

An orange speech bubble with a tail pointing towards the bottom left.

STUFF

**I WISH
I'D KNOWN**

A dark blue speech bubble with a tail pointing towards the bottom right.

WHEN

**I STARTED
WORKING**

FERGUS O'CONNELL

STUFF I WISH I'D KNOWN WHEN I STARTED WORKING

FERGUS O'CONNELL

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*For Jenny Ng,
my friend and the best co-pilot any author
could possibly wish for*

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So Why Did You Write the Book, Fergus?

This book had a simple and – rather obvious – birth.

I was thinking one day about how I'd really like to be nineteen again. Nineteen – but to have all the knowledge about the world that I have gained – gained from people I've met or been involved with, gained from situations I've been in or experienced, gained from the countless dumb mistakes that I've made.

It occurred to me then that a book that talked about this knowledge – but in a business context – would be a useful thing. I've made lots of mistakes in my working life – some big, plenty small. If a book could stop other people from making those mistakes then that probably would be a good enough reason to destroy a lot of trees and make a book. You'll be able to make plenty mistakes of your own. You don't have to make the ones I made.

Mistakes involve waste – sometimes appalling amounts of it. And waste, of course, is one of the big problems in the world today. I don't just mean rubbish/garbage, but waste of time, effort, resources, money, people, lives. If a book like this could stop some of that waste then the destruction of the trees – not really a good thing – would have been repaid by these savings – which could be a very good thing indeed.

That was good enough for me. I pitched it to Darin, my agent. He liked it. We pitched it to the good folks at Wiley. *They* liked it. I got to work and here we are.

Thank you for buying and I hope it makes a difference.

Fergus O'Connell

Ireland, 2015

OK, So What's the Plan?

Maybe you've started working for somebody else – a company or organization. Maybe you've started your own thing. In either case I think you'll find much that will be of use to you in this book. (And given that I've done both I feel I'm suitably qualified to be your guide.)

If you have never started your own business, don't discount the chapters that appear to be targeted at the entrepreneur or business owner. Greater minds than mine have pointed out how the era of a job for life is long over – that ship has sailed. More and more, organizations are encouraging their employees to think like entrepreneurs. Get closer to the customer. Take risks. Be passionate about projects. How else can I add value? What value *do* I add? Why do I deserve a salary rise? And so on.

What I've done is to rack my brains and come up with (what's turned out to be) 24 subjects about which I wish I'd known more when I started working. Thus, the book has 24 chapters in alphabetical order.

The book is intended to be quick and easy to read, punchy and concise. The chapters are all pretty short. I take as my starting point that you're like the rest of us – that you've got far more to do than you'll ever have time to do it. So you don't want to spend too much time messing around with this book.

While you can certainly read it from cover to cover – and would get benefit from doing that – my sense is that the most effective way to use the book would be to dip into it. You're asked to attend a meeting, for example, so you check the chapter on meetings. You're asked to take on a new project but before you start calling meetings, sending

out emails, banging stuff into your computer, hiring people, making Gantt charts in Microsoft Project and so on, you take a few minutes out to read the chapter on projects.

I would pretty much guarantee that the time you spend on this book would be repaid several or even many times over by time you wouldn't waste as a result. Not a bad deal, eh?

Each chapter is short and focused on a very specific subject. The main body of each chapter talks about the issues associated with that subject. The book is very much a how-to book so it then goes on to tell you how to deal with these issues. In other words, it identifies some specific actions that you can take straight away in order to learn the lesson of the chapter.

Littered throughout the book are extracts from carefully selected commencement speeches – where the great and the good give advice to graduating university students. In commencement speeches, the speaker recounts past experiences and tries to crystallize the lessons they learned from these. Essentially, these lessons, which they are now passing on to people about to go into the workplace, are the things *they* wish they'd known when *they* started working.

So these commencement speeches fitted in very nicely with the concept of the book. While I found some of these speeches to be of questionable quality, there were also some truly great ones there. So I've taken the best of these and spread them throughout the book. I've also drawn on some of the wisdom of the great and good throughout history – from Roman times to the present day.

So will this book change your life? Well, surely the change needs to come from within. But it should certainly inspire and support change.

Is it free from fluffiness and cod-philosophy? Yes – we’ve tried to ensure that it is.

Does it contain useful, actionable insight? For sure – it is common sense, hopefully elucidated with uncommon clarity.

Does it allow dip-in-dip-out reading, for that quick refresher/morale boost at those times your commitment to change is wavering? It certainly does. It’s written in manageable chunks, which we hope you will find enjoyable to read.

And so without further ado, let’s launch into it.

AIMING HIGH THE ONLY LIMITS ARE THE ONES YOU SET YOURSELF

At some point in any career, a normally unjustifiable risk might need to be taken to make the quantum leap from the mediocre to the big time.

– Sir Ranulph Fiennes, British explorer

I remember being a kid and watching on a black and white TV the Alabama race riots. I remember – even as a kid – wondering how this problem could ever be solved, how this level of hatred could ever be overcome. Fast forward 50 years and there's a coloured president in the White House. Pretty much anything is possible.

In my teens and twenties, the Iron Curtain was a fixed part of the geography of Europe. It was hard to see how that situation could ever change. Look at the map of Europe now. Germany is reunited, democracies (of various qualities) in almost all of the countries of the former Soviet Union and that country itself a distant memory. And all of that happened in a just a handful of years. Pretty much anything is possible.

In 2000, my company numbered nearly 50 people. When the dot.com bubble burst, much of our business disappeared overnight. Thinking this was a temporary thing, we tried to ride out the storm rather than getting small quickly, which is what we should have done. Bad mistake. As a result, we ended up with a debt of – essentially – \$1,000,000. Fast forward to now and we're

debt free, small, profitable and thriving. I'll say it again – pretty much anything is possible.

Have you ever thought how lucky you are to have been born at this time in the history of the world?

Imagine if you had been born in the Middle Ages or indeed pretty much any time before about the middle of the nineteenth century. If you had, and unless you were lucky enough to have been born into that tiny percentage of the world's wealthy people, you would have died as you started out – a peasant or a farmer or a miner or a factory worker or a soldier or something similar.

These days, it's all different. These days, you can do whatever you want. You can become whatever you want to be. You can start out as the child of parents who do whatever for a living and you can end up doing something entirely different that has never been done by any of your family members or ancestors before you. Harold May was a draughtsman at the Ministry of Aviation – his son Brian went on to become guitarist with Queen.

If your parents are not well off, you don't have to be too – if that's what you want. In 2008, Warren Buffet, was reckoned by *Forbes* magazine to be the richest man in the world with a net worth of \$62,000,000,000. Buffet was born in 1930. His father was a congressman whose salary at that time would have been \$9,000 per annum.

If your family were people who didn't seek the limelight, you don't have to be like them – you can put yourself out there – all over the Internet – if you want to. Beyoncé's father worked for Xerox and her mother owned a hair salon.

Basically – you don't have to do anything anybody in your family did before – all down through history. You can go and plough your own course. The world is your oyster.