Small businesses don't collapse. They erode.

The Drift names the seven structural patterns behind a failure rate that has not moved in a generation, and shows how the numbers see failure coming. This paper sets out the book's argument, for both sides of the desk.

Sixty per cent of small businesses fail within their first decade, and the number has survived the internet, cloud accounting, social media and the arrival of AI.[1] There is more information, more advice and more tooling available to a business owner than at any point in history, and the failure rate has not budged. **The causes of failure are not informational. They are structural, and structural patterns leave tracks in the numbers long before anyone feels the pain.** The Drift, by Clarity HQ co-founder Aynsley Damery, is a book about those patterns: what they are, how to see them in a set of accounts, and who is best placed to stop them.

60% FAIL WITHIN THEIR FIRST DECADE[1]	**7** STRUCTURAL PATTERNS BEHIND THE FAILURES	**+19** CASH DAYS DRIFTED IN ONE COMPOSITE CASE[2]
78% HIGHER GOAL ACHIEVEMENT WITH ACCOUNTABILITY[3]		

HOW TO READ THIS

Part One is the argument: what drift is and why more information has never fixed it. Part Two is the seven patterns themselves. Part Three is where the drift shows up, and what each side of the desk can do about it. This is a Clarity HQ paper about a Clarity Business Press book, and the notes say plainly which claims come from where.

PART ONE

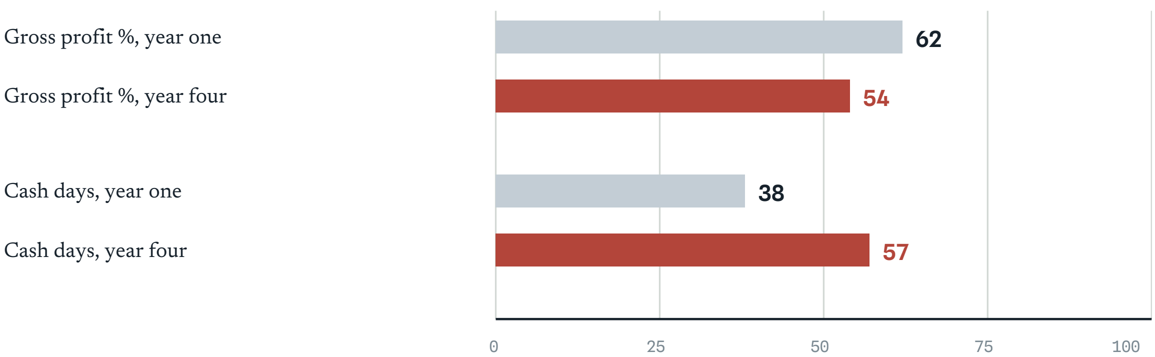
Failure is not an event

There is no single moment when a small business fails. No alarm goes off. No email arrives saying the business model broke on Tuesday.

Instead, margins thin by a point a year. Cash days stretch by a week per quarter. Revenue per employee softens so gradually that nobody notices until the owner is working twice the hours for half the reward. By the time the pain is felt, the structural damage has been compounding for months or years. The book's name for this is the drift.

The Drift opens with a composite firm called Mark's: professional services, £1.2m of turnover, a team of twelve.[2] Over four years its gross margin slid from 62% to 54%, a point or a point and a half at a time, none of them alarming on their own. Revenue per employee flatlined for three years while the headcount grew, so every new hire diluted the business rather than growing it. Cash days stretched from 38 to 57. Nothing about any single month looked like a crisis. The whole four years was one.

Figure 1. What four years of drift looks like



SOURCE The Drift, Chapter 1. A composite professional services firm (£1.2m turnover, team of twelve); revenue per employee also flatlined for three years while headcount grew. Composite, not a client case; see note 2.

The uncomfortable part of the argument is why all the new tooling has not helped. The causes of failure are not informational, so more information was never going to fix them. Owners do not fail for lack of access to advice. They fail because the advice they get is reactive and fragmented, and because nobody holds them to account for acting on it. The data sits in the accounting system, accurate and complete (or maybe not), and the owner does not look at it. Or looks and does not know what it means. Or knows what it means and does not act.

> **The problem has never been that the signals are missing. The problem is that nobody is looking.**

PART TWO

The seven patterns

Every one of the seven operates the same way: slowly, invisibly, without announcement. The first six are causes. The seventh is the alarm bell, and by the time it rings, the others have usually been compounding for years.

01 They Have No Model.

Not a business plan; a financial model. Owners can describe their product and their team, and cannot trace the path from a sale to a bank balance. For every pound of revenue, how much profit does the business actually produce, and why? Most cannot answer, so every decision is made without understanding the economic engine it lands on.

02 They Try to Serve Everyone and Specialise in Nothing.

Saying yes to every kind of client feels like growth, and quietly erodes margin, expertise, pricing power and reputation. The instinct that looks most like ambition is the slow dismantling of what makes a business valuable.

03 They Don't Get the Numbers.

In both senses: they do not receive them regularly, and they do not understand them when they do. Richard Branson has told the story of confusing gross profit with net profit for decades, until someone drew him a picture of a fishing net.[4] If it can happen to Branson, it can happen to anyone, which is precisely why embarrassment should never keep an owner from asking.

