DEEP WORK BY CAL NEWPORT | BOOK SUMMARY

Cal Newport's <u>Deep Work</u> is a fascinating read about the benefits and practical steps you can take to do more deep work. Unlike shallow work, that can give the false impression of productivity, deep work is much more conducive to increased productivity and getting the results you desire.

The Deep Work Hypothesis: The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. As a consequence, the few who cultivate this skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive.

This book has two goals, pursued in two parts. The first, tackled in Part 1, is to convince you that the deep work hypothesis is true. The second, tackled in Part 2, is to teach you how to take advantage of this reality by training your brain and transforming your work habits to place deep work at the core of your professional life. Before diving into these details, however, I'll take a moment to explain how I became such a devotee of depth.

PART 1: The Idea

Chapter 1: Deep Work Is Valuable
There are two groups of workers that are poised to thrive in our distracting digital economy: those who can work creatively with intelligent machines and those who are stars in their field. What's the secret to landing in these lucrative sectors of the widening digital divide? I argue that the following two core abilities are crucial:

1. The ability to quickly master hard things.
2. The ability to produce at an elite level, in terms of both quality and speed.

How does one cultivate these core abilities? It's here that we arrive at a central thesis of this book: The two core abilities just described depend on your ability to perform deep work. If you haven't mastered this foundational skill, you'll struggle to learn hard things or produce at an elite level.

To learn hard things quickly, you must focus intensely without distraction. To learn, in other words, is an act of deep work. If you're comfortable going deep, you'll be comfortable mastering the increasingly complex systems and skills needed to

thrive in our economy. If you instead remain one of the many for whom depth is uncomfortable and distraction ubiquitous, you shouldn't expect these systems and skills to come easily to you.

High-Quality Work Produced = (Time Spent) x (Intensity of Focus)

To produce at your peak level you need to work for extended periods with full concentration on a single task free from distraction. Put another way, the type of work that optimizes your performance is deep work. If you're not comfortable going deep for extended periods of time, it'll be difficult to get your performance to the peak levels of quality and quantity increasingly necessary to thrive professionally.

Chapter 2: Deep Work Is Rare
Big trends in business today actively decrease people's ability to perform deep work, even though the benefits promised by these trends (e.g., increased serendipity, faster responses to requests, and more exposure) are arguably dwarfed by the benefits that flow from a commitment to deep work (e.g., the ability to learn hard things fast and produce at an elite level).

Why do so many fooster a culture of connectivity even though it's likely to hurt employees' well-being and productivity, and probably doesn't help the bottom line? I think the answer can be found in the following reality of workplace behavior.

The Principle of Least Resistance: 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.

i.e. Because it's easier.

It seems that in today's business landscape, many knowledge workers, bereft of other ideas, are turning toward this old definition of productivity in trying to solidify their value in the otherwise bewildering landscape of their professional lives. Knowledge workers, I'm arguing, are tending toward increasingly visible busyness because they lack a better way to demonstrate their value. Let's give this tendency a name.

Busyness as Proxy for Productivity: In the absence of clear indicators of what it means to be productive and valuable in their jobs, many knowledge workers turn back toward an industrial indicator of productivity: doing lots of stuff in a visible manner.

Deep work should be a priority in today's business climate. But it's not. I've just summarized various explanations for this paradox. Among them are the realities that deep work is hard and shallow work is easier and in the absence of clear goals for your job, the visible busyness that surrounds shallow work becomes self-preserving.

Chapter 3: Deep Work Is Meaningful
Just because this connection between depth and meaning is less clear in knowledge work, however, doesn't mean that it's nonexistent. The goal of this chapter is to convince you that deep work can generate as much satisfaction in an information economy as it so clearly does in a craft economy.

Deep work is an activity well suited to generate a flow state (the phrases used by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe what generates flow include notions of stretching your mind to its limits, concentrating, and losing yourself in an activity—all of which also describe deep work). And as we just learned, flow generates happiness. Combining these two ideas we get a powerful argument from psychology in favor of depth. Decades of research stemming from Csikszentmihalyi's original ESM experiments validate that the act of going deep orders the consciousness in a way that makes life worthwhile.

Deep work, therefore, is key to extracting meaning from your profession in the manner described by Dreyfus and Kelly. It follows that to embrace deep work in your own career, and to direct it toward cultivating your skill, is an effort that can transform a knowledge work job from a distracted, draining obligation into something satisfying—a portal to a world full of shining, wondrous things.

