

## **Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World**

*by Cal Newport*

### ***/ Introduction /***

“If I organize my life in such a way that I get lots of long, consecutive, uninterrupted time-chunks, I can write novels. [If I instead get interrupted a lot] what replaces it? Instead of a novel that will be around for a long time... there is a bunch of e-mail messages that I have sent out to individual persons.” - Neal Stephenson

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.

### ***/ Part 1 - The Idea /***

#### ***/ Chapter One - Deep Work Is Valuable /***

Why have Silver, Hansson, and Doerr done so well?

LB: because they're white dudes!?

There are two types of answers to this question. The first are *micro* in scope and focus on the personality traits and tactics that helped drive the trio's rise. The second type of answers are more *macro* in that they focus less on the individuals and more on the type of work they represent. Though both approaches to this core question are important, the macro answers will prove most relevant to our discussion, as they better illuminate what our current economy rewards.

LB: whiteness

“We are in the early throes of a Great Restructuring,” Brynjolfsson and McAfee explain early in their book. “Our technologies are racing ahead but many of our skills and organizations are lagging behind.” For many workers, this lag predicts bad news. As intelligent machines improve, and the gap between machine and human abilities shrinks, employers are becoming increasingly likely to hire “new machines” instead of “new people.” And when only a human will do, improvements in communications and collaboration technology are making remote work easier than ever before, motivating companies to outsource key roles to stars - leaving the local talent pool underemployed.

In other words, those with the oracular ability to work with and tease valuable results out of increasingly complex machines will thrive. Tyler Cowen summarizes this reality more bluntly: “The key question will be: are you good at working with intelligent machines or not?”

The fact that Hansson might be working remotely from Marbella, Spain, while your office is in Des Moines, Iowa, doesn't matter to your company, as advances in communication and collaboration technology make the process near seamless. (This reality does matter, however, to the less-skilled local programmers living in Des Moines and in need of a steady paycheck.) (...) Once the talent market is made universally accessible, those at the peak of the market thrive while the rest suffer.

LB: assuming people don't have income caps or don't learn how to share

Therefore, if you're in a marketplace where the consumer has access to all performers, and everyone's q value is clear, the consumer will choose the very best. Even if the talent advantage of the best is small compared to the next rung down on the skill ladder, the superstars will win the bulk of the market.

LB: 10% rule

(subtitle) -How to Become a Winner in the New Economy

LB: lol-framing

To become a world-class yoga instructor, for example, requires that you master and increasingly complex set of physical skills.

LB: and spiritual? Ugh. failure of western yoga.

*To learn requires intense concentration.*

LB: intellectual learning does... what about other types?

Ericsson opens his seminal paper on the topic with a powerful claim: "We deny that these differences [between expert performers and normal adults] are immutable... Instead, we argue that the difference between expert performers and normal adults reflect a life-long period of deliberate effort to improve performance in a specific domain.

"Men of genius themselves were great only by bringing all their power to bear on the point on which they had decided to show their full measure." - Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life*

...what deliberate practice actually requires. (1) your attention is focused tightly on a specific skill you're trying to improve or an idea you're trying to master; (2) you receive feedback so you can correct your approach to keep your attention exactly where it's most productive. The first component is of particular importance to our discussion, as it emphasizes that deliberate practice cannot exist alongside distraction, and that it instead requires uninterrupted concentration. As Ericsson emphasizes, "Diffused attention is almost antithetical to the *focused attention* required by deliberate practice..." (emphasis mine).

LB: diffuse vs focused attention! <3

This new science of performance argues that you get better at a skill as you develop more myelin around the relevant neurons, allowing the corresponding circuit to fire more effortlessly

and effectively. (...) This understanding is important because it provides a neurological foundation for why deliberate practice works. By focusing intensely on a specific skill, you're forcing the specific relevant circuit to fire, again and again, in isolation. This repetitive use of a specific circuit triggers cells called oligodendrocytes to begin wrapping layers of myelin around the neurons in the circuits -- effectively cementing that skill. The reason, therefore, why it's important to focus intensely on the task at hand while avoiding distraction is because this is the only way to isolate the relevant neural circuit enough to trigger useful myelination. By contrast, if you're trying to learn a complex new skill (say, SQL database management) in a state of low concentration (perhaps you also have your Facebook feed open), you're firing too many circuits simultaneously and haphazardly to isolate the group of neurons you actually want to strengthen.

