

Star operator

A favourite title in Emma Isaacs' library of about 300 business books is *The Starfish and the Spider: The unstoppable power of leaderless organizations*, by Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom. The owner of women's network Business Chicks says it outlines a very different kind of organisational structure.

"A starfish organisation is one that is decentralised. If we cut off an arm it will grow a new one," she says, "whereas the spider is very hierarchical and if you cut off a leg it can't operate. A starfish organisation is a new world organisation that is built around a community and you can't really track them down and you don't know who the leader is."

Some of the theory is being put into practice at Business Chicks, which Isaacs says is transforming from its traditional base as a networking community for business women into a starfish business, recently launching a glossy magazine and ramping up its web presence.

"Business Chicks has such great content and it's in every state now. I really see this as a media business and we've now got the magazine, *Latte*. We have an online presence with a portal we are developing."

And Isaacs is happy to take a less central role. "I want to build an international business that runs

without me and serves people," she says. "There needs to be some control in place but systems and processes don't run people."

An entrepreneur to her bootstraps, Isaacs was only 18 when she started her initial business, a recruitment agency. Her first experience of attending a Business Chicks event left such a strong impression she decided to buy the business.

These days it has around 2000 members and 22,000 on its database, and National Australia Bank recently signed up as a sponsor.

The network runs educational workshops and mentoring programs, fundraising events, boot camps and sporting events, as well as health retreats for members. Events help raise money for the charity Kids Helpline, which set up the original network. And there are plenty more plans.

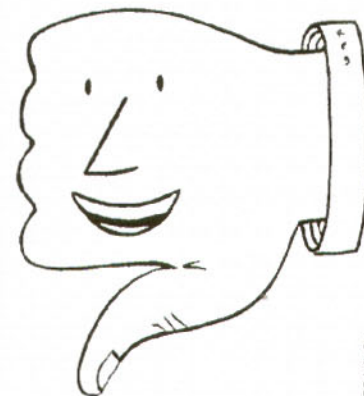
"I love the idea of social business – starting a business with the intention of paying back investors but not making a profit for the owners – and want to explore it more," Isaacs says. "It is making the world a better place but not through profit making. If you are a heartfelt entrepreneur and want to leave a legacy, it's not of interest to me to just make money."

CATHERINE FOX



MC WALKER

Unsung skills give employees the edge



REG LYNCH

If you're working in a service role and are good at saying no politely to the boss, handling six different urgent tasks at the same time and giving negative feedback, congratulations. You are the proud possessor of the hidden skills needed for high-quality performance.

Researchers at the Australian School of Business have identified nine service skills that are essential to performance in a range of environments, including call centres and IT departments, and for managers.

The good news, according to researchers Dr Anne Junor and Dr Ian Hampson, is that the skills can be learned at work and don't require formal study, so there's no need to go out and recruit new employees.

But such skills often also go unidentified or unrecognised, which could hamper efforts to understand and match job requirements – risky in a tight labour market.

According to the research, many low-paid workers were using high-level work process skills. Three of the skills concern focusing awareness: noting signs of change while being conscious of personal reactions and impacts. Another three concern negotiating boundaries and influencing with or without words.

The final three are to do with interweaving tasks to keep work processes going, working around obstacles and patching things up if they go wrong.

Among the key skills were saying no or "not now" nicely to the boss or clients; judging how to juggle a variety of urgent tasks; and giving advice or negative feedback in an acceptable way, especially to superiors.

With services one of the fastest growing sectors in developed countries, the findings are particularly important. About 75 per cent of employment in Australia is in the service sector, the researchers say.

CATHERINE FOX