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FOCUSED SUCCESS:
THE CONTINUED IMPORTANCE & GREAT REWARDS OF CULTIVATING DEEP WORK IN A DISTRACTED WORLD

Cal Newport

Deep Work: *Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.*

Modern knowledge workers are rapidly forgetting the value of going deep.

The reason they are losing their familiarity with deep work is well established: network tools. This is a broad category that captures communication services like e-mail and SMS, social media networks like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, and the shiny tangle of infotainment sites like BuzzFeed and Reddit. In aggregate, the rise of these tools, combined with ubiquitous access to them through smartphones and networked office computers, has fragmented most knowledge workers' attention into slivers. A 2012 McKinsey study found that the average knowledge worker now spends more than 60 percent of the workweek engaged in electronic communication and Internet searching, with close to 30 percent of a worker's time dedicated to reading and answering e-mail alone.

This state of fragmented attention cannot accommodate deep work, which requires long periods of uninterrupted thinking.

At the same time, however, modern knowledge workers are not loafing. In fact, they report that they are as busy as ever. What explains the discrepancy? A lot can be explained by another type of effort, which provides a counterpart to the idea of deep work:

Shallow Work: *Noncognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tend to not create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate.*

In an age of network tools, in other words, knowledge workers increasingly replace deep work with the shallow alternative—constantly sending and receiving e-mail messages like human network routers, with frequent breaks for quick hits of distraction. Larger efforts that would be well served by deep thinking, such as forming a new business strategy or writing an important grant application, get fragmented into distracted dashes that produce muted quality. To make matters worse for depth, there's increasing evidence that this shift toward the shallow is not a choice that can be easily reversed. Spend enough time in a state of frenetic shallowness and you *permanently* reduce your capacity to perform deep work. "What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation," admitted journalist Nicholas Carr, in an oft-cited 2008 *Atlantic* article. "[And] I'm not the only one." Carr expanded this argument into a book, *The Shallows*, which became a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. To write *The Shallows*, appropriately enough, Carr had to move to a cabin and forcibly disconnect.

The idea that network tools are pushing our work from the deep toward the shallow is not new. *The Shallows* was just the first in a series of recent books to examine the Internet's effect on our brains and work habits.

My interest in this matter is pragmatic and individualized: Our work culture's shift toward the shallow is exposing a massive economic and personal opportunity for the few who recognize the potential of resisting this trend and prioritizing depth.

Deep work is not some nostalgic affectation of writers and early-twentieth-century philosophers. It's instead a skill that has great value today.

There are two reasons for this value. The first has to do with learning. We have an information economy that's dependent on complex systems that change rapidly. Some of computer languages, for example, didn't exist ten years ago and will likely be outdated ten years from now. Similarly, someone coming up in the field of marketing in the 1990s probably had no idea that today they'd need to master digital analytics. To remain valuable in our economy, therefore, you must master the art of quickly learning complicated things. This task requires deep work. If you don't cultivate this ability, you're likely to fall behind as technology advances.

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The second reason that deep work is valuable is because the impacts of the digital network revolution cut both ways. If you can create something useful, its reachable audience (e.g., employers or customers) is essentially limitless—which greatly magnifies your reward. On the other hand, if what you're producing is mediocre, then you're in trouble, as it's too easy for your audience to find a better alternative online. Whether you're a computer programmer, writer, marketer, consultant, or entrepreneur, to succeed you have to produce the absolute best stuff you're capable of producing—a task that requires depth.

The growing necessity of deep work is new. In an industrial economy, there was a small skilled labor and professional class for which deep work was crucial, but most workers could do just fine without ever cultivating an ability to concentrate without distraction. They were paid to crank out widgets—and not much about their job would change in the decades they kept it. But as we shift to an information economy, more and more of our population are knowledge workers, and deep work is becoming a key currency—even if most haven't yet recognized this reality.

Deep work is not, in other words, an old-fashioned skill falling into irrelevance. It's instead a crucial ability for anyone looking to move ahead in a globally competitive information economy that tends to chew up and spit out those who aren't earning their keep. The real rewards are reserved not for those who are comfortable using Facebook (a shallow task, easily replicated), but instead for those who are comfortable building the innovative distributed systems that run the service (a decidedly deep task, hard to replicate). Deep work is so important that we might consider it, to use the phrasing of business writer Eric Barker, "the superpower of the 21st century."

We have now seen two strands of thought—one about the increasing scarcity of deep work and the other about its increasing value—which we can combine into the idea that provides the foundation for everything that follows:

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.*

THE PRINCIPLE OF LEAST RESISTANCE

When it comes to distracting behaviors embraced in the workplace, we must give a position of dominance to the now ubiquitous *culture of connectivity*, where one is expected to read and respond to e-mails (and related communication) quickly. In researching this topic, Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow found that the professionals she surveyed spent around twenty to twenty-five hours a week *outside the office* monitoring email—believing it important to answer any e-mail (internal or external) within an hour of its arrival.

You might argue—as many do—that this behavior is necessary in many fast-paced businesses. But here's where things get interesting: Perlow tested this claim. In more detail, she convinced executives at the Boston Consulting Group, a high-pressure management consulting firm with an ingrained culture of connectivity, to let her fiddle with the work habits of one of their teams. She wanted to test a simple question: Does it really help your work to be constantly connected? To do so, she did something extreme: She forced each member of the team to take one day out of the workweek completely off—no connectivity to anyone inside or outside the company.

