Deep Work

Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World

Cal Newport
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304 pages

Rating

9

9 Applicability
8 Innovation
9 Style

Focus

Leadership & Management
Strategy
Sales & Marketing
Finance
Human Resources
IT, Production & Logistics
Career & Self-Development
Small Business
Economics & Politics
Industries
Global Business
Concepts & Trends

Take-Aways

- "Deep work" is professional work that requires intense focus and concentration.

- Deep work is essential for and central to knowledge work.

- It is necessary for mastering complex topics more quickly.

- How much elite work you produce equals the time you spend on your task multiplied by how intensely you focus.

- Obstacles and conflicting demands are increasing every day and they hinder deep work.

- Deep work promotes a sense of flow, meaning and sacredness.

- Evaluate your habits and actions with the goal of structuring your time to protect the attention you need for deep work.

- Some people integrate deep work into their lives in daily units.

- Others, like Bill Gates, withdraw from the world periodically for periods of complete focus.

- To promote deep work, "embrace boredom," "quit social media" and "drain the shallows" of your life.

Relevance

What You Will Learn
In this summary, you will learn: 1) What constitutes "deep work," 2) Why deep work matters and 3) What strategies you can use to organize your life to support your deep work.

Recommendation
Professor Cal Newport presents a multipart argument for deep, concentrated work. He explains that work that demands your full focus is intrinsically valuable and rewarding. You need to be able to handle "deep work" to succeed in an information economy. Yet people face increasing distractions or social pressure that drive them toward shallow work. Newport develops his ideas with a blend of formal research, stories and personal accounts about the challenges and rewards of deep work. He provides tips for arranging your life to support deep work, which he sees as valuable, productive and rare. He makes his case persuasively and even poetically. *getAbstract* recommends his guidance to knowledge workers and anyone else who is seeking flow, creativity or focus.

Summary

"Deep Work: Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capacities to their limit."

"Deep work is necessary to wring every last drop of value out of your current intellectual capacity."

"Deep Work" and Why It Matters
Deep work is professional work that requires complete focus and full concentration. Deep work pushes your creative and analytical abilities to their limits. For real achievement in art, science, business or other fields, you must work deeply. To understand deep work, compare it to ordinary, "shallow work." Shallow work is work you can do while you're distracted. It doesn't ask much of your mind, and contributes little that's new or valuable.

Current trends push you – and the rest of the world – toward shallow work. This push to network, tweet, respond quickly and multitask can fill your days with shallow work. But, that's dangerous. Often, people automate shallow work or skip it. Putting shallow work at the center of your professional activity puts your career at risk. Shallow work has limited value; deep work offers profound value. Being able to do deep work is becoming increasingly important.

Technology places new demands on workers, and many struggle to keep up. Among other challenges, technology is splintering and restructuring the economy. This eliminates some jobs, but rewards others. Firms need "high-skilled workers" who can master complex technology.

Specialization
In the past, companies hired from their local labor pool or paid people to relocate. In that environment, local experts reaped rewards. Now companies might ask specialists to telecommute. This displaces local workers while validating superstars. It pushes job markets toward a "winner-take-all" model. In fact, information technology lets the "superstars" in a field multiply their influence and rewards. To earn a place in one of the employment groups that the information economy rewards most highly, you need to master "hard things" and to learn complex material quickly. That requires deep work. And you must "produce at an elite level." For that, deep work is essential; it focuses your attention and ability like a lens.

"Deliberate Practice"

Deep work involves periods of deliberate practice. At such times, you focus on the specific skill you're trying to develop and you don't switch among tasks. Deliberate practice calls for "uninterrupted concentration." It forces specific neural circuits to fire repeatedly, fixing these skills in place. Deep work helps you reach better results. How much elite work you produce equals the time you spend on your task multiplied by how intensely you focus. If you switch tasks often, you suffer "attention residue" – part of your attention clings to a previous task, lowering your performance level. Get feedback to correct your practice and make it more productive.

