

'In a nutshell, do what he says and
your business will improve. Simple as that.'
—SIMON REYNOLDS, author of *Why People Fail*

THE GAME OF INCHES

WHY SMALL CHANGE WINS BIG RESULTS

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WILEY

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First published in 2016 by John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd
42 McDougall St, Milton Qld 4064
Office also in Melbourne

Typeset in 10/12 pt Trade Gothic Lt Std, by Aptara, India

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Creator:	Collin, Nigel, 1963- author.
Title:	The Game of Inches: why small change wins big results / Nigel Collin.
ISBN:	9780730328964 (pbk.) 9780730328988 (ebook)
Notes:	Includes index.
Subjects:	Success in business. Creative ability in business. Industrial management. Marketing.
Dewey Number:	650.1

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Cover design by Wiley

Title graphics by © pialhovich/iStockphoto

Printed in Singapore by C.O.S. Printers Pte Ltd

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nigel created his first business at the age of twenty and sold it at twenty-one. He then went on to build Absurd Entertainment, one of Australia's largest entertainment design companies. He worked extensively on the 2000 Olympic Games, was entertainment advisor at the 2000 Paralympic Games, and holds the accolade of being show director for Australia's largest ever corporate event in 2005. Having passed the baton by selling the Absurd in 2004, he moved into the world of consulting, advising his clients on implementing ideas and everyday innovation.

In 2013, armed with a video camera, Nigel set off on an initiative to travel throughout Australia, solo on his motorbike, to discover ingenious Australians and share their stories. His quest was, through his 'Ingenious Oz Project', to inspire the ideas of a nation. In 2014, as an ambassador of Start Up Australia, he interviewed over 50 of Australia's top entrepreneurs and business leaders. He is now founder and maestro of 'Game of Inches'.

He has advised C-Suite executives, Ministers of Parliament and entrepreneurs in both public and private sectors. As an international speaker, he has presented his experience and expertise to organisations in myriad industries including IT, Franchise, Events, Marketing, Finance, Pharmaceuticals, Government and Telecommunications.

When not speaking, working with clients, writing or riding his motorcycle he spends his time between Sydney and the rural mid north coast of NSW with his family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is the page most people skip over and never read. Please don't do that because without the people listed below, none of the wisdom and extraordinary advice in this book would have been possible and as a result the pages that follow would be blank.

So a huge personal thanks to all the extraordinary individuals who contributed by allowing me to interview or meet with them. To Mark and Judy Evans, Robyne Carmichael, Shane Kelly, Kristy-Lee Billett, Kirsty Dunphey, Mike McEnearney, Kenton Campbell, Phillipe Carlier, Alisa Camplin, Graham Davies, David Vitek, Eddie Geller, Adam Hudson, Paul Hawker, Sylvia and Danny Wilson, Lyndon Frearson, Jeff Morgan, Denis and Bob (2 blokes on bikes), and Rick Ball, not only has your input been immensely valuable but I've enjoyed every conversation.

Huge thanks also to my business mentors Siimon Reynolds and Brian Sher, not only for their insightful and useful advice over the years but also for their input and friendship. Thanks especially to Siimon for writing this book's foreword and to Brian for giving me the opportunity to interview many brilliant entrepreneurs for Start Up Australia.

Another big thanks to my writing mentor Megan Kerr who has nurtured my skill and belief over many years now.

Also, thank you to the wonderful team at Wiley, Ingrid Bond, Lucy Raymond, Chris Shorten and Jem Bates, who not only took on the project with great enthusiasm but who were integral to making it happen. Thanks also to Dr Jason Fox for that generous email.

Then of course there is my darling, beautiful wife who when I decided to head off into remote Australia on my motorbike with dream and ambition in hand, as always, not only supported me but never questioned my motives (well not to me anyway).

Finally, I want to thank all of the entrepreneurs, business owners, leaders and friends who over many years inspired me and contributed to an enormous pool of knowledge, wisdom and advice.

FOREWORD BY SIMON REYNOLDS

The trouble with most business books is twofold.