(...) productivity as a scientific problem to systematically solve (...)

LB: batching --

Though Grant's productivity depends on many factors, there's one idea in particular that seems central to his method: the batching of hard but important intellectual work into long, uninterrupted stretches. Grant performs this batching at multiple levels. Within the year, he stacks his teaching into the fall semester, during which he can turn all of his attention to teaching well and being available to his students. By batching his teaching in the fall, Grant can then turn his attention fully to research in the spring and summer, and tackle his work with less distraction.

Grant also batches his attention on a smaller time scale. Within a semester dedicated to research, he alternates between periods where his door is open to students and colleagues, and periods where he isolates himself to focus completely and without distraction on a single research task.

(...) researching my second book, *How to Become a Straight-A Student* (...)

During that research process, I interviewed around fifty ultra-high-scoring college undergraduates from some of the country's most competitive schools. Something I noticed in these interviews is that the very best students often studied less than the group of students right below them on the GPA rankings. One of the explanations for this phenomenon turned out to be the formula detailed earlier: The best students understood the role intensity plays in productivity and therefore went out of their way to maximize their concentration -- radically reducing the time required to prepare for tests or write papers, without diminishing the quality of the results.

The problem this research identifies with this work strategy is that when you switch from some Task A to another Task B, your attention doesn't immediately follow -- a *residue* of your attention remains stuck thinking about the original task. This residue gets especially thick if your work on Task A was unbounded and of low intensity before you switched, but even if you finish Task A before moving on, your attention remains divided for a while.

"People experiencing attention residue after switching tasks are likely to demonstrate poor performance on that next task," and the more intense the residue, the worse the performance.

(...) residue-slathering (...)

LB: lol

It might seem harmless to take a quick glance at your inbox every ten minutes or so. Indeed, many justify this behavior as *better* than the old practice of leaving an inbox open on the screen at all times (a straw-man habit that few follow anymore). But Leroy teaches us that this is not in fact much of an improvement. That quick check introduces a new target for your attention. Even worse, by seeing messages that you cannot deal with at the moment (which is almost always the case), you'll be forced to turn back to the primary task with a secondary task left unfinished. The attention residue left by such unresolved switches dampens your performance.

The fact that Dorsey encourages interruption or Kerry Trainor checks his email constantly doesn't mean that you'll share their success if you follow suit: Their behaviors are characteristic of their specific roles as corporate officers.

## **/ Chapter Two - Deep Work is Rare /**

To summarize, 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).

LB: !

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 this shift toward distraction we increasingly encounter in the professional world.

**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.

There are at least two big reasons why this is true.

The first reason 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

your organized, and be prepared to put things aside for a while and turn your attention elsewhere while waiting for what you requested.

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 satisfying productive (more on this soon). If email 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.

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 obligation 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.

So why are these easily avoidable and time-sucking emails 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.

Clarity about what matters provides clarity about what does not.

LB: !

**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.

This mind-set provides another explanation for the popularity of many depth-destroying behaviors. If you send and answer emails at all hours, if you schedule and attend meetings constantly, if you weigh in on instant message systems like Hall within seconds when someone poses a new question, or if you roam your open office bouncing ideas off all whom you encounter -- all of these behaviors make you seem busy in a public manner. If you're using busyness as a proxy for productivity, then these behaviors can seem crucial for convincing yourself and others that you're doing your job well.

Leo: this is also such a paradox because I often think that when people take a while to reply my emails and IMs it's because they're busy and would personally think otherwise but yeah!

