

Deep Work by Cal Newport | Book Summary by Paul Minors

INTRODUCTION

Who is this book for?

Cal Newport's *Deep Work* is a guide on how to have focused success in a distracted world. This book is a great read for anyone looking to get better at what you already do, master your work and produce better results more efficiently. Anyone living and working in the twenty-first century will be well aware of the abundance of distractions and the frantic pace that life takes on, Newport's book will help you overcome this and really master your work.

About the author

Cal Newport studied the theoretical foundations of our digital age, he has in turn written about the impact of these technologies in our lives today and most significantly, on our work. He has a special interest in mastering the ability to concentrate without distraction and believes it is one of the most valuable skills, that is becoming increasingly rare. He has also written *So Good They Can't Ignore You* and three books popular among students full of advice.

In this summary

Cal Newport's *Deep Work* 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.

Cal Newport firstly examines the deep work hypothesis and offers evidence to support it. He explains the advantages of performing deep work. Secondly, using 4 core rules, Newport teaches you how to take advantage of this hypothesis and train your brain, in turn, transforming your working habits.

BOOK SUMMARY

The Deep Work Hypothesis

Cel Newport defines two different types of individuals that are destined to be successful in the emerging digital age. 1) Anyone who can work with intelligent machines and technology and 2) anyone that is considered a 'star' in their field of work.

Newport defines the two most important characteristics in these 'successful workers' as; 1) the ability to take on hard tasks/things and master them at pace, and 2) producing content/products/services at what can be considered an 'elite level' in both speed and quality.

Thus posing the question, how do you obtain these abilities? This is where the concept of deep work comes in, if you are unable to perform deep work, then you will struggle with both of these desired characteristics.

Learning hard things

The key to learning hard things at pace, is focusing without any distraction, in order to learn efficiently, you need to be performing deep work. Hard things are complex and you need to give them all of your attention and focus. Without deep work, these things will take time to learn, and mistakes will be made.

$$\text{High-Quality Work Produced} = (\text{Time Spent}) \times (\text{Intensity of Focus})$$

Newport explains that in order to produce content/work/services as an elite level, you must be maintaining focus on the single task for long periods of time, completely without distraction. It's this narrow focus that allows you to produce your best work.

Why is deep work rare?

Newport questions why so many businesses encourage a culture based on being constantly connected, encouraging faster responses to requests, more exposure etc. These are the behaviours that are affecting employee's ability to produce deep work. Newport believes that the reason is due to the principle of least resistance;

“The Principle of Least Resistance: In a business setting, without clear feedback on the impact of various behaviours to the bottom line, we will tend toward behaviours that are easiest in the moment.”

It all comes down to the simple reason; Because it’s easier.

Newport believes that workers today, are running what he describes as “increasingly visible business”, because they simply do not know another way to portray their value.

“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.”

Newport sums it up simply;

“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.”

Why should we perform deep work?

In short, because it’s meaningful.

“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.”

It becomes clear, that in order to extract meaning from your profession, deep work is the answer, It can assist you to cultivate your skills, transform a knowledge-based, distracted job into work that is satisfying, meaningful and successful.

HOW?

Cal Newport has come up with 4 core rules that will help you to take advantage of deep work and master your work.

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.”

Newport outlines the key to needing to use less willpower is to set up smart routines and rituals to get you through the workday, whether it be setting a time and determining a specific location for all your deep work each afternoon.

Newport discusses the following points as crucial to getting the most out of deep work sessions:

- Decide where you'll work and for how long. Create a zone where you can allow yourself to focus.
 - Decide how you'll work once you start work, what are your processes?
 - How will you support your work? Do you need to be fuelled adequately before you begin? Or try some light exercise?

Newport mentions the importance of downtime and freedom, it's allowing yourself this time that assists you in really knuckling down when required to get your deep work done.

- Downtime can aid your insights.
 - Downtime helps recharge the energy needed to work deeply.

- You have a limited capacity for deep work in any given day. Try and get it done during the workday and use evenings primarily for downtime.

2. Embrace Boredom

Newport identifies the problem with our fast-paced lives, is that our brains have been re-wired and expect and request distraction. The way we check our smartphones at any moment of 'potential boredom' whether it be waiting in a queue or when your friend pops to the bathroom; means that our brains are accustomed to looking for distraction, there is no space left for deep work.

Newport suggests that we re-arrange our schedules, rather than scheduling a break from distractions, to focus, instead start scheduling breaks from focus, to give in to those distractions.

"To succeed with deep work you must rewire your brain to be comfortable resisting distracting stimuli."

A way to combat this is to 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. "

The key to successful productive meditation is repeatedly returning your attention to the problem at hand, and doing this whenever your mind wanders. You have to continually practice this in order to reap the benefits.