PART 2: The Rules

Rule #1: Work Deeply
The key to developing a deep work habit is to move beyond good intentions and add routines and rituals to your working life designed to minimize the amount of your limited willpower necessary to transition into and maintain a state of unbroken concentration. If you suddenly decide, for example, in the middle of a distracted afternoon spent Web browsing, to switch your attention to a cognitively demanding task, you'll draw heavily from your finite willpower to wrest your attention away from the online shininess. Such attempts will therefore frequently fail. On the other hand, if you deployed smart routines and rituals—perhaps a set time and quiet

location used for your deep tasks each afternoon—you'd require much less willpower to start and keep going. In the long run, you'd therefore succeed with these deep efforts far more often.

To make the most out of your deep work sessions, build rituals into your work day. Decide:

- **Where you'll work and for how long**. If it's possible to identify a location used only for depth—for instance, a conference room or quiet library—the positive effect can be fargreater.
- **How you'll work once you start to work**. Your ritual needs rules and processes to keep your efforts structured. For example, you might institute a ban on any Internet use, or maintain a metric such as words produced per twenty-minute interval to keep your concentration honed.
- **How you'll support your work**. Your ritual needs to ensure your brain gets the support it needs to keep operating at a high level of depth. For example, the ritual might specify that you start with a cup of good coffee, or make sure you have access to enough food of the right type to maintain energy, or integrate light exercise such as walking to help keep the mind clear.

When it comes to deep work, consider the use of collaboration when appropriate, as it can push your results to a new level. At the same time, don't lionize this quest for interaction and positive randomness to the point where it crowds out the unbroken concentration ultimately required to wring something useful out of the swirl of ideas all around us.

This strategy argues that you should inject regular and substantial freedom from professional concerns into your day, providing you with the idleness paradoxically required to get (deep) work done.

- **Reason #1: Downtime Aids Insights**. Providing your conscious brain time to rest enables your unconscious mind to take a shift sorting through your most complex professional challenges. A shutdown habit, therefore, is not necessarily reducing the amount of time you're engaged in productive work, but is instead diversifying the type of work you deploy.
- **Reason #2: Downtime Helps Recharge the Energy Needed to Work Deeply**. Attention is a finite resource. If you exhaust it, you'll struggle to concentrate. The core mechanism of this theory is the idea that you can restore your ability to direct your attention if you give this activity a rest.
- **Reason #3: The Work That Evening Downtime Replaces Is Usually Not That Important**. Your capacity for deep work in a given day is limited. If you're careful

about your schedule (using, for example, the type of productivity strategies described in Rule #4), you should hit your daily deep work capacity during your workday. It follows, therefore, that by evening, you're beyond the point where you can continue to effectively work deeply. Any work you do fit into the night, therefore, won't be the type of high-value activities that really advance your career; your efforts will instead likely be confined to low-value shallow tasks (executed at a slow, low-energy pace).

Rule #2: Embrace Boredom

Once your brain has become accustomed to on-demand distraction, it's hard to shake the addiction even when you want to concentrate. To put this more concretely: If every moment of potential boredom in your life—say, having to wait five minutes in line or sit alone in a restaurant until a friend arrives—is relieved with a quick glance at your smartphone, then your brain has likely been rewired to a point where it's not ready for deep work—even if you regularly schedule time to practice this concentration.

I propose an alternative to the Internet Sabbath. Instead of scheduling the occasional break from distraction so you can focus, you should instead schedule the occasional break from focus to give in to distraction. To succeed with deep work you must rewire your brain to be comfortable resisting distracting stimuli.

Practice productive meditation. The goal of productive meditation is to take a period in which you're occupied physically but not mentally—walking, jogging, driving, showering—and focus your attention on a single well-defined professional problem. Depending on your profession, this problem might be outlining an article, writing a talk, making progress on a proof, or attempting to sharpen a business strategy. As in mindfulness meditation, you must continue to bring your attention back to the problem at hand when it wanders or stalls. To succeed with productive meditation, it's important to recognize that, like any form of meditation, it requires practice to do well.

As a novice, when you begin a productive meditation session, your mind's first act of rebellion will be to offer unrelated but seemingly more interesting thoughts. When you notice your attention slipping away from the problem at hand, gently remind yourself that you can return to that thought later, then redirect your attention back.

Rule #3: Quit Social Media

I won't ask you, in other words, to quit the Internet altogether. But I will ask you to reject the state of distracted hyperconnectedness at the other end of the spectrum. There is a middle ground, and if you're interested in developing a deep work habit, you must fight to get there.

I propose that if you're a knowledge worker—especially one interested in cultivating a deep work habit—you should treat your tool selection with the same level of care as other skilled workers, such as farmers.

The Craftsman Approach to Tool Selection: Identify the core factors that determine success and happiness in your professional and personal life. Adopt a tool only if its positive impacts on these factors substantially outweigh its negative impacts.