"At first, the team resisted the experiment," she recalled about one of the trials. "The partner in charge, who had been very supportive of the basic idea, was suddenly nervous about having to tell her client that each member of her team would be off one day a week." The consultants were equally nervous and worried that they were "putting their careers in jeopardy." But the team didn't lose their clients and its members did not lose their jobs. Instead, the consultants found more enjoyment in their work, better communication among themselves, more learning, and perhaps most important, "a better product delivered to the client."

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This motivates an interesting question: Why do so many follow the lead of the Boston Consulting Group and foster a culture of connectivity even though it's likely, as Perlow found in her study, that it hurts 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.*

To return to our question about why cultures of connectivity persist, the answer, according to our principle, is because *it's easier*. There are at least two big reasons why this is true. The first concerns responsiveness to your needs. If you work in an environment where you can get an answer to a question or a specific piece of information immediately when the need arises, this makes your life easier—at least, in the moment. If you couldn't count on this quick response time you'd instead have to do more advance planning for your work, be more organized, and be prepared to put things aside for a while and turn your attention elsewhere while waiting for what you requested. All of this would make the day to day of your working life harder (even if it produced more satisfaction and a better outcome in the long term).

The rise of professional instant messaging, mentioned earlier, can be seen as this mindset pushed toward an extreme. If receiving an e-mail reply within an hour makes your day easier, then getting an answer via instant message in under a minute would improve this gain by an order of magnitude.

The second reason that a culture of connectivity makes life easier is that it creates an environment where it becomes acceptable to run your day out of your inbox—responding to the latest missive with alacrity while others pile up behind it, all the while feeling satisfyingly productive. If e-mail were to move to the periphery of your workday, you'd be required to deploy a more thoughtful approach to figuring out what you should be working on and for how long. This type of planning is hard. Consider, for example, David Allen's *Getting Things Done* task-management methodology, which is a well-respected system for intelligently managing competing workplace obligations. This system proposes a *fifteen-element* flowchart for making a decision on what to do next! It's significantly easier to simply chime in on the latest cc'd e-mail thread.

I'm picking on constant connectivity as a case study in this discussion, but it's just one of many examples of business behaviors that are antithetical to depth, and likely reducing the bottom-line value produced by the company, that nonetheless thrive because, in the absence of metrics, most people fall back on what's easiest.

To name another example, consider the common practice of setting up regularly occurring meetings for projects. These meetings tend to pile up and fracture schedules to the point where sustained focus during the day becomes impossible. Why do they persist? *They're easier.* For many, these standing meetings become a simple (but blunt) form of personal organization. Instead of trying to manage their time and obligations themselves, they let the impending meeting each week force them to take some action on a given project and more generally provide a highly visible simulacrum of progress.

Also consider the frustratingly common practice of forwarding an e-mail to one or more colleagues, labeled with a short open-ended interrogative, such as: "Thoughts?" These e-mails take the sender only a handful of seconds to write but can command many minutes (if not hours, in some cases) of time and attention from their recipients to work toward a coherent response. A little more care in crafting the message by the sender could reduce the overall time spent by all parties by a significant fraction. So why are these easily avoidable and time-sucking e-mails so common? From the sender's perspective, *they're easier*. It's a way to clear something out of their inbox—at least, temporarily—with a minimum amount of energy invested.

The bottom-line impact of such depth-destroying behaviors are not easily detected, as they fall into an opaque region resistant to easy measurement—a region I call *the metric black hole*.

None of these behaviors would survive long if it was clear that they were hurting the bottom line, but the metric black hole prevents this clarity and allows the shift toward distraction we increasingly encounter in the professional world.

The Principle of Least Resistance, protected from scrutiny by the metric black hole, supports work cultures that save us from the short-term discomfort of concentration and planning, at the expense of long-term satisfaction and the production of real value. By doing so, this principle drives us toward shallow work in an economy that increasingly rewards depth.

Deep work is so important that we might consider it … "the superpower of the 21st century."

Deep work *should* be a priority in today's business climate. But it's not. The reality is 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. Add in the fact that our culture has developed a belief that if a behavior relates to "the Internet," then it's good—regardless of its impact on our ability to produce valuable things—and the difficulty of directly measuring the value of depth or the cost of ignoring it, and the reasons for our tendency toward shallow work become apparent.

BAD FOR BUSINESS. GOOD FOR YOU.

If you believe in the value of depth, this reality spells bad news for businesses in general, as it's leading them to miss out on potentially massive increases in their value production.

But for *you*, as an individual, good news lurks. The myopia of your peers and employers uncovers a great personal advantage. Assuming the trends outlined here continue, depth will become increasingly rare and therefore increasingly valuable. **There's nothing fundamentally flawed about deep work and nothing fundamentally necessary about the distracting behaviors that displace it. You can therefore continue with confidence to systematically develop your personal ability to go deep—and by doing so, reap great rewards.**

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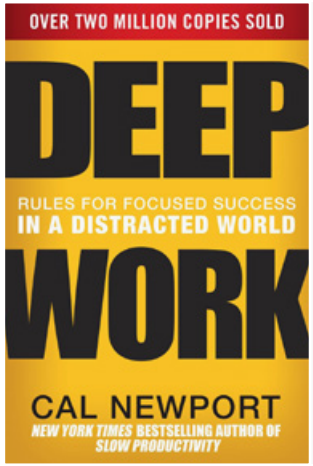

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Cal Newport is an MIT-trained computer science professor at Georgetown University who also writes about the intersections of technology, work, and the quest to find depth in an increasingly distracted world.

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