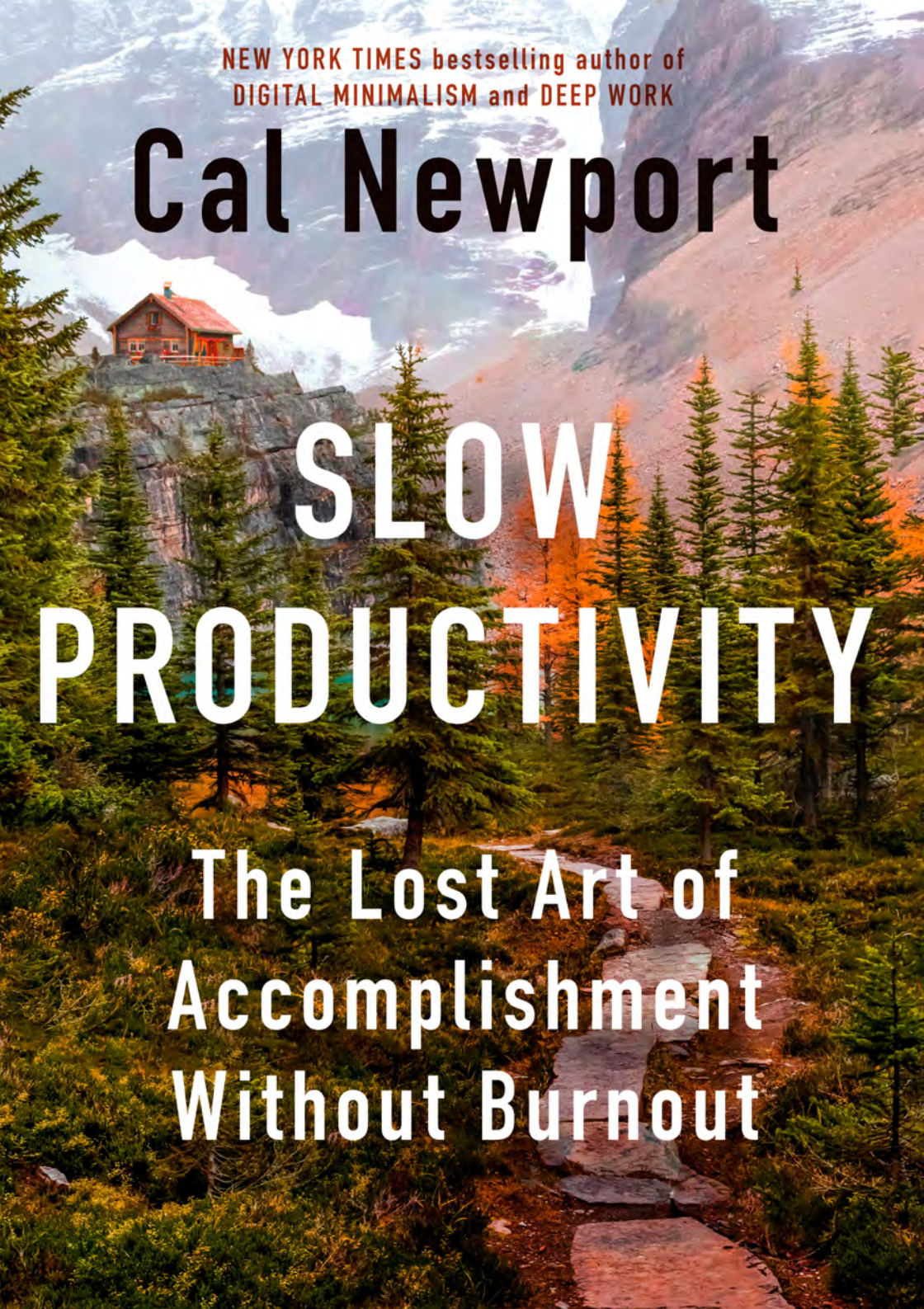
NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of
DIGITAL MINIMALISM and DEEP WORK
Cal Newport
SLOW
PRODUCTIVITY
The Lost Art of
Accomplishment
Without Burnout

