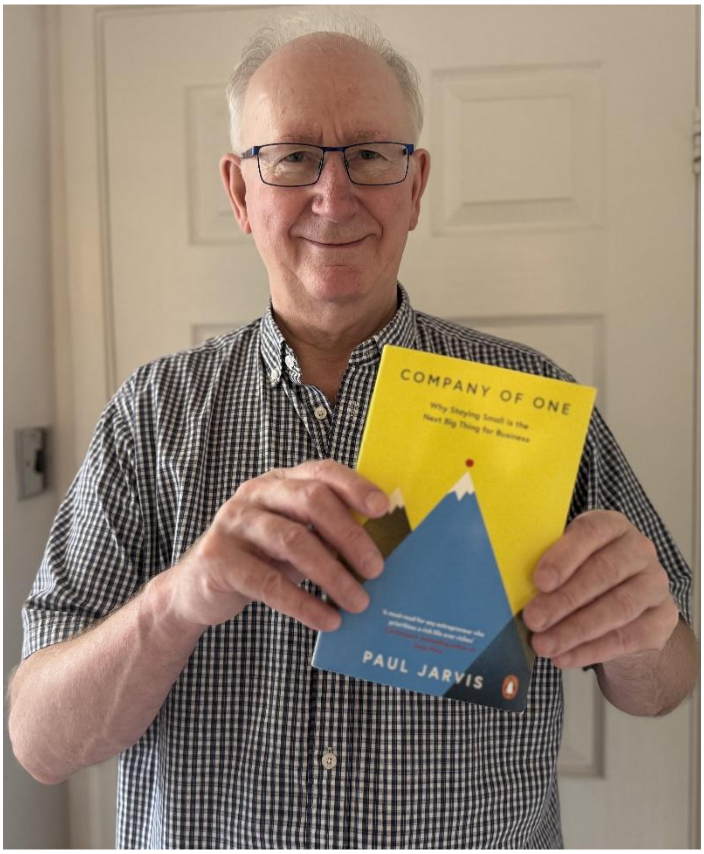
Wealden Business Group

Book Review: “Company of One - Why Staying Small is the Next Big Thing for Business” by Paul Jarvis

Report by Bill Ferguson, 5 August 2026



Why did I choose this book?

It made me feel vindicated. At the start of my osteopathic career I received some business advice: you can build a large practice with lots of staff and hundreds of clients a week or stay small, minimise your overheads and focus on a smaller group of clients. I chose to stay small and I haven’t regretted it.

This book doesn’t prove that every business should stay small; but it forces readers to question a belief many never examine: that bigger is always better. Whether you ultimately agree or disagree, Jarvis claims that "growth" is something to justify rather than simply assume. For our group, with a mix of business owners, managers and professionals, I think that makes the book a worthwhile choice.

I’m going to start with some criticisms:

Criticisms

A lot of repetition.

Selection bias. Many examples involve successful people who chose to stay small and thrived. Less attention is given to businesses that stayed small and failed.

Doesn't fit every industry. The philosophy applies best to knowledge businesses and service businesses. (Our speaker last week set up a chain of audiology clinics. Should he have stuck with one?). Manufacturing,

pharmaceuticals, supermarkets and airlines require large scale.
Romanticises small business. overlooks insecurity, limited holidays, dependence on one person, succession or exit strategy (if there is one).

Strengths of the book
Easy to read.
Thought provoking.

A quick summary
This book challenges one of the most deeply held assumptions in business - that growth is always the primary goal. Many entrepreneurs reach a comfortable income and then continue expanding simply because everyone expects them to. Unnecessary growth is asking for trouble. More complexity, more risk, more stress.

A company of one is not necessarily one employee, it's okay to use freelance workers when you need them. PJ defines ACOO as any business that deliberately stays small enough to remain agile, independent and customer-focused.

Key points
A business should support the owner's desired lifestyle not dominate it.

Complexity is the hidden cost of growth. Unplanned growth creates: more management, more stress, more debt, more meetings, more risk. More demands on your time.

A company can become "better" without becoming "bigger." Keep improving: relationships, products, communication. Often overlooked because it isn't exciting. Be like a chef and tweak the seasoning until it's just right. Small experiments reduce risk.

Don't waste money on scattergun marketing. Build a tribe of loyal customers that value what you offer. Listen to them, they will tell you what they want. Revenue will follow: you are not selling cheap haircuts! Customers will happily pay for excellence.

Don’t let systems create distance between your business and its customers. Customers remember genuine interactions. What is it worth to have someone answer the phone vs 20 min on hold? Customers will pay a premium to avoid waiting.

Teach and share everything you know. Share your expertise, it’s a form of marketing. An old teacher of NLP, Wilf Proudfoot, used to say “I often see my old training material pirated and sold”, “I don’t care I’ve got better since then.”

Profit is different to turnover. Cash flow trumps everything. (DB can tell you stories that will make your blood run cold). Many businesses increase turnover while reducing profit and increasing stress.

Simplicity is a competitive advantage. You can be quicker to react, innovate and communicate.

Some questions to reflect on

Did any example in the book particularly resonate - or feel unconvincing?

Would you rather own a small business that gives you freedom or a £50 million company that dominates your life?

Did the book challenge your assumptions about business growth, or simply confirm what you already believed? Confirmation bias or cognitive dissonance.

What does "enough" look like for your business? Can you ever define it objectively? Have you thought about what you want: income, working hours, lifestyle.

What would happen if more companies deliberately chose not to grow? Would society benefit or suffer?

How do AI and automation strengthen - or weaken - Jarvis's argument?

Has the book changed how you personally define success?