First, the typical author is often not experienced enough in business to create a breakthrough, high-impact point of view. The result of this is a million books that say basically the same things.

Second, the typical author cannot get close enough to business high achievers, so they never really get the truth of the matter from people who really know. They merely report what others have reported.

Very fortunately for you, the reader, Nigel Collin is not your typical author.

He has over 30 years of experience in business—seeing close up what it takes to make a business survive and then thrive. You can feel his hard-won wisdom in every chapter—this guy has been there. He understands the real grit and fire of business.

Nigel has also interacted with a lot of business super stars. In fact he's got closer to more of them than almost anyone else in the country. He's done over eighty one-on-one, in-depth interviews with the cream of the Australian corporate world. This unprecedented access to our country's finest business minds has enabled him to not only understand the somewhat arcane art of money making, but to also create a cogent, highly practical system that literally anyone can follow to achieve better business results.

In nutshell, do what he says and your business will improve. Simple as that.

But you'll need more than a pen and pad to follow his business treasure map; you'll need something quite rare in the corporate realm—a totally open mind.

Because what follows in this book is far from your typical business growth template. Instead, Nigel suggests a counterintuitive way to think and act in order to succeed. In Nigel's world more is not more, strategy is not obvious and the usual road travelled is for chumps.

All of this makes for a very lively read and at times you'll be stunned by some of the conclusions and the forthrightness with which they're expressed. But at every step, you'll see the care that Nigel has taken to back up his assertions with research, logic and the simple clarity that can only come from somebody who doesn't just report, but understands.

I'm honoured to write the foreword for this unusual and fine book. As they say in the classics, it's a corker.

Siimon Reynolds

Best-selling author of *Why People Fail*

START HERE

It's a game of inches

Over the past couple of years I have interviewed many successful people, from high-profile entrepreneurs to unrecognised individuals throughout Australia who are doing amazing things that you and I may never have heard about.

My odyssey began in April 2013, when I set off one morning from my home in Sydney heading for remote Australia—just me, my motorcycle and a video camera. It was the start of the Ingenious Oz Project, an initiative that set me on a quest to uncover and tell the stories of ordinary Australians like you and me who have done extraordinary things.

I had launched my own first business at the age of 20 and had forged a career in the business events industry, over nine years building up Absurd Entertainment, one of Australia's largest creative entertainment design companies. So I knew firsthand that most people don't think they are very creative or that their ideas are of any value or that they have what it takes to succeed. I wanted to prove them wrong.

My mission was to demonstrate that Australians are far more creative, clever and capable than we often give ourselves credit for. I wanted to show that innovation isn't the sole domain of the leviathans of business or the elite few, but that it belongs to everyone, and that with determination and hard work anyone can build a successful business. There were, after all, clever and successful people and

businesses to be found all over Australia. So I headed off on my quest to inspire the ideas of a nation—and ended up getting the biggest education of my business career.

In 2014 I was invited to become an ambassador for Start Up Australia, a not-for-profit organisation created by entrepreneurs to help young businesses and entrepreneurs get started by offering free practical advice and hard-earned lessons from people who had been there and done it. I was asked to interview 50 of Australia's top entrepreneurs. After the success of Ingenious Oz, and because I had already talked with so many businesspeople and leaders over the years at conferences and other events, I leapt at the chance. Why wouldn't I? The opportunity to spend an hour with each of these dynamic individuals and draw on their ideas and practical advice on how to grow a profitable business was one I simply couldn't turn down.

What hit me during my involvement with both projects was the sheer number of smart, successful businesspeople there are throughout Australia. Both these initiatives offered me a rare opportunity to tap into the collective wisdom of highly creative and resourceful people from a wide variety of industries and backgrounds. In both projects I found people who were open and willing to share real strategies and ideas for business success.

That's important, because now more than ever entrepreneurship is vital to that success. The world today is a very different place from the one we knew even a couple of decades ago. The economy behaves differently, the social landscape and the way we do things have changed radically, and the evolving world of new technology has opened many new doors of opportunity in the way we do business.