- **Apply the law of the vital few to your internet habits**. The law of the vital few says in many settings, 80 percent of a given effect is due to just 20 percent of the possible causes.

- **Quit social media for 30 days**. Don't formally deactivate these services, and (this is important) don't mention online that you'll be signing off: Just stop using them, cold turkey.
  After thirty days of this self-imposed network isolation, ask yourself the following two questions about each of the services you temporarily quit: 1. Would the last thirty days have been notably better if I had been able to use this service? 2. Did people care that I wasn't using this service?
- **Don't use the internet to entertain yourself**. If you give your mind something meaningful to do throughout all your waking hours, you'll end the day more fulfilled, and begin the next one more relaxed, than if you instead allow your mind to bathe for hours in semiconscious and unstructured Web surfing.

To summarize, if you want to eliminate the addictive pull of entertainment sites on your time and attention, give your brain a quality alternative. Not only will this preserve your ability to resist distraction and concentrate, but you might experience, perhaps for the first time, what it means to live, and not just exist.

Rule #4: Drain the Shallows
Treat shallow work with suspicion because its damage is often vastly underestimated and its importance vastly overestimated. This type of work is inevitable, but you must keep it confined to a point where it doesn't impede your ability to take full advantage of the deeper efforts that ultimately determine your impact.

Start by scheduling every minute of your day. I would go so far as to argue that someone following this combination of comprehensive scheduling and a willingness to adapt or modify the plan as needed will likely experience more creative insights than someone who adopts a more traditionally "spontaneous" approach where the day is left open and unstructured. Without structure, it's easy to allow your time to devolve into the shallow—e-mail, social media, Web surfing. This type of shallow behavior, though satisfying in the moment, is not conducive to creativity. With structure, on the other hand, you can ensure that you regularly schedule blocks to grapple with a new idea, or work deeply on something challenging, or brainstorm for a fixed period—the type of commitment more likely to instigate innovation.

Quantify the depth of every activity. An advantage of scheduling your day is that you can determine how much time you're actually spending in shallow activities. Once you know where your activities fall on the deep-to-shallow scale, bias your time toward the former.

What percentage of my time should be spent on shallow work? If you have a boss, in other words, have a conversation about this question. (You'll probably have to first define for him or her what "shallow" and "deep" work means.) If you work for yourself, ask yourself this question. In both cases, settle on a specific answer. Then—and this is the important part—try to stick to this budget.

Finish your work by 5:30pm. I call this commitment fixed-schedule productivity, as I fix the firm goal of not working past a certain time, then work backward to find productivity strategies that allow me to satisfy this declaration.

- **Make people who send you email do more work**. The notion that all messages, regardless of purpose or sender, arrive in the same undifferentiated inbox, and that there's an expectation that every message deserves a (timely) response, is absurdly unproductive. The sender filter is a small but useful step toward a better state of affairs, and is an idea whose time has come—at least for the increasing number of entrepreneurs and freelancers who both receive a lot of incoming communication and have the ability to dictate their accessibility. If you're in a position to do so, consider sender filters as a way of reclaiming some control over your time and attention.
- **Do more work when you send or reply to emails**. Replying to emails with a quick response will, in the short term, provide you with some minor relief because you're bouncing the responsibility implied by the message off your court and back onto the sender's. This relief, however, is short-lived, as this responsibility will continue to bounce back again and again, continually sapping

your time and attention. I suggest, therefore, that the right strategy when faced with a question of this type is to pause a moment before replying and take the time to answer the following key prompt: What is the project represented by this message, and what is the most efficient (in terms of messages generated) process for bringing this project to a successful conclusion?

- **Don't respond**. As the author Tim Ferriss once wrote: "Develop the habit of letting small bad things happen. If you don't, you'll never find time for the life-changing big things. It should comfort you to realize that, as the professors at MIT discovered, people are quick to adjust their expectations to the specifics of your communication habits. The fact you didn't respond to their hastily scribed messages is probably not a central event in their lives. Once you get past the discomfort of this approach, you'll begin to experience its rewards.

Conclusion

The deep life, of course, is not for everybody. It requires hard work and drastic changes to your habits. For many, there's a comfort in the artificial busyness of rapid e-mail messaging and social media posturing, while the deep life demands that you leave much of that behind. There's also an uneasiness that surrounds any effort to produce the best things you're capable of producing, as this forces you to confront the possibility that your best is not (yet) that good.

But if you're willing to sidestep these comforts and fears, and instead struggle to deploy your mind to its fullest capacity to create things that matter, then you'll discover, as others have before you, that depth generates a life rich with productivity and meaning.