04 The Owner Is the Ceiling.

Growth is capped by the owner's bandwidth, and the harder they work, the more firmly they hold the cap in place. Bandwidth has a hard ceiling. Effort doesn't.

05 They Don't Know What Their Customers Actually Value.

Pricing built on cost-plus and competitor matching, rather than on the outcome the customer is buying. The margin a business could earn sits in the gap between what it could charge and what it does.

06 Nobody Holds Them to Account.

Decisions made in isolation get abandoned in isolation. The research is blunt: people with written goals and regular accountability achieve 78% more than those without.[3] The profession that literally has “account” in its name has largely stopped doing the accountability that matters most.

07 They Manage Cash by Feel, Not by Flow.

Structurally different from the first six, because cash is the final symptom of the others compounding unchecked. Nigel Botterill, who writes one of the book's forewords, describes logging into his bank one January morning expecting more than £700,000 and finding less than £200,000.[5] When the cash gap opens far enough, the end comes fast. The first person he called was his accountant. That accountant was the author.

PART THREE

Where the drift shows up

Every pattern in the book is diagnosable through a small set of financial signals that already exist in the accounts, whether or not anyone is reading them.

The book's diagnostic lens is a panel of seven numbers: revenue growth, gross profit percentage, operating profit, revenue per employee, cash days, the core cash target and business return. No single number tells you much. Read together, on a rhythm, the pattern across them is the diagnosis. Mark's figure above is exactly that panel doing its work: margin, efficiency and cash each drifting a little, and the combination telling a story that none of them told alone.

Which is why the book is written for two audiences at once, and reads differently depending on which chair you sit in.

IF YOU RUN A BUSINESS

The book names what is happening to you

Every business is drifting on at least two or three of the seven dimensions at any moment. Reading the book is how you find out which, before the numbers force the issue. It will not ask you to become an accountant. It asks you to watch seven numbers and to stop managing by feel, and it shows you what kind of help to ask for (and what kind of help merely sends you reports).

IF YOU'RE AN ACCOUNTANT

You are the person best placed to stop it

You already hold the data where every one of the seven patterns shows up first. The book's argument is that the role is not to explain what happened last year; it is to change what happens next. The companion 7 Reasons Playbook (free) turns the book into firm practice: the seven patterns as the diagnosis, the seven numbers as the measurement layer, and a structured conversation as the intervention. Give the book to a drifting client and the first meeting starts itself.

THE BOOK

Why read The Drift

Published by Clarity Business Press on 18 May 2026, with forewords by Paul Dunn and Nigel Botterill, framing the argument from both sides of the desk.

The Drift went to #1 on Amazon UK on launch day in Business Skills, Business Accounting, and Management & Leadership, became an international bestseller in Australia and Ireland, and reached the top five in the United States.[6] Every copy sold contributes a small business loan through B1G1 and Opportunity International Australia, which means the book funds, one loan at a time, exactly the kind of businesses it is written for.

The author's closing point is the one this paper would leave you with. The tragedy of the 60% statistic is not that businesses fail; it is that so many fail unnecessarily, with the problems visible in the numbers and the relationship that could have made the difference sitting in an accountant's office, buried under compliance deadlines. Drift is not destiny. It is a pattern, and patterns can be caught.

NEXT STEPS

Read it, then put it to work

- **Get the book.** The Drift by Aynsley Damery, in paperback and ebook, via aynsleydamery.com or Amazon.
- **Take the Drift Diagnostic.** Fourteen questions, five minutes: which of the seven patterns are active in your business right now. Free at aynsleydamery.com/resources.
- **Owners:** print the 7 Key Numbers Snapshot from the same page, pin it to the wall, and give a copy to your accountant.
- **Accountants:** download the 7 Reasons Playbook, the book's methodology written for firms, and see how firms deliver it at clarity-hq.com.

Notes to the figures

1 **The 60% failure statistic.** Sixty per cent of small businesses fail within their first decade. A long-standing figure, widely cited across government and industry sources; UK data from the Office for National Statistics business demography series, US data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Business Employment Dynamics. Discussed in the introduction to The Drift and referenced in its endnotes.

2 **Mark's firm.** The Drift, Chapter 1. A composite professional services firm with changed names and details, as the book discloses: £1.2m turnover, team of twelve; gross profit from 62% to 54% over four years; revenue per employee flat for three years; cash days from 38 to 57. Composite, not a client case.

3 **Accountability research.** Dr Gail Matthews, Dominican University of California: participants with written goals and regular accountability achieved 78% more than those without. Cited in The Drift in the context of Reason 6.

4 **Branson.** The fishing-net anecdote (confusing net profit with gross profit) is widely reported and has been discussed publicly by Branson as an example of the importance of financial literacy.

5 **Botterill.** From Nigel Botterill's foreword to The Drift, describing the January 2015 cash crisis at his own business; written with his direct input and published with his approval.

6 **The book.** The Drift: The 7 Reasons Businesses Fail, Aynsley Damery, Clarity Business Press, published 18 May 2026 (ISBN 978-1-0676769-0-2). Launch-day #1 positions on Amazon UK in Business Skills, Business Accounting, and Management & Leadership; international bestseller in Australia and Ireland; top five in the United States. This is a Clarity HQ paper about a book by Clarity's co-founder; read the enthusiasm accordingly. The argument stands or falls on the patterns, which you can test against your own accounts.

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