"If you're not visibly busy," [the manager] signaled, "I'll assume you're not productive."

Viewed objectively, however, this concept is anachronistic. Knowledge work is not an assembly line, and extracting values from information is an activity that's often at odds with busyness, not supported by it.

We could, of course, eliminate this anachronistic commitment to busyness if we could easily demonstrate its negative impact on the bottom line, but the metric black hole enters the scene at this point and prevents such clarity.

Consider Alissa Rubin. She's the *New York Times*' bureau chief in Paris. Before that she was the bureau chief in Kabul, Afghanistan, where she reported from the front lines on the postwar reconstruction. Around this time I was writing this chapter, she was publishing a series of hard-hitting articles that looked at the French government's complicity in the Rwandan genocide. Rubin, in other words, is a serious journalist who is good at her craft. She also, at what I can only assume is the persistent urging of her employer, tweets.

LB: uh... maybe they're scheduled?

In Morozov's critique, we've made "the Internet" synonymous with the revolutionary future of business and government. To make your company more like "the Internet" is to be with the times, and to ignore these trends is to be the proverbial buggy-whip maker in an automotive age. We no longer see Internet tools as products released by for-profit companies, funded by investors hoping to make a return, and run by twentysomethings who are often making things up as they go along. We're instead quick to idolize these digital doodads as a signifier of progress and a harbinger of a (dare I say, brave) new world.

Deep work is at a severe disadvantage in a technopoly because it builds on values like quality, craftsmanship, and mastery that are decidedly old-fashioned and non-technological. Even worse, to support deep work often requires the rejection of much of what is new and high-tech. Deep work is exiled in favor of more distracting high-tech behaviors, like the professional use of social media, not because the former is empirically inferior to the latter. Indeed, if we had hard metrics relating the impact of these behaviors on the bottom line, our current technopoly would likely crumble. But the metric black hole prevents such clarity and allows us instead to elevate all things Internet into Morozov's feared "uber-ideology." In such a culture, we should not be surprised that deep work struggles to compete against the shiny thrum of tweets, likes, tagged photos, walls, posts, and all the other behaviors that we're now taught are necessary for no other reason than they exist.

(subtitle) - Bad for Business. Good For You

LB: individuality is good?

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, that in the absence of clear goals for your job, the visible busyness that surrounds shallow work becomes self-preserving, and 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. All of these trends are enabled by the difficulty of directly measuring the value of depth or the cost of ignoring it.

### **/ Chapter Three - Deep Work is Meaningful /**

“The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to make a man quiet and easy,” explains Matthew Crawford. And we believe him.

LB: !

But when we shift our attention to knowledge work this connection is muddled. Part of the issue is clarity. Craftsmen like Furrer tackle professional challenges that are simple to define but difficult to execute -- a useful imbalance when seeking purpose. Knowledge work exchanges this clarity for ambiguity. It can be hard to define exactly what a given knowledge worker does and how it differs from another.

“The world of information superhighways and cyberspace has left me rather cold and disenchanted.” -- Ric Furrer

LB: !

[Winifred Gallagher after a cancer diagnosis] “This disease wanted to monopolize my attention, but as much as possible, I would focus on my life instead.”

(...) Gallagher set out to better understand the role that attention - that is, what we choose to focus on and what we choose to ignore - plays in defining the quality of our life.

*Like fingers pointing to the moon, other diverse disciplines from anthropology to education, behavioral economics to family counseling, similarly suggest that the skillful management of attention is the sine qua non of the good life and the key to improving virtually every aspect of your experience. -- Gallagher*

LB: !

If you focus on a cancer diagnosis, you and your life become unhappy and dark, but if you focus instead on an evening martini, you and your life become more pleasant -- even though the circumstances in both scenarios are the same. As Gallagher summarizes: “Who you are, what you think, feel, and do, what you love -- is the sum of what you focus on.”

By skillfully managing their attention, [elderly subjects of study by Laura Carstensen] improved their world without changing anything concrete about it.