Like you, I've listened to, watched and read a myriad of gurus and experts talk about entrepreneurship and business growth. Yes, some of them have interesting insights to offer, but let's face it: there's no substitute for the real thing. If you want to learn how to improve your business, learn from those who've done it and done it well.

The one thing that binds them all

In every interview I've conducted, without exception, one thing has stood out again and again. If there's such a thing as a silver bullet for business success, this is as close as you're ever going to get.

I started noticing it a while back while travelling through Australia's regions and remote areas on the Ingenious Oz Project. The realisation was a slow burn at first, an *isn't that interesting?* moment that became steadily more obvious, and more important. Then, when I began interviewing Start Up Australia's 50 top performers, it popped up again, right from the first conversation.

When I looked back over my own career, from my first business 30 years ago, I realised I'd done it myself without being explicitly aware of it or recognising just how vital it had been. In fact, the one time I didn't follow my instinct it bit me on the bum. In the early days of my consulting business I once tried stepping over the necessary intervening stages to jump directly to 'overnight success'. It didn't work. Once I recognised I had missed something vital and stepped back, things began to take off again.

What is the one thing? Simply this: *business is a game of inches.*

It's not about a one-off disruptive event or inventing the next iPhone. It's about consistently finding ways to improve everything you do. It's a philosophy to constantly drive towards doing it better than everyone else. It's an obsession with finding the best ways to advance every part of your business, incrementally.

It's more than an obsession—it's a quest. The constant passion that every one of these entrepreneurs demonstrated for playing this game of inches floored me. When I asked John McGrath (who set out to build one of the world's best real estate companies) if this was how he built McGrath, he confirmed that it was.

He started his business with a vision: to be the best real estate company in the world. To make that happen, he focused on doing everything better in every way. He still does. As he said, 'I recognise incremental improvement on a daily basis'. Business success and profitable growth are not about quantum leaps. They're about moving forward step by step, inch by inch.

At first glance, this idea might seem to contradict thinking big and aiming high. It might appear that playing the game of inches means you're playing small and thinking small. Not so. Siimon Reynolds, who built one of the largest marketing companies on the planet, explained to me, 'We must completely commit to constant improvement', adding, 'That philosophy, over time, combined with the philosophy of aiming high, is pretty much all you need to succeed in business and in life. The rest is just detail'.

The game of inches is what makes *big* happen.

In the foothills of the Flinders Ranges is a remarkable business that does this exceptionally well. Kelly Engineering manufactures farm machinery, mainly diamond harrows and prickly chains used for paddock preparation, weeding, tillage, soil management and so on.

It started 40 years ago when farmer Peter Kelly wasn't totally happy with the machinery he had—and decided to make his own. Then he thought it would be a good idea to make a few extra and sell them to his neighbours so his machine would effectively cost him nothing. The word soon got around, and by the time he'd sold 30 units or so he realised he had a viable engineering business on his hands.

**The game of inches
is what makes *big*
happen.**

It wasn't an overnight thing. He didn't wake up one morning and decide to quit farming and take up engineering. Thirty farmers didn't all knock on his door one Sunday morning each with an order. The game of inches takes time, for good reason. But as the momentum slowly built, so did Peter Kelly's ability to meet it.

When I visited Shane Kelly, Peter's son, in 2013 he had a unique process in place that empowers their employees to constantly seek ways of improving every part of the business, so the business advances in every area. It's extremely simple. He asks his workers to come up with ideas that will improve their particular part of the business, and then to apply those ideas. Each week a team leaders' meeting focuses on the most innovative ideas. As Shane said, 'The team leaders are expected to bring their diary with as many innovations and ideas as the guys have thought of during the week'.

Those ideas spring from practical problems they face in their own tasks. Solving the problems improves both their own daily work and the business. Kelly listed a range of examples: 'What's holding us up this week? Waiting for the forklift every day because it's always over there, or this jig takes a lot of working because it doesn't load or unload easily, or why don't we shift that rack closer so we're not having to go over there and get stuff all the time. If we had a bigger loader, or two forklifts...' Shane actively encourages them to write down anything they think of and bring it to the weekly meeting.

