

Peter Drucker

The most enduring guru of them all, Peter Drucker (1909-2005) was the author of more than three dozen books, translated into almost as many languages. In 1997 *McKinsey Quarterly* said: "In the world of management gurus, there is no debate. Peter Drucker is the one guru to whom other gurus kowtow." But unlike some of those that might have kowtowed to him, Drucker was a guru with charm who never set out to diminish others. Some commentators have remarked that although he was firmly embedded in the human-relations school of management—along with Douglas McGregor (see [article](#)) and Warren Bennis (see [article](#)), for example—the guru he himself most admired was Frederick Winslow Taylor, the father of "scientific" management.

"There are many books I could have written that are better than the ones I actually wrote. My best book would have been 'Managing Ignorance', and I'm very sorry I didn't write it."

Though born in Vienna, Drucker started his professional life in Frankfurt as a financial reporter, and he never lost his journalistic eye for a witty aphorism or a memorable metaphor. His writing is never dull, but nor is it superficial, in a field where both dullness and superficiality are common. He brought to it a Renaissance breadth of knowledge, and was as likely to refer to his beloved Jane Austen as to Taylor. Rosabeth Moss Kanter once wrote: "In the Drucker perspective ... quality of life, technological progress and world peace are all the products of good management ... at root, Drucker is a management Utopian, descended as much from Robert Owen as Max Weber."

Drucker moved to England in the early 1930s and thence to America in 1937, where he stayed until his death 68 years later. He started in the United States as a correspondent for a number of British newspapers. From 1950 to 1972 he was professor of business at New York University Graduate School of Business. In 1971 he moved to California to help develop one of the country's first executive MBAs at Claremont Graduate University, and its business school is now named after him.

From his first management book, "The Concept of the Corporation", published in 1946, to his last article, "What Makes an Effective Executive" (which won the prestigious McKinsey award for the best article to appear in *Harvard Business Review* in 2004), Drucker never failed to sympathise with the difficulties of managers and the demands of their task. In his 1954 book "The Practice of Management", he argued that management was one of the major social innovations of the 20th century, primarily a human activity, not a mechanical or an economic one. He pioneered the idea of the corporation as a social institution.

"In the next economic downturn there will be an outbreak of bitterness and contempt

for the super-corporate chieftains who pay themselves millions.”

In “The Concept of the Corporation”, Drucker argued strongly in favour of decentralised decision-making at a time when corporate role models such as General Motors were concentrating more and more power in their headquarters. He argued that the assembly line, so embedded at the heart of industrial efficiency, was in fact very inefficient because it only allowed things to be done in sequence. He also introduced the idea of management by objectives, aiming for long-term goals by setting a series of short-term ones. In 1969 he coined the phrase “knowledge worker”.

Drucker thought of himself as a loner, as someone well outside the mainstream of management education. “I have always been a loner,” he said once. “I work best outside. That's where I'm most effective. I would be a very poor manager. Hopeless. And a company job would bore me to death. I enjoy being an outsider.”

Drucker was awarded the American Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2002.

Notable publications

“[The End of Economic Man](#)”, Heinemann, 1939

“[The Concept of the Corporation](#)”, John Day & Co, 1946

“[The Practice of Management](#)”, Harper, New York, 1954; Heinemann, London, 1955; revised edn, Butterworth-Heinemann, 2007

“[The Age of Discontinuity](#)”, Heinemann, 1967



More management gurus

This profile is adapted from “The Economist Guide to Management Ideas and Gurus”, by Tim Hindle (Profile Books; 322 pages; £20). The guide has the low-down on more than 50 of the world's most influential management thinkers past and present and over 100 of the most influential business-management ideas. To buy this book, please visit our [online shop](#).