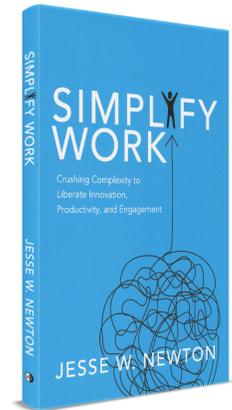


Simplify Work

Crushing Complexity to Liberate Innovation,
Productivity, and Engagement

by **Jesse W. Newton**



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Spaghetti of Structure

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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Complexity is wreaking havoc on organizations and individuals at an increasing rate. Organizations and the people in them are paralyzed by controlling and energy-sapping rules, processes, and transactional expectations, all of which are giving rise to a sense of hopelessness and holding organizations back from delivering breakthrough innovations and executing at speed.

Simplify Work promises to reveal the typical drivers of complexity in our organizations and in our lives and provides a practical method for simplifying work. Author Jesse W. Newton shares his experience and research regarding how to go about simplifying work in a careful and sustainable manner. This information will benefit anyone that believes there could be a better way to run our businesses in the 21st century.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To identify the key drivers of complexity in your organization.
- How to use design thinking to identify and solve top complexity problems.
- To rethink strategy, structure, and systems to simplify work.
- Personal steps to take to become free of burdening complexity.

Complexity is wreaking havoc on organizations and individuals at an increasing rate. We are on the front step of a new industrial revolution but are still using 20th-century methods of organizing how work gets done. Consequently, many organizations cannot realize the phenomenal performance potential this new revolution promises.

Also, individuals are unhappy, unhealthy, and burning out at an increasing rate. The time is right to rethink how work gets done.

Bogged Down in a Spaghetti of Structure

An epidemic of debilitating complexity is affecting businesses large and small. This disease restricts innovation, limits productivity, disengages the workforce, and eventually leads to organizational failure. Debilitating complexity takes the form of unnecessary and complicated structures, processes, systems, rules, metrics, and checks and balances. Businesses traditionally add more and more of these things as they grow, which stifles innovation and entrepreneurship.

So many people are stuck wasting a significant part of their day doing low value, non-core activities. The implication for business is that things move too slow, people think and act in silos, it's hard to get anything done, decision making is poor, innovation is missing, risk-taking is low, and it all leads to increasing costs and being left behind by more nimble competitors.

Today we are on the front step of the fourth industrial revolution. We are living in a digital era where artificial intelligence, big data, and the internet of things are revealing big opportunities for us to finally step out of transactional, repeatable work and focus our time, energy and capabilities on the activities with the greatest value. It is now critical to refocus teams and strip out and simplify unnecessary work.

While getting to simple may take a lot of hard work and persistence, there are some core components or ways of “getting to simple” to help in this important endeavor.

Get Clear on Purpose: There has to be a clear sense on the strategy, mission, or vision so you can begin to remove the things that are cluttering the business.

Organize: A comprehensive picture of the current state should be obtained so themes can be extracted and used to group and organize the minutiae.

Reduce: Prioritize, reduce, and remove those things that are not essential.

Using Design Thinking to Simplify Work

There is a bigger process that more effectively guides simplification beyond the common methods of getting clear on purpose, organizing, and reducing: Organizations can use design thinking to simplify work.

People take for granted how their lives are shaped by design, from the physical feel of a seat to the convenience of an online shopping experience. Design is everywhere and is constantly seeking to improve human experience. Design thinking has a number of defining characteristics that set it apart from traditional problem-solving methods.

One is taking a human-centered approach versus a purely analytical approach. Designers put themselves in the shoes of the people who will be using the product or experiencing a service. Through this they reveal critical problems to be solved or opportunities to enhance the design. When pursuing simplification, truly immersing oneself in the world of the worker reveals all kinds of contextual insights that would never be gathered purely from a survey or data analysis.

Design thinking is also highly participative. There is a focus on engaging clients and impacted teams throughout the simplification process as there is so much value in doing so. When they're engaged in the process, it fosters buy-in and ownership, which is essential if the solutions are to be embedded into the business and sustained over time.

The design thinking method can be sequenced in three steps:

- 1. Empathizing and Illuminating:** Capture information about what people actually do and how they do it through stakeholder interviews, workshops, observations, and surveys. The key is to ask great questions, often the same question multiple ways, and truly listen to reveal opportunities. Make sense of the “current state” information by quantifying the amount of work spent on various activities and aggregate sources of frustration.
- 2. Ideation:** Bring together small teams of diverse areas of expertise to brainstorm and explore any and every avenue to solve the top problems. If someone comes up with an interesting idea, others should feel energized to build on it, tweak it, evolve it, or explore tangents. The team will begin to converge on the ideas, grouping

them into themes and from that, a prioritized list of the top three to five solutions should be generated.

3. **Prototyping and Iterative Implementation:**

With prototyping, the solution ideas coming out of the ideation process are rapidly designed and tested. The intent is to learn as much as you can through experience and then iterate the design based on lessons learned. The learning, adjusting, and evolving never stops. This promotes a culture of continuous improvement, curiosity, and reflection which then reduces the risk of failure mentality that can stymie innovation.

Common Simplification Focal Areas

Many parts of a business can create confusion, cloud focus, and absorb time and energy but some specific areas generate the lion's share of this muddy state.