The problems may not sound earth-shattering and the solutions may not be wildly innovative, but when you add up all of those small improvements, across the different areas of the business, over a year or ten it's massive. And the thinking is so simple, it's brilliant.

Since then Kelly has evolved and formalised the process by learning from and modelling Japanese operational efficiencies. In essence though, he suggested, 'The same philosophy applies: What problems do you have? What constraints? What opportunities for improvement? Can you fix it yourself? Do you need other resources? Do you need higher input etc.? It's been extremely powerful and allowed us in the last 12 months to achieve world's best practice in employment efficiency'.

If you visit Kelly Engineering today and look at their big international business—they export their IP (intellectual

property) to both North America and Europe, with plans for expanding into South America and Africa—you could easily think things have always been this way. But if you backtrack over the decades you'll see the evolution of a simple idea to solve a simple problem, which caught the attention of a few early adopters. You'll see the progression of that idea over many years, through many simple ideas to solve small problems, and the steady growth of a viable engineering business within Australian borders. You'll see the seemingly chance meeting with a potential American distributor, leading to international expansion. And throughout this evolution, you'll also see the constant improvement not just in their products but also in how they conduct business. Step by step, inch by inch.

Kristy-Lee Billett is the founder of the Footprint Group, a recruitment and HR consulting business. It took her just seven days to set up her business, move into serviced offices, and be up and running. It sounds like an overnight success, yet her story started well before that.

In Billett's words, she fell into recruitment soon after studying forensic psychiatry at university. Floating around, unsure what to do for work, she went to see a recruitment agency and was offered a job. A little later, in 2006, she was working for one of the world's biggest recruiters when she had the impulse to start her own business. At the time she was heading up the organisation's newly launched commercial division. Just three weeks into her new role, however, her employers decided they didn't want to play in the commercial space after all. She recalls going home and thinking, *I'm not happy with that*. She resigned the next day.

The strange thing was that over the three weeks she headed up the commercial division they had been flooded with work. So she simply decided to do it herself, and over the next seven days she set up shop. Certainly she saw an opportunity in the market and homed in on it, but in reality it had taken years of experience and work to get her to that point.

Seven years later, the Footprint Group consists of a number of businesses in recruitment, HR services and SMSF (self-managed super fund) recruitment. Having started as a local operation on the

Central Coast, about an hour north of Sydney, today the Footprint Group serves clients through the region and nationally. Billett won the Young Entrepreneur award in 2013, seven years after she launched the business.

As with Kelly Engineering, you could easily look at the Footprint Group and see only the success, rather than the gradual evolution and the years of experience behind it.

One of the major challenges businesses and entrepreneurs face is having an unrealistic expectation of how quickly a business will grow and become profitable. For about 90 per cent of those I interviewed it took between three and eight years to become profitable and successful. Not one of them saw overnight success. And yet we're bombarded with stories of the 'instant' fortunes won by the very few. It's easy to look at the Facebooks of this world and imagine that all it takes is one brilliant idea and, *voilà*, you're a billionaire.

Australian actor Shane Jacobson, whose meteoric rise to success was on the back of the mockumentary movie *Kenny*, sums it up beautifully in his book title: *The Long Road to Overnight Success*. Perfect.

Think about it. The Footprint Group wasn't kick-started by a catalytic quantum leap, a sudden stroke of genius, but by a strong desire to do things differently and better. Billett's first tagline was 'a fresh approach'. Over time, she has been very good at two things in particular that are vital in the game of inches: finding gaps in the market and finding ways of doing things better. For Footprint the game of inches is about constant, everyday disruption and reinvention.

Talking about this, Billett made a crucial point; 'Over time, we really kept an eye on that market disruption mentality and some of the stuff we're developing at the moment is more along the lines of reinventing how things are done in the market'. This illustrates that disruption isn't always big, completely new or totally out there; it's disruptive because it's different. It's disruptive because no-one has done it before in that way, that well or in that market.

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