LB: why older folks tend to be happier

We can now step back and use [Winifred] Gallagher's grand theory to better understand the role of deep work in cultivating a good life. This theory tells us that your world is the outcome of what you pay attention to, so consider for a moment the type of mental world constructed when you dedicate significant time to deep endeavors. There's a gravity and sense of importance inherent in deep work - whether you're Ric Furrer smithing a sword or a computer programmer optimizing an algorithm. Gallagher's theory, therefore, predicts that if you spend enough time in this state, your mind will understand your world as rich in meaning and importance.

There is, however, a hidden but equally important benefit to cultivating rapt attention in your workday: Such concentration hijacks your attention apparatus, preventing you from noticing the many smaller and less pleasant things that unavoidably and persistently populate our lives.

Even when [knowledge workers are] required to complete something more involved, the habit of frequently checking inboxes ensures that these issues remain at the forefront of their attention. Gallagher teaches us that this is a foolhardy way to go about your day, as it ensures that your mind will construct an understanding of your working life that's dominated by stress, irritation, frustration, and triviality. The world represented by your inbox, in other words, isn't a pleasant world to inhabit.

'The idle mind is the devil's workshop'... when you lose focus, your mind tends to fix on what could be wrong with your life instead of what's right.

LB: !

Leo: !

"The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile." - Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Most people assumed (and still do) that relaxation makes them happy.

*Ironically, jobs are actually easier to enjoy than free time, because like flow activities they have built-in goals, feedback rules, and challenges, all of which encourage one to become involved in one's work, to concentrate and lose oneself in it. Free time, on the other hand, is unstructured, and requires much greater effort to be shaped into something that can be enjoyed.*

-- Csikszentmihalyi

When measured empirically, people were happier at work and less happy relaxing than they suspected. And as the ESM studies confirmed, the more such flow experiences that occur in a given week, the higher the subject's life satisfaction.

"The world used to be, in its various forms, a world of sacred, shining things," Dreyfus and Kelly explain early in the book [*All Things Shining*]. "The shining things now seem far away."

What happened between then and now? The short answer, the authors argue, is Descartes. From Descartes' skepticism came the radical belief that the individual seeking certainty trumped

a God or king bestowing truth. The resulting Enlightenment, of course, led to the concept of human rights and freed many from oppression. But as Dreyfus and Kelly emphasize, for all its good in the political arena, in the domain of the metaphysical this thinking stripped the world of the order and sacredness essential to creating meaning. In a post-Enlightenment world we have tasked *ourselves* to identify what's meaningful and what's not, an exercise that can seem arbitrary and induce a creeping nihilism. "The Enlightenment's metaphysical embrace of the autonomous individual leads not just to a boring life," Dreyfus and Kelly worry; "it leads almost inevitably to a nearly unlivable one."

"The woodworker has an intimate relationship with the wood he works. Its subtle virtues call out to be cultivated and cared for." In this appreciation for the "subtle virtues" of his medium, they note, the craftsman has stumbled onto something crucial in a post-Enlightenment world: a source of meaning sited outside the individual.

LB: !

As Dreyfus and Kelly explain, such sacredness is common to craftsmanship. The task of a craftsman, they conclude, "is not to *generate* meaning, but rather to *cultivate* in himself the skill of *discerning* the meanings that are *already there*."

LB: !

(...) a glimpse of the sacred.

"We who cut mere stones must always be envisioning cathedrals." - *Medieval Quarry Worker's Creed*

In our current culture, we place a lot of emphasis on job description. Our obsession with the advice to "follow your passion" (the subject of my last book), for example, is motivated by the (flawed) idea that what matters most for your career satisfaction is the specifics of the job you choose.

## **/ Part 2 - The Rules /**

### **/ Rule #1 - Work Deeply /**

[The Eudaimonia Machine], which takes its name from the ancient Greek concept of *eudaimonia* (a state in which you're achieving your full human potential), turns out to be a building.