Deep work is uncommon, and many aspects of the modern business environment work against it. People tend to do what is easiest at any given time. In today's corporate world, that increasingly means staying connected and focusing on how fast you can respond to messages, rather than evaluating the quality response or the best use of your time. People now tend to spend less time prioritizing tasks and making sure they're doing what's most important. They just plunge in, using "busyness as a proxy for productivity." This is understandable: You can measure speed and task completion, but you can't measure depth. Measuring knowledge work can be ambiguous. Those seeking metrics might seize on factors, like speed, that their bosses can measure clearly.

"Cult of the Internet"

People act as if using the Internet and making the most of its connectivity equates to doing revolutionary work. Today, firms whose service or products have nothing to do with the web invite people to like them on Facebook. Companies push knowledge workers to use Twitter and other social media channels. This scatters their attention instead of letting them put in the concentrated focus that is crucial to their real contribution. Using Twitter pulls them away. This is unfortunate, because deep work matters more than shallow work to society and to those doing it.

What You "Pay Attention To"

Studies of consciousness argue for the merits of deep work. Winifred Gallagher, a science writer, spent years studying how attention shapes the quality of life. She found that the way you manage your attention is incredibly important for leading a good life – more important than your circumstances. Your brain creates your experience according to what you pay attention to; where you focus and how you approach experiences shape your emotions and results, "down to the neurological level." Accenting the positive aspects of your reality trains your "prefrontal cortex" to keep your amygdala from firing as strongly in response to "negative stimuli." In deep work, you focus on topics that matter. That reshapes your reality positively. The challenges of deep work and its structured nature generate the psychological state known as "flow," making deep work its own reward.

In their 2011 book *All Things Shining*, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly make a philosophical argument for deep work. They examine how meaning and sacredness have changed over time. The sacred seems further away than it once did. They trace this diminishing access back to the Enlightenment – to René Descartes, specifically – and to the demand that individuals must determine what is meaningful for themselves. Dreyfus and Kelly propose craftsmanship as one solution.

Focus lets artists shift from having to create meaning to finding meaning in the objects they craft. Deep work allows knowledge workers to return to the sacred.

Following four rules will help you embrace deep work:

1. "Work Deeply"

Make deep work a regular part of your life. Remove distractions and increase your level of focus. Many distractions come from within. Basic desires like food and sex can distract you. Other distractions are social and technological, like the desire to check your email or watch television. Developing a deep work routine helps you maintain your focus. Some people follow a "monastic philosophy," shutting themselves completely off from the world. They disengage from email for blocks of time – perhaps permanently – and focus entirely on intellectual work.

Others find that this doesn't work for them due to their professional obligations. They follow a "bimodal philosophy" and alternate extended periods of deep work with periods in which they focus elsewhere. Some academics, for example, cluster their classes and focus on teaching for one semester and then turn their attention to research during the rest of the year.

Other people find that a "rhythmic philosophy" works best: They schedule deep work at the same time daily. They apply a "chain method" in which they add a new link of deep work each day. People who lack control over their daily schedules or who easily "switch into a deep work mode," find the "journalistic philosophy" useful. These thinkers take advantage of any breaks or gaps in their schedules to work deeply on their core projects.

Once you find an approach that works for you, ritualize your choice to build habits that support focus. Think about where you will do your deep work and how long you'll focus. Plan how "you'll support your work." Do you need to eat first? Take a walk? How will you maintain focus while working, and how will you measure your results? Will you outlaw the Internet until you're done or track how many words you write? Making "grand gestures" helps solidify focus. J.K. Rowling checked into a hotel to finish writing the last Harry Potter book. Bill Gates took "Think Weeks" when he'd leave Microsoft and go to a cabin to read and focus.