"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."

3. Quit Social Media

Newport acknowledges that the internet is an integrated component of our lives and doesn't suggest that we stop using the internet altogether. However, he poses the challenge of quitting social media, to begin with for just 30 days, and then assesses the

trial period. Were the days off social media, in any way, worse than the days where you were able to check your facebook feed? Did anyone notice or care that you were no longer using social media? (Note, Newport encourages that you simply stop using the services for 30 days, do not formally deactivate your accounts or announce it to your following, just simply stop checking it.)

Further to quitting social media, Newport encourages you to assess your internet consumption habits. In order to truly achieve deep work, you have to actively reject the distracted world of connectedness. It's important to stop using the internet as 'entertainment'. Do more meaningful things with your mind, this will leave you feeling more fulfilled than if you spent your day semi-consciously browsing the net.

"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."

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."

Newport suggests that you begin by scheduling your entire day. Having structure in your day means having a comprehensive schedule, but still being open to adapt or modify plans as needed. This structure means that you have less opportunities to delve into 'shallow work'. If you have an over-flexible, unstructured schedule you can find yourself on social media, doing un-productive tasks and mindlessly browsing the web before you start new tasks.

"With structure, 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."

Newport identifies an advantage of the more structured approach is that it can visually represent how much time you are working on deep work and how much

time is spent on shallow activities. Assess the ration and adjust so that the majority of time throughout the day is focused on deep work.

Budget time for shallow tasks, and stick to it. More importantly, schedule a finishing time. Schedule to finish all work by 5.30pm and work backwards, ensuring that all tasks are completed by your self-imposed deadline.

Newport has a few tips for avoiding shallow work and encouraging deep work;

1. **Make people who send you email do more work.** Consider sender filters as a way of filtering the more important emails as separate from the time-wasting ones.
2. **Do more work when you send or reply to emails.** Rather than sending quick short-term responses that may require more work later, assess the email, can you fulfil all requirements right away? Be efficient with email and don't put things off that can be dealt with immediately.
3. **Don't respond.** Not everything needs a response, and that's OK. You have to learn to be comfortable with this but soon enough you will see the benefits.

STOP BEING BUSY

"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."

Newport describes a life rich with productivity and meaning, and the road to this life is engaging in deep work, allowing your mind to work to its capacity and getting over your comforts and fears. It's entirely possible, and once you start, you won't look back.

CONCLUSION

Key Takeaways

- If you want to have the ability to learn hard tasks quickly and produce quality content/products/services you need to engage in deep work.
- Deep work is rare, because shallow work is easier. It takes time and effort to engage in deep work, but once you start, you will experience the benefits.
- There are 4 Rules to follow if you want to maximise your productivity and work;
 1. Work Deeply
 2. Embrace Boredom
 3. Quit Social Media
 4. Drain the Shallows.

Further Reading

So Good They Can't Ignore You, also by Cal Newport is an insightful analysis of the correlation between passion and work. Newport explores the idea of finding happiness and fulfilment, despite your work not necessarily reflecting your passion.

If you enjoy the psychology behind training your brain, *Mindset* by Carol S. Dweck is a great read examining the two different mindsets; growth and fixed, and how they effect all areas of our life. She offers ways you can grow your mindset, expand yourselves and learn more.

Another interesting read is *Liminal Thinking* by Dave Gray. Gray challenges the way you think and see the world, emphasising the choice we have and opening up your mind to exploring new opportunities.

A few more great reads around the topic of mindset, psychology and bettering your mind are; *Give and Take* by Adam Grant, *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel

Kahneman, *The Magic of Thinking Big* by David Schwartz and *I Will Teach You to be Rich* by Ramit Sethi.

Guidelines is my eBook that summarises the main lessons from 33 of the best-selling self-help books in one place. It is the ultimate book summary; Available as a 80-page ebook and 115-minute audio book. Guidelines lists 31 rules (or guidelines) that you should follow to improve your productivity, become a better leader, do better in business, improve your health, succeed in life and become a happier person.

Action Steps

1. Start scheduling your entire day. Identify what work you will be doing and when. Focus on prioritising deep work. Also identify times that you can spend engaging in shallow tasks.
2. Create a specified time and space for your deep work, eliminate all distractions so you can focus.
3. Try a social media ban - if you're not ready to quit cold turkey, ban yourself from checking throughout the working day.
4. When you find yourself waiting in a queue or killing time, try not to pick up your phone, engage your brain and see what you can do, it's times like these where you can open up the opportunity to make innovative breakthroughs.
5. Try practicing meditation.
6. If you loved the summary and want to read more, you can purchase the book on [Amazon](#).
7. You can check out my [podcast](#) on How to spend more time on Focussed Work and read my [blog post](#) on creating a focussed work conditions!