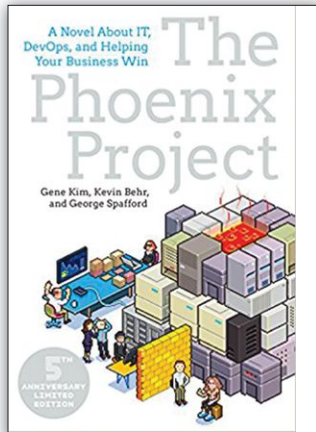# **BOOK**review by Benedict Reuschling

The Phoenix Project: A Novel about IT, DevOps, and Helping Your Business Win
by Gene Kim, Kevin Behr, and George Spafford

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*T*he Phoenix Project is a novel set in the IT world, written by Gene Kim, Kevin Behr, and George Spafford. Although the characters and the company are fictional, the circumstances and dynamics feel very real. The book opens with the main protagonist, Bill Palmer, being promoted to VP of IT Operations amidst a pile of issues his ousted predecessors left behind.

The book does a great job describing the problems that could happen to pretty much any company. Readers can relate to similar situations they may have experienced themselves and the impacts on their businesses. I was interested in seeing how things turned out from the total mess of the first few chapters. Moreover, I found a lot of parallel experiences from my own work in various organizations and how things are handled (or not handled) in a similar way. Sometimes without knowing any better—as in the book—people do not see any other way of doing things. I think that is one of the interesting things about DevOps and the promise that it holds to make IT work and collaboration with other departments better. DevOps ultimately changes the way things are done on a day-to-day basis.

Companies often see IT as just a cost center or necessary evil that does not provide much. I remember one of our professors reminding us that IT is not our core business, but it is the core of our business. The book describes how IT is at first seen as just a department every other department relies upon, but is causing constant grief and trouble. Over the course of the book, it becomes clear to the people in IT that they need to look beyond the boundaries of their own department. Identifying what other departments like sales and finance need from IT changes priorities and objectives. Making an impact on those departments directly affects business outcomes in positive ways beyond running servers reliably and applying changes to production systems. That is one of the promises of DevOps, that over time it ultimately transforms the whole company into a better, more efficient and productive performer.

Pundits may find some of the approaches described in the book naive to implement in a large corporation or that the results cannot be seen as fast as in the novel. However, the book also has people that are resisting the plans that Bill is implementing and they try to sabotage his efforts. I like how the authors made an effort to transcribe some of the (fictional) emails in the form you would get in your email program (including From:, To:, and Subject: lines). This makes the book more realistic and business-like. Also, the graph about wait time being the relationship of busy time divided by idle time for resources was particularly insightful for me. It explains a lot of things and cautions you to be careful not to overcommit yourself.

What I particularly liked is that the book is not only focusing on the business side of IT operations, but also how it affects the personal life of Bill with his wife and kids. All too often, Bill is being called at home after hours and has to deal with current business problems instead of spending time with his family. Often, working in IT

affects the whole family when things go bad.

Reading this book was a continuation of what I learned in the Agile Software Development course at the university. Things like the Toyota Production System, Lean Manufacturing, and Kanban are mentioned and applied in a concrete business setting in *The Phoenix Project*. Although I wished they would have elaborated more on Kanban and how to use it, I can understand that this is just one tool and a (nevertheless important) means to an end in the bigger picture of DevOps. There are other books on Kanban and this book motivated me to try it out for my own personal projects.

Not everyone reading the book will be in a management position like Bill and cannot change a whole department at once. But these concepts also work for a single person—things like identifying and prioritizing the most important work, mastering your skills by constantly applying and refining them, creating a value stream map and using Kanban to visualize the work, eliminating waste and rework. Of course, some of these concepts require deeper elaboration and tips on how to implement them, which is why there is a resource guide in the Appendix. Additionally, the authors mention *The DevOps Cookbook*, which is now called *The DevOps Handbook*, which is meant to be read after *The Phoenix Project*.

All in all, I can recommend the book to everyone working in IT. The story is interesting enough that non-IT workers can also see what IT is dealing with. And the concepts about work can be universally applied to pretty much any profession. ●

BENEDICT REUSCHLING joined the FreeBSD Project in 2009. After receiving his full documentation commit bit in 2010, he actively began mentoring other people to become FreeBSD committers. He is a proctor for the BSD Certification Group and joined the FreeBSD Foundation in 2015, where he is currently serving as vice president. Benedict has a Master of Science degree in Computer Science and is teaching a UNIX for software developers class at the University of Applied Sciences, Darmstadt, Germany.