(...) truth about willpower: *You have finite amount of willpower that becomes depleted as you use it.*

Your will, in other words, is not a manifestation of your character that you can deploy without limit; it's instead like a muscle that tires. This is why the subjects in the Hofmann and Baumeister study had such a hard time fighting desires -- over time these distractions drained their finite pool of willpower until they could no longer resist. The same will happen to you, regardless of your intentions -- unless, that is, you're smart about your habits.

This brings me to the motivating idea behind the strategies that follow: 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.

With this in mind, the six strategies that follow can be understood as an arsenal of routines and rituals designed with the science of limited willpower in mind to maximize the amount of deep work you consistently accomplish in your schedule. Among other things, they'll ask you to commit to a particular pattern for scheduling this work and develop rituals to sharpen your concentration before starting each session. Some of these strategies will deploy simple heuristics to hijack your brain's motivation center while others are designed to recharge your willpower reserves at the fastest possible rate.

You could just try to make deep work a priority. But supporting this decision with the strategies that follow -- or strategies of your own devising that are motivated by the same principles -- will significantly increase the probability that you succeed in making deep work a crucial part of your professional life.

#### (1) Decide on Your Depth Philosophy

(...) the minimum unit of time for deep work in this philosophy tends to be at least one full day. To put aside a few hours in the morning, for example, is too short to count as a deep work stretch for an adherent of this approach.

At the same time, the bimodal philosophy is typically deployed by people who cannot succeed in the absence of substantial commitments to non-deep pursuits. [Carl Jung], for example, needed his clinical practice to pay the bills and the Zurich coffeehouse scene to stimulate his thinking. The approach of shifting between two modes provides a way to serve both needs well.

[Adam Grant]'s bestseller, *Give and Take*, promoted the practice of giving of your time and attention, without expectation of something in return, as a key strategy in professional development.

The rhythmic philosophy provides an interesting contrast to the bimodal philosophy. It perhaps fails to achieve the most intense levels of deep thinking sought in the daylong concentration sessions favored by the bimodalist. The trade-off, however, is that this approach works better with the reality of human nature. By supporting deep work with rock-solid routines that make sure a little bit gets done on a regular basis, the rhythmic scheduler will often log a larger total number of deep hours per year.

The decision between rhythmic and bimodal can come down to your self-control in such scheduling matters. If you're Carl Jung and are engaged in an intellectual dogfight with Sigmund Freud's supporters, you'll likely have no trouble recognizing the importance of finding time to focus on your ideas. On the other hand, if you're writing a dissertation with no one pressuring you to get it done, the habitual nature of the rhythmic philosophy might be necessary to maintain progress.

[The *journalist philosophy* is the approach] in which you fit deep work wherever you can into your schedule. This name is a nod to the fact that journalists, like Walter Isaacson, are trained to shift into a writing mode on a moment's notice, as is required by the deadline-driven nature of their profession.

This approach is not for the deep work novice. As I established in the opening to this rule, the ability to rapidly switch your mind from shallow to deep mode doesn't come naturally. Without practice, such switches can seriously deplete your finite willpower reserves. This habit also requires a sense of confidence in your abilities - a conviction that what you're doing is important and will succeed. This type of conviction is typically built on a foundation of existing professional accomplishment.

## (2) Ritualize

Great minds like [Robert] Caro and [Charles] Darwin didn't deploy rituals to be weird; they did so because success in their work depended on their ability to go deep, again and again -- there's no way to win a Pulitzer Prize or conceive a grand theory without pushing your brain to its limit.

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 even greater.

Regardless of where you work, be sure to also give yourself a specific time frame to keep the session a discrete challenge and not an open-ended slog.

"It is only ideas gained from walking that have any worth." - Nietzsche

(...) keep in mind that finding a ritual where sticks might require experimentation, so be willing to work at it. I assure you that the effort's worth it: Once you've evolved something that feels right, the impact can be significant.