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1966, toward the end of his second year as a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, John McPhee found himself on his back on a picnic table under an ash tree in his backyard near Princeton, New Jersey. "I lay down on it for nearly two weeks, staring up into branches and leaves, fighting fear and panic," he recalls in his 2017 book, *Draft No. 4*. McPhee had already published five long-form articles for *The New Yorker* and, before that, had spent seven years as an associate editor for *Time*. He wasn't, in other words, new to magazine writing, but the article that immobilized him on his picnic table that summer was the most complicated he had yet attempted to write.

McPhee had previously written profiles, such as his first major piece for *The New Yorker*, "A Sense of Where You Are," which followed the Princeton University basketball star Bill Bradley. He had also written historical accounts: in the spring of 1966, he published a two-part article on oranges that traced the humble fruit's

history all the way back to its first reference in 500 BCE in China. McPhee's current project, however, which tackled the impossibly broad topic of the Pine Barrens of southern New Jersey, was attempting to do much more. Instead of writing a focused profile, he had to weave the stories of multiple characters, including extensive re-creation of dialogue and visits to specific settings. Instead of summarizing the history of a single object, he had to dive into the geological, ecological, and even political backstory of an entire region.

McPhee spent eight months researching the topic in the lead-up to his picnic table paralysis, gathering what he later called "enough material to fill a silo." He had traveled from his Princeton home down to the Pine Barrens more times than he could easily remember, often bringing a sleeping bag to extend his stay. He had read all the relevant books and talked to all the relevant people. Now that he had to start writing, he felt overwhelmed. "To lack confidence at the outset seems rational to me," he explained. "It doesn't matter that something you've done before worked out well. Your last piece is never going to write your next one for you." So McPhee lay on his picnic table, looking up at the branches of that ash tree, trying to figure out how to make this lumbering mass of sources and stories work together. He stayed on that table for two weeks before a solution to his quandary finally arrived: Fred Brown.

Early in his research, McPhee had met Brown, a seventy-nine-year-old who lived in a "shanty" deep in the Pine Barrens. They had subsequently spent many days wandering the woods together. The revelation that jolted McPhee off his picnic table was that Brown seemed to be connected in some way to most of the topics

that he wanted to cover in his article. He could introduce Brown early in the piece, and then structure the topics he wanted to explore as detours from the through line of his adventures with Brown.

Even after this moment of insight, it still took McPhee more than a year to finish writing his article, working in a modest rental office off Nassau Street in Princeton, located above an optometrist's shop and across the hall from a Swedish massage parlor. The finished piece would stretch to more than thirty thousand words and be divided into two parts, to appear in two consecutive issues of the magazine. It's a marvel of long-form reporting and one of the more beloved entries in McPhee's long bibliography. It couldn't have existed, however, without McPhee's willingness to put everything else on hold, and just lie on his back, gazing upward toward the sky, thinking hard about how to create something wonderful.

I came across this story of John McPhee's unhurried approach during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, which was, to put it mildly, a complicated time for knowledge workers. As that anxious spring unfolded, a long-simmering unease with the demands of *productivity* among those who toil in offices and at computer screens for a living began to boil over under the strain of pandemic-related disruptions. As someone who often touched on productivity issues in my writing on technology and distraction, I experienced this intensifying backlash directly. "Productivity language is an impediment to me," one of my readers explained to me in an email. "The pleasure in thinking and doing things well is such a deep-

wired human pleasure . . . and it feels (to me) diluted when it's linked to productivity." A commenter on my blog added, "The productivity terminology encodes not only getting things done, but doing them at all costs." The specific role of the pandemic as a driver of these sentiments was often evident in this feedback. As one insightful reader elaborated, "The fact that productivity = widgets produced is, if anything, clearer during this pandemic as parents fortunate enough to still have jobs are expected to produce similar amounts of work while caring for and educating kids." This energy surprised me. I love my audience, but *fired up* is not usually a term I used to describe them. Until now. Something was clearly changing.