Simplify Strategy: As organizations grow, they often expand into new business units and geographies or acquire other businesses. All of this expansion has traditionally resulted in more complexity. More structures, processes, rules, and responsibilities are defined to maintain control of the expanding workforce, and strategic focus gets hazy.

Interestingly, there is one common tactic that leaders deploy to successfully turn around a business: they shed all extraneous business units and return clarity and focus to the business. They simplify strategy. Sometimes organizations need to pare down the number of initiatives they have running at one time to regain strategic clarity.

Another method for simplifying strategy is to simply ensure that everyone knows what the strategy actually is. It is surprising how often employees are not truly clear on what is most important in their business. Without a clear understanding of an organization's strategic priorities, one cannot make decisions that align with what the company needs to do to win.

An effective communication campaign can play an important role in building collective understanding and buy-in for an organization's strategy. All the complex elements of a strategy need to be distilled into a pithy, succinct statement or visual. Language is crucial, so each word needs to be carefully selected. The simpler the language, the better.

How the communication is delivered is also critical. The messages need to be displayed or delivered in a way so that it is rapidly understandable, energizing, and easily attainable. This is often done by carefully visualizing complex content, using metaphors, and storytelling. Metaphors paint a picture

for us, which speeds understanding. These metaphors, when used in a story format, are remembered more easily.

Rethinking Organization Design: How a company is organized is often a significant driver of complexity. Structural design directly affects how people get work done, how goals are met, how decisions are made, how communications flow, and how the degree of control influences accountability and autonomy.

The most common organization structure type that most large businesses have today is a matrix. It caters to complex organizations that have multiple business units operating in markets around the world. Back-office functions are integrated into regional shared service centers and business units are organized by market, product, or service.

The challenge with matrix organizations is that people get lost in the web of functions, product groups, customer segments, and geographies. They become territorial with resources and talent, coordination becomes a nightmare, and more approvals are required to ensure oversight of performance.

Companies are starting to explore new ways of operating that are counter to the traditional models. Instead of assuming that people cannot be trusted and therefore need to be controlled, the emerging designs serve to liberate the intelligence of their people by empowering them with the autonomy to work, decide, and execute as they see fit. This autonomous team structure, otherwise referred to as an agile organization or holacracy, is getting more and more attention.

The major differences that this relatively new structure embodies include:

- **Clarity from the top:** Vision, mission, and strategy are set and clearly articulated by leadership.
- **Removal of layers of management:** Vertical reporting lines are removed and replaced with pods of small teams.
- **Category pods:** Pods are established for each product, service, or market.
- **Small autonomous teams that are focused on a particular opportunity:** Each team determines how they solve problems and make decisions, when to execute, and how to incorporate lessons learned.
- **Coordinating nodes:** Teams are closely coordinated through ongoing check-ins.
- **Managers become coaches:** Traditional managers

are redeployed as coaches, and their role is to enable effective teaming, mitigate conflict, and provide feedback and coaching.

There is a lot of value in evolving an organization model to empower people, but each company needs to carefully create a model that will work in their unique commercial environment.

Stripping Out Bureaucratic Practices

Bureaucracy acts like an anchor, prohibiting efficiency and killing momentum. An important contributor to bureaucratic practices is unwieldy processes. Identifying better ways of doing a repeatable process has been a core management task for a long time and has delivered tons of value to businesses over the past century.

Examples of processes that are unwieldy and inappropriately time consuming include: performance management, budget setting, travel booking, expense processing, and compliance.

Schedule a bi-annual or annual review of core processes and take steps to reduce or remove low value processes. The more we can redesign or remove non-core, low value activities and enable space and focus, the more likely we are to free the performance potential of people.

Making Sense of Systems

Too many employees struggle to find the information they need within their company's information system. IT functions need to deliver simple and user-friendly solutions for employees, so the complexity is contained as much as possible and people get the right information or connectivity when they need it, in a form that is digestible and usable so that focus and energy can be used on problem solving and innovating.

Simplify You

People have more and more work to do, are spending less and less time with their families and are not taking time to disconnect and recharge. The go-go-go mindset reduces one's ability to think strategically and operate in a proactive manner. Steps can be taken and skills can be built to smash complexity in your life, take control, increase your energy, be more productive, and be happier. It's time to begin to live simply.

Here are the steps you can take to simplify you:

1. **Reduce clutter:** It is mentally liberating to get rid of things that are not needed. With a simplified environment, we feel less stress and mentally scattered.
2. **Get clear on what is most important:** With clarity on what truly matters most you can say no to the various things that pop up during the day that are not your highest priorities.
3. **Plan effectively:** Annually, quarterly, and weekly plans should be completed for your professional and personal life. Put all plans, including date nights and taking your kids to school, on your calendar and adhere to it.
4. **Avoid distractions and interruptions:** Turn off phone notifications, designate time for email, and avoid low-value meetings.
5. **Nurture and protect energy:** Learn to meditate, practice positivity, prioritize quality sleep, and remain active.

The image of what work could be like when simplification takes hold is an inspiring one. The idea of people rapidly learning and developing, using all their creative potential, and positively throwing all of their energy into work that matters is a beautiful image. We can get there. We just have to take the first step to simplify work.



Jesse W. Newton is the founder and CEO of Simplify Work, a global consultancy that specializes in unburdening organizations from paralyzing complexity. In his work with clients, Newton advises across the spectrum of simplification focal areas, including rethinking organizational structure, transforming culture, and building smart skills in individuals and teams. Clients include Mondelez International, McDonald's Corporation, and PepsiCo.

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