

The one book to read to understand your career

Professionals pick the titles that reveal aspects to their work that outsiders rarely see.

By Joshua Gabert-Doyon

What should you read to get to grips with a new job? Employee manuals or classic management titles can be an obvious starting point. But for many professions, a more informal reading list can offer greater insight than official resources.

These offbeat classics, picked by people working in key sectors, can act as spiritual guidebooks, revealing the subtler nuances in corporate culture or the artistry of the day-to-day. Crucially, they are often a joy to read, whether you are employed in the field or not.

Accountants: 'Foundation series' by Isaac Asimov

Vivek Kotecha, a forensic accountant who began his career at Deloitte and now runs Trinava Accounting, says Asimov's science fiction epic, which revolves around a maverick who combines mathematics and sociology to predict the future, is a useful warning for colleagues. "The confidence in large historical patterns and laws of human behaviour in the novels reflects the (sometimes misplaced) confidence that accountants... have in both historical financial data and the accounting standards," he says. "The lesson I draw from it is the constant need for humility."

Doctors: 'A Fortunate Man' by John Berger



Matthew Baker, a junior doctor based in south London, was first recommended John Berger's *A*

Fortunate Man by a colleague on the geriatric ward. The book, with photography by Jean Mohr, documents the life of a country doctor contemplating what it means to make sacrifices for, and be fulfilled by, work. "It offers quite a human and tender perspective on the relationship between doctor and patient," he says. "[There's] a salient point about the role of the doctor being to separate the disease from the patient, by naming it, which is psychologically a very important step for recovery."

Civil Engineers: 'Flourish: Design Paradigms for our Planetary Emergency' by Sarah Ichioka & Michael Pawlyn

Jessica Rowe, a civil engineer based in Cornwall, says the regenerative design principles set out in *Flourish* reignited her love for the profession. The book examines the next phase of sustainable building, and traces the way engineering can bring communities together, repair injustices and improve health outcomes. "Flourish helped me see the



Lizzie Knoff

built environment industry for what it was — an existing system that needed total transformation," Rowe says, "It helped me envisage a good future for the industry."

Lawyers: 'Bleak House' by Charles Dickens



"Lawyers love to tease themselves through the lens of *Bleak House*," says Nick Bano, a barrister specialising in

housing issues and author of *Against Landlords: How to Solve the Housing Crisis*. "It holds up a mirror to the camp melodrama of the law. Its legal characters, despite their villainy, are dignified and worldly. They remain weirdly aspirational." The book — which follows a thorny legal case involving conflicting wills and warring inheritors — remains a touchpoint for navigating the UK's legal system, says Bano. "It is an affecting reminder that our job is to guide clients out of legal quagmires, rather than to tempt them deeper in."

Restaurateurs: 'The Art of Eating' by MFK Fisher

Co-owner and head waiter at Hackney's Towpath Cafe, Lori de Mori, recommends MFK Fisher's *The Art of Eating* as a way of understanding what it means to satisfy hunger with pleasure and style. "Fisher famously defended writing about food, rather than 'more important' subjects like power and love, because for her, our universal hunger meant they were one and the same." This anthology, first published in 1951, covers topics ranging from oysters to cooking at times of rationing.

Joiners: 'The Architecture of Happiness' by Alain de Botton

As director of Richard Cullinan joinery studio, Katie Cullinan spends a lot of time on building sites. "I find them full of hope and potential, ready to be transformed," she says. For on-the-job reading, she recommends de Botton's 2006 look at beauty and built environment, which examines how the buildings we live in shape our lives. "This book discusses the importance of our surroundings and the way they impact on our well being. I find this concept

incredibly interesting, and not at all surprising."

Biotech entrepreneurs: 'The Billion-Dollar Molecule' by Barry Werth



Published in 1994, *The Billion Dollar Molecule* tells the story of Vertex Pharmaceuticals, a drug discovery start-up that became a formidable challenger to Big Pharma despite tremendous obstacles. Stephanie Wisner, co-founder at biotech firm Centivax, says it makes a compelling case for the risk-taking inherent in the development of new medicines. "Every co-founder has had difficult moments and ups and downs... even a company as successful as Vertex navigated difficult periods en route to helping patients."

Bankers: 'Investment Banking Explained: An Insider's Guide to the Industry' by Michel Fleuriet

Penned by a former chair of HSBC

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Fiction

Enduring appeal of office novel

Love and deviousness explain the appeal of recent novels grappling with work and the workplace, according to Jo Thompson at the Borough Press and Hemlock Press. She says readers yearn for stories of "people pining across the department meeting" or to get lost in the "dark underbelly" of career success depicted in Rebecca Kuang's *Yellowface*.

Even the most boring job can be compelling if the story is well told, says Adelle Waldman, whose novel *Help Wanted*, revolves around retail workers. Think, for example, about Melville's *Bartleby, The Scrivener*: "a story about a clerk who refuses to do mundane tasks,"

notes Waldman, that is "extremely funny".

Madeleine Gray, author of *Green Dot*, about a newspaper content moderator, says readers are attracted to "human commonality" in fiction about work. It is gratifying to see others experience "camaraderie that grows from colleagues' trauma bonds", she says. "Agreeing to spend nine hours a day at a desk working to make profits for someone that is not oneself — that is insane. But it's something most of us agree to do, because the alternative is starving."

Workplace relationships are "layered in unusual ways", says Calvin Kasulke,

whose book *Several People Are Typing* takes place largely on messaging app Slack. "You may not get along with someone especially well... but make a great working pair, you may be terrific friends at work and never interact outside... or you can be intimately familiar with someone in the workplace for years and learn next to nothing about their personal life." That mystery creates complexity, Waldman adds that the modern workplace has much in common with the social settings of the 19th century novel. "There is a clearly defined social world characterised by hierarchy," *Emma Jacobs*