## (3) Make Grand Gestures

[J.K.] Rowling's decision to check into a luxurious hotel suite near Edinburgh Castle is an example of a curious but effective strategy in the world of deep work: *the grand gesture*. The concept is simple: By leveraging a radical change to your normal environment, coupled perhaps with a significant investment of effort or money, all dedicated toward supporting a deep work

task, you increase the perceived importance of the task. This boost in importance reduces your mind's instinct to procrastinate and delivers an injection of motivation and energy.

#### (4) Don't Work Alone

If we turn our attention back to Building 20 and Bell Labs, we see that [*hub-and-spoke* architecture of innovation] is the architecture they deployed as well. Neither building offered anything resembling a modern open office plan. They were instead constructed using the standard layout of private offices connected to shared hallways. Their creative mojo had more to do with the fact that these offices shared a small number of long connecting spaces -- forcing researchers to interact whenever they needed to travel from one location to another. These megahallways, in other words, provided highly effective hubs.

The key is to maintain both in a hub-and-spoke-style arrangement: Expose yourself to ideas in hubs on a regular basis, but maintain a spoke in which to work deeply on what you encounter.  
LB: both/and

[Walter] Brattain and [John] Bardeen worked together during [a period of one month in 1947] in a small lab, often side by side, pushing each other toward better and more effective designs. These efforts consisted primarily of deep work -- but a type of deep work we haven't yet encountered. Brattain would concentrate intensely to engineer an experimental design that could exploit Bardeen's latest theoretical insight; then Bardeen would concentrate intensely to make sense of what Brattain's latest experiments revealed, trying to expand his theoretical framework to match the observations. This back-and-forth represents a collaborative form of deep work (common in academic circles) that leverages what I call *the whiteboard effect*. For some types of problems, working with someone else at the proverbial shared whiteboard can push you deeper than if you were working alone. The presence of the other party waiting for your next insight -- be in someone physically in the same room or collaborating with you virtually -- can short-circuit the natural instinct to avoid depth.

*First*, distraction remains a destroyer of depth. Therefore, the hub-and-spoke model provides a crucial template. Separate your pursuit of serendipitous encounters from your efforts to think deeply and build on these inspirations. You should try to optimize each effort separately, as opposed to mixing them together into a sludge that impedes both goals.

*Second*, even when you retreat to a spoke to think deeply, when it's reasonable to leverage the whiteboard effect, do so. By working side by side with someone on a problem, you can push each other toward deeper levels of depth, and therefore toward the generation of more and more valuable output as compared to working alone.

When it comes to deep work, in other words, 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.

## (5) Execute Like a Business

As [Clayton] Chrisensen later explained, this division between *what* and *how* is crucial but is overlooked in the professional world. It's often straightforward to identify a strategy needed to achieve a goal, but what trips up companies is figuring out how to execute the strategy once identified.

## (6) Be Lazy

### / Rule #2 - Embrace Boredom /

### / Rule #3 - Quit Social Media /

The business world understands this math. This is why it's not uncommon to see a company *fire* unproductive clients. If 80 percent of their profits come from 20 percent of their clients, then they make more money by redirecting the energy from low-revenue clients to better service the small number of lucrative contracts -- each hour spent on the latter returns more revenue than each hour spent on the former. The same holds true for your professional and personal goals. By taking the time consumed by low-impact activities -- like finding old friends on Facebook -- and reinvesting in high-impact activities -- like taking a good friend out to lunch -- you end up more successful in your goal. To abandon a network tool using this logic, therefore, is not to miss out on its potential small benefits, but is instead to get more out of the activities you already know to yield large benefits.

Once the packing was done, [Ryan] Nicodemus then spent the next week going through his normal routine. If he needed something that was packed, he would unpack it and put it back where it used to go. At the end of the week, he noticed that the vast majority of his stuff remained untouched in his boxes. So he got rid of it.

The reason why I ask you to not announce your thirty-day experiment is because for some people another part of the delusion that binds them to social media is the idea that people *want to hear what you have to say*, and that they might be disappointed if you suddenly leave them bereft of your commentary.