As I soon discovered, this growing anti-productivity sentiment wasn't confined only to my readers. Between the spring of 2020 and the summer of 2021, a period spanning less than a year and a half, at least four major books were published that took direct aim at popular notions of productivity. These included Celeste Headlee's *Do Nothing*, Anne Helen Petersen's *Can't Even*, Devon Price's *Laziness Does Not Exist*, and Oliver Burkeman's delightfully sardonic *Four Thousand Weeks*. This exhaustion with work was also reflected in multiple waves of heavily reported social trends that crested one after another during the pandemic. First there was the so-called Great Resignation. Though this phenomenon encompassed retreats from labor force participation in many different economic sectors, among these many sub-narratives was a clear trend among knowledge workers to downgrade the demands of their careers. The Great Resignation was then followed by the rise

of quiet quitting, in which a younger cohort of workers began to aggressively push back on their employers' demands for productivity.

"We are overworked and overstressed, constantly dissatisfied, and reaching for a bar that keeps rising higher and higher," writes Celeste Headlee in the introduction to *Do Nothing*. A few years earlier, this sentiment might have seemed provocative. By the time the pandemic peaked, however, she was preaching to the choir.

As I witnessed this fast-growing discontent, it became clear to me that something important was happening. Knowledge workers were exhausted—burned out from an increasingly relentless busyness. The pandemic didn't introduce this trend so much as push its worst excesses beyond the threshold of tolerability. More than a few knowledge workers, thrust suddenly into remote work, their kids screaming in the next room as they suffered through yet another Zoom meeting, began to wonder, "What are we really doing here?"

I began extensively covering knowledge worker discontent, as well as alternative constructions of professional meaning, on my long-standing newsletter, as well as on a new podcast I launched early in the pandemic. As the anti-productivity movement continued to pick up speed, I also began to cover the topic more frequently in my reporting for *The New Yorker*, where I'm on the contributor staff, ultimately leading, during the fall of 2021, to my taking on a twice-a-month column called Office Space that was dedicated to this subject.

The storylines I uncovered were complicated. People were overwhelmed, but the sources of this increasing exhaustion weren't obvious. Online discussion of these issues offered no shortage of varied, and sometimes contradictory, theories: Employers were relentlessly increasing the demands on their employees in an attempt to extract more value from their labor. No, it's actually an internalized culture valorizing busyness, driven by online productivity influencers, that's leading to our exhaustion. Or maybe what we're really seeing is the inevitable collapse of "last-stage capitalism." Fingers were pointed and frustrations vented; all the while, knowledge workers continued to descend into increasing unhappiness. The situation seemed dark, but as I continued my own research on this topic, a glimmer of optimism emerged, sparked by the very tale with which we opened this discussion.

When I first encountered the story of John McPhee's long days looking up at the leaves in his backyard, I received it nostalgically—a scene from a time long past, when those who made a living with their minds were actually given the time and space needed to craft impressive things. "Wouldn't it be nice to have a job like that where you didn't have to worry about being *productive*?" I thought. But eventually an insistent realization emerged. McPhee *was* productive. If you zoom out from what he was doing on that picnic table on those specific summer days in 1966 to instead consider his entire career, you'll find a writer who has, to date, published twenty-nine books, one of which won a Pulitzer Prize, and two of which were nominated for National Book Awards. He has also penned

distinctive articles for *The New Yorker* for over five decades, and through his famed creative nonfiction course, which he has long taught at Princeton University, he has mentored many young writers who went on to enjoy their own distinctive careers, a list that includes Richard Preston, Eric Schlosser, Jennifer Weiner, and David Remnick. There's no reasonable definition of productivity that shouldn't also apply to John McPhee, and yet nothing about his work habits is frantic, busy, or overwhelming.