2. "Embrace Boredom"

People in today's world suffer an addiction to distraction. The focus that deep work requires means that you must escape that addiction. Without distraction, however, you will suffer boredom. When trying to concentrate intensely, you will yearn for something to break the tedium. But if you stop fighting that boredom and recognize it as proof of your focus, you can make focused concentration a "habit," something you do regularly because it is good for you.

3. "Quit Social Media"

Social media are entertaining, and keep you in touch with people. These benefits are minor compared to what social media cost you. When considering the use of any social media tool, identify which factors create "success and happiness in your professional and personal life." Use that tool only if it offers more benefits than negatives.

Think of this as "the law of the vital few," or "the 80/20 rule" or "Pareto's principle." Identify your top two or three goals in the personal and professional arenas. Name the top two to three activities that contribute to reaching these goals. Review the network tools you use now. Evaluate their impact on your pursuit of your goals. Use the Internet for a substantive purpose, not entertainment.

"The type of work that optimizes your performance is deep work."

"Those who use their minds to create valuable things [are] rarely haphazard in their work habits."

"When you're done scheduling your day, every minute should be part of a block. You have, in effect, given every minute of your workday a job."

"Figure out in advance what you're going to do with your evenings and weekends before they begin."

4. "Drain the Shallows"

Shallow work crowds out more valuable deep work. Deep work is exhausting because it pushes you to your limits. Most people have a maximum capacity of four hours of deep work a day. They have to build up to that level. Starting with an hour isn't uncommon.

Many people overestimate how much they work and underestimate how much television they watch. Schedule literally "every minute" of your workday. Group batches of related activities together. As you use this schedule, you'll see that your time estimates probably are off; you're likely to underestimate how much time new activities take. You'll experience interruptions. When these things happen, make a new schedule. Over time, you'll get better at estimating your time use. Schedule "overflow conditional blocks" of time after an activity. If the first activity runs over, continue focusing on it. If you finished by the original deadline, have a second activity planned. Leave time for spontaneous inspiration. Rigidly adhering to a schedule isn't the goal. Your objective is to use your time intentionally.

Deep Work Tools

"Quantify the depth of every activity." Estimate how many months it would take you to train a smart new employee to complete this work. When you know how much effort a job requires, place your work on a depth spectrum. Push yourself to move toward the deeper end of the spectrum. Construct a "shallow work budget." Determine how much of your time you spend "on shallow work." Most people need to spend 30% to 50% of their time on shallow work: attending meetings, answering emails, filling out paperwork, and the like. If shallow work makes up all or almost all of your job, plan your transition to deeper work.

Apply the principle of "fixed-schedule productivity" to enhance your work. If you work in a traditional office job, this means finishing all of your work by 5:30 p.m. This serves as an antidote to the belief that you must work extra long hours and on the weekend to succeed. Be more selective about what tasks you tackle and what meetings you attend. Select work that shapes your "professional fate."

Protect Your Time

Becoming harder to get in touch with can protect your deep work time and drain your shallows. Because sending emails is easy, people do it casually. Many recipients feel a compulsion to answer. Don't. Respond selectively. Make the people who contact you "do more work." For example, rather than offering a general email address, use a "sender filter": a brief preface asking correspondents to contact you with specific opportunities related to particular activities.

Do more work when you answer emails. Don't answer quickly to express general interest or agreement. Push forward with specifics. If someone asks to meet with you, agree, list specific times you're available and ask the person to agree to one of them. If you've received a request to help with a project, give that help and define the next step, so you're not sending emails back and forth. Don't answer ambiguous, open-ended emails, notes that don't interest you, or emails that offer no benefit if you answer and no penalty if you don't.

> "In a business setting without clear feedback on the impact of various behaviors to the bottom line, we will tend toward behaviors that are easiest in the moment."

> "The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy."

> "Identify the core factors that determine success and happiness in your personal and professional life. Adopt a tool only if its positive impacts on these factors substantially outweighs its negative impacts."

About the Author

Cal Newport teaches in Georgetown University's computer science department. He also wrote *So Good They Can't Ignore You: How to Win at College.*