowledge work. Yet we remain trapped in the pursuit of ever more work and ever more productivity. Even the challenges of a global pandemic haven't changed that!

What powers this pursuit? Leaders who are ambitious, competitive and overconfident. They chase continuous growth, seek ever larger rewards and drive overwork. They're prepared to sacrifice everything to win the game.

Leaders who are high-achieving, conscientious and agreeable get caught in the slipstream. Avery is one such leader, and her work ethic and need for achievement mean that she sets her standards high. She's considered to have high potential and be ready for

promotion, but she's hesitant to take that step. She sees the C-suite executives in her organisation working incredibly long hours, with heavy demands on their time; they embody 'always on'.

Avery's not a machine: she's a human. She has a partner, two kids and a dog. Her father, who lives an hour away, was recently diagnosed with early onset dementia. Life is full; she works full-time and flexibly, working her five days in four to be able to balance her family needs and work demands.

At her best, when she's purposeful, focused and influential, Avery feels on top of her game; work gives her a surge of energy. Her organisation and colleagues love working with her: she's invited to participate in many projects, to give advice and support others. She exemplifies the old adage – 'If you want something done, give it to a busy person'.

Avery is ripe for overwork. As a high achiever, she sets tough personal standards and enjoys meeting them. Her conscientiousness translates into a high work ethic, and she takes her performance and output seriously. As a highly agreeable leader, she is willing to do what it takes.

But there's a tipping point, and it's not always easy to notice it. When the pressure builds, Avery does too much, cares too much and tries too hard. Chronic stress and burnout loom. Avery's thinking fractures; she's burdened by others' emotional needs. She starts to doubt herself, make mistakes and feel like a fraud. Surely this would only be worse at a more senior level?

This is what overwork does to amazing people. An organisational context of overwork sets the pace, and high-achieving leaders are readily drawn into its vortex.

In a world where overwork remains an expectation for knowledge workers, flexible work is a pipedream. No matter how flexibly

Avery works, whether from home or the office, whether she can choose when she starts and finishes is pretty much irrelevant given the expectation of overwork that she faces daily. No matter how she manages these variables, she'll still overwork.

What should leaders like Avery do? If her organisation isn't one of the few which are taking overwork seriously (no matter their flexible work policies), then Avery needs to reset herself. A personal reset might not change the bigger picture, but Avery can't afford to wait around for that to happen. She needs a better way to navigate her world, and she needs it now.

The heart of her new focus should not be flexibility – where and when she works – it's what I call 'flexAbility' – why and how she works.

Flexibility is how the system operates; organisations grant workers certain freedoms in relation to their work location and working hours. Flexibility is often associated with part-time work, even though part-time workers often overwork. It tends to put limits on career progress: if you want to work flexibly, you may be judged as lacking true dedication to work.

flexAbility is how you operate in this demanding system. It's the freedom you grant yourself to avoid the sacrifices of overwork and live a rich, purpose-filled life, doing meaningful work while prioritising your wellbeing. Much of my coaching is focused on helping leaders like Avery and others profiled throughout the book (using pseudonyms) to be more flexAble.

If you know why you do what you do and where work fits into your sense of purpose, you can better align your work practices to suit. If you have good methods for focusing on the work that matters most, you are more likely to achieve your goals and aspirations. Without a clear sense of purpose, however, you'll forever be swept up in the whirlwind of 'too much to do and not

enough time to do it in' – always catching up, not being your best and facing down another bout of burnout.

This book is designed for the Averys of the world, to help you create your own oasis of calm amid the whirlwind. It has three parts:

1. Know what matters.
2. Do what matters.
3. Influence what matters.

Part I, 'Know what matters', focuses on you. Chapter 1 provides an outline of what overwork, stress and burnout do to you, and how you can protect your wellbeing. Chapter 2 helps you to find and live your purpose and Chapter 3 focuses on psychological flexibility – flexible thinking, feeling and learning.

Part II, 'Do what matters', helps you to recalibrate your work to make it easy to do what matters most. Chapter 4 helps you to rediscover the love in your work, Chapter 5 helps you to deepen your focus and Chapter 6 helps you to make good work habits stick.

Part III, 'Influence what matters', then helps you to review and reset your influence. Chapter 7 helps you to flex your style so that influencing others is easier and more effective, Chapter 8 helps you to delegate more and Chapter 9 helps you to increase your influence and impact.

Every chapter contains an assessment exercise to help you identify where you might make improvements, and also a 'reset' exercise – a set of actions to take.

When you know what matters, do what matters and influence what matters, you can be flexAble. You can better defend against the demands of overwork, stop taking on too much, feel greater

freedom and enjoy your life more. You might still work long hours, but you'll know why you do. Your mind won't feel pulled in so many different directions that time feels like confetti. You will feel composed, vital, focused and free to be the influential leader you aspire to be.

PART I

Know what matters

*There's 'a silver lining... to the pandemic:
the opportunity to make work lives more purposeful,
productive, agile, and flexible'.*

LYNDA GRATTON⁴

OVERWORK CREATES a whirlwind of continuous, competing demands. It makes it hard to focus, to identify what's most important, and to switch off and enjoy your leisure time. While the pandemic hasn't liberated us from the reality of overwork, it has, as Lynda Gratton says, provided impetus for resetting ourselves. When you know what matters, what you need to do to reset yourself becomes clearer.

In this part of the book, Chapter 1 starts with what's at the core: you and your wellbeing! The chapter defines what stress and burnout are and how they erode your time, energy and health. The assessment exercise in this chapter will help you take stock of your wellbeing and burnout levels: you need to make sure overwork doesn't compromise your health. The chapter's reset exercise is a five-step process to recharge and renew yourself.

Making your life more purposeful doesn't just make you feel better, it also helps you live longer. Chapter 2 explains what purpose is and how it casts its magic, and provides you with a series of tools to clarify your purpose. Along with purpose, clarifying your values, identity, aspiration and goals will help you to make your life more intentional. With this clarity, it's much easier to make work choices that prevent overwork and allow you to fulfil your purpose and find freedom.

The final focus for Part I is on psychological flexibility – flexible thinking, feeling and learning – a superpower for achieving flexAbility. Even smart high achievers sometimes make the wrong choices, feel lousy about themselves and repeat old mistakes. Chapter 3 helps you to avoid getting stuck in unhelpful thoughts and rise above the dilemmas and barriers you face. It shows you how to avoid feeling too emotionally caught up, to avoid caring

too much. It encourages you to prioritise curiosity to increase your learning.

When you know what matters, you are freer to make better choices that serve your purpose. That generates rather than saps your energy, and allows you to feel aligned, accomplished and satisfied.