This initial insight developed into the core idea that this book will explore: perhaps knowledge workers' problem is not with productivity in a general sense, but instead with a specific faulty definition of this term that has taken hold in recent decades. The relentless overload that's wearing us down is generated by a belief that "good" work requires increasing busyness—faster responses to email and chats, more meetings, more tasks, more hours. But when we look closer at this premise, we fail to find a firm foundation. I came to believe that alternative approaches to productivity can be just as easily justified, including those in which overfilled task lists and constant activity are downgraded in importance, and something like John McPhee's languid intentionality is lauded. Indeed, it became clear that the habits and rituals of traditional knowledge workers like McPhee were more than just inspiring, but could, with sufficient care to account for the realities of twenty-first-century jobs, provide a rich source of ideas about how we might transform our modern understanding of professional accomplishment.

These revelations sparked new thinking about how we approach our work, eventually coalescing into a fully formed alternative to the assumptions driving our current exhaustion:

SLOW PRODUCTIVITY

A philosophy for organizing knowledge work efforts in a sustainable and meaningful manner, based on the following three principles:

1. *Do fewer things.*
2. *Work at a natural pace.*
3. *Obsess over quality.*

As you'll learn in the pages ahead, this philosophy rejects busyness, seeing overload as an obstacle to producing results that matter, not a badge of pride. It also posits that professional efforts should unfold at a more varied and humane pace, with hard periods counterbalanced by relaxation at many different timescales, and that a focus on impressive quality, not performative activity, should underpin everything. In the second part of this book, I'll detail the philosophy's core principles, providing both theoretical justification for why they're right and concrete advice on how to take action on them in your specific professional life, regardless of whether you run your own company or work under the close supervision of a boss.

My goal is not to simply offer tips about how to make your job somewhat less exhausting. Nor is it to merely shake my metaphor-

ical fist on your behalf at the exploitative fiends indifferent to your stressed-out plight (though we'll certainly do some of that). I want to instead propose an *entirely new* way for you, your small business, or your large employer to think about what it means to get things done. I want to rescue knowledge work from its increasingly untenable freneticism and rebuild it into something more sustainable and humane, enabling you to create things you're proud of without requiring you to grind yourself down along the way. Not every office job, of course, will enjoy the ability to immediately embrace this more intentional rhythm, but as I'll detail, it's more widely applicable than you might at first guess. I want to prove to you, in other words, that accomplishment without burnout not only is possible, but should be the new standard.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, however, we must first understand how the knowledge sector stumbled into its current malfunctioning relationship with productivity in the first place, as it will be easier to reject the status quo once we truly understand the haphazardness of its formation. It's toward the pursuit of this goal, then, that we'll now start our journey.

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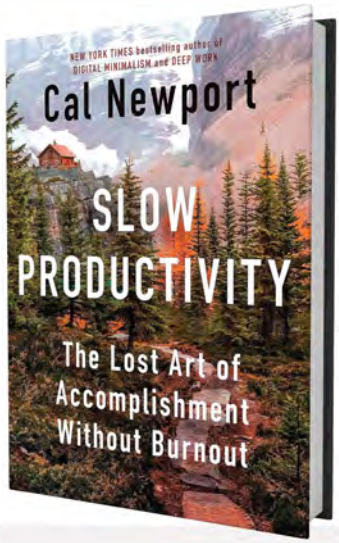

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Cal Newport is an Associate Professor of Computer Science at Georgetown University. His scholarship focuses on the theory of distributed systems, while his general-audience writing explores intersections of culture and technology. He is the author of eight books, including, most recently, Slow Productivity, A World Without Email, Digital Minimalism, and Deep Work. These titles include multiple *New York Times* bestsellers and have been published in 40 languages. Newport is also a contributing writer for the *New Yorker* and the host of the Deep Questions podcast.