Part of what fueled social media's rapid ascent, I contend, is its ability to short-circuit this connection between the hard work of producing real value and the positive reward of having people pay attention to you. It has instead replaced this timeless capitalist exchange with a shallow collectivist alternative: *I'll pay attention to what you say if you pay attention to what I say - regardless of its value.*

LB: =O

*You “like” my status update and I’ll “like” yours.* This agreement gives everyone a simulacrum of importance without requiring much effort in return.

By dropping off these services without notice you can test the reality of your status as a content producer.

These services aren’t necessarily, as advertised, the lifeblood of our modern connected world. They’re just products, developed by private companies, funded lavishly, marketed carefully, and designed ultimately to capture then sell your personal information and attention to advertisers. They can be fun, but in the scheme of your life and what you want to accomplish, they’re a lightweight whimsy, one unimportant distraction among many threatening to derail you from something deeper. Or maybe social media tools are at the core of your existence. You won’t know either way until you sample life without them.

LB: hugely important

The “great and profound mistake which my typical man makes in regard to his day,” [Arnold Bennett] elaborates, is that even though he doesn’t particularly enjoy his work (seeing it as something to “get through”), “he persists in looking upon those hours from ten to six as ‘the day,’ to which the ten hours preceding them and the six hours following them are nothing but a prologue and an epilogue.” This is an attitude that Bennett condemns as “utterly illogical and unhealthy.”

What’s the alternative to this state of affairs? Bennett suggests that his typical man see his sixteen free hours as a “day within a day,” explaining, “during those sixteen hours he is free; he is not a wage-earner; he is not preoccupied with monetary cares; he is just as good as a man with a private income.” Accordingly, the typical man should instead use this time as an aristocrat would: to perform rigorous self-improvement -- a task that, according to Bennett, involves, primarily, reading great literature and poetry.

LB: =O

In more detail, in the strategies discussed so far in this rule, we haven’t spent much time yet on a class of network tools that are particularly relevant to the fight for depth:

entertainment-focused websites designed to capture and hold your attention for as long as possible. At the time of this writing, the most popular examples of such sites include the Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, Business Insider, and Reddit. This list will undoubtedly continue to evolve, but what this general category of sites shares is the use of carefully crafted titles and easily digestible content, often honed by algorithms to be maximally attention catching.

Once you’ve landed on one article in one of these sites, links on the side or bottom of the page beckon you to click on another, then another. Every available trick of human psychology, from listing titles as “popular” or “trending,” to the use of arresting photos, is used to keep you engaged. At this particular moment, for example, some of the most popular articles on BuzzFeed include, “17 Words That Mean Something Totally Different When Spelled Backward” and “33 Dogs Winning at Everything.”

These sites are especially harmful after the workday is over, where the freedom in your schedule enables them to become central to your leisure time.

Fortunately, Arnold Bennett identified the solution to this problem a hundred years earlier: *Put more thought into your leisure time.*

(...) spend your “day within a day.” Addictive websites of the type mentioned previously thrive in a vacuum: If you haven’t given yourself something to do in a given moment, they’ll always beckon as an appealing option. If you instead fill this free time with something of more quality, their grip on your attention will loosen.

At this point you might worry that adding such structure to your relaxation will defeat the purpose of relaxing, which many believe requires complete freedom from plans or obligations. Won’t a structured evening leave you exhausted -- not refreshed -- the next day at work? Bennett, to his credit, anticipated this complaint. As he argues, such worries misunderstand what energizes the human spirit:

*What? You say that full energy given to those sixteen hours will lessen the value of the business eight? Not so. On the contrary, it will assuredly increase the value of the business eight. One of the chief things which my typical man has to learn is that the mental faculties are capable of continuous hard activity; they do not tire like an arm or a leg. All they want is change -- not rest, except in sleep.*

In my experience, this analysis is spot-on. 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.

#### **/ Rule #4 - Drain the Shallows /**

*Very few people work even 8 hours a day. You’re lucky if you get a few good hours in between all the meetings, interruptions, web surfing, office politics, and personal business that permeate the typical workday.*

*Fewer official working hours help squeeze the fat out of the typical workweek. Once everyone has less time to get their stuff done, they respect that time even more. People become stingy with their time and that’s a good thing. They don’t waste it on things that just don’t matter. When you have fewer hours you usually spend them more wisely.*

[ - Jason Fried ]

In other words, the reduction in the 37signals workweek disproportionately eliminated shallow as compared to deep work, and because the latter was left largely untouched, the important stuff continued to get done. The shallow stuff that can seem so urgent in the moment turned out to be unexpectedly dispensable.

“How can we afford to put our business on hold for a month to ‘mess around’ with new ideas?” Fried asked rhetorically. “How can we afford not to?”

(...) we should first confront the reality that there’s a limit to this anti-shallow thinking. The value of deep work vastly outweighs the value of shallow, but this doesn’t mean that you must quixotically pursue a schedule in which *all* of your time is invested in depth. For one thing, a nontrivial amount of shallow work is needed to maintain most knowledge work jobs. You might be able to avoid checking your email every ten minutes, but you won’t likely last long if you *never* respond to important messages. In this sense, we should see the goal of this rule as taming shallow work’s footprint in your schedule, not eliminating it.

[Anders Ericsson and his collaborators] note for someone new to [deep work] practice (citing, in particular, a child in the early stages of developing an expert-level skill), an hour a day is a reasonable limit. For those familiar with the rigors of such activities, the limit expands to something like four hours, but rarely more.

Here’s my suggestion: At the beginning of each workday, turn to a new page of lined paper in a notebook you dedicate to [schedule every minute of your day]. Down the left-hand side of the page, mark every other line with an hour of the day, covering the full set of hours you typically work. Now comes the important part: Divide the hours of your workday into *blocks* and assign activities to the blocks. For example, you might block off nine a.m. to eleven a.m. for writing a client’s press release. To do so, actually draw a box that covers the line corresponding to these hours, then write “press release” inside the box. Not every block need be dedicated to a work task. There might be time blocks for lunch or relaxation breaks. To keep things reasonably clean, the minimum length of a block should be thirty minutes (i.e., one line on your page). This means for example that instead of having a unique small box for each small task on your plate for the day -- *respond to boss’s email, submit reimbursement form, ask Carl about report* -- you can batch similar things into more generic *task blocks*. You might find it useful, in this case, to draw a line from a task block to the open right-hand side of the page where you can list out the full set of small tasks you plan to accomplish in that block.

LB: new practice to recommend

The second tactic that helps is the use of *overflow conditional* blocks. If you’re not sure how long a given activity might take, block off the expected time, then follow this with an additional block that has a split purpose. If you need more time for the preceding activity, use this additional block to keep working on it. If you finish the activity on time, however, make an alternate use already assigned for the extra block (for example, some non-urgent tasks). This allows unpredictability in your day without requiring you to keep changing your schedule on paper.

In other words, I not only allow spontaneity in my schedule; I encourage it. Joseph's critique is driven by the mistaken idea that the goal of a schedule is to force your behavior into a rigid plan. This type of scheduling, however, isn't about constraint -- it's instead about thoughtfulness.

"What makes sense for me to do with the time that remains?" It's the habit of asking what returns results, not your unyielding fidelity to the answer.

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.

LB: people often want me to be more spontaneous and yet are shocked at how much I output over the time that they have ^\_^

It's natural, at first, to resist this idea, as it's undoubtedly easier to continue to allow the twin forces of internal whim and external requests to drive your schedule. But you must overcome this distrust of structure if you want to approach your true potential as someone who creates things that matter.

[Planning meetings] rarely dive into substantial content and tend to feature a lot of small talk and posturing in which participants try to make it seem like they're committing to a lot without actually having to commit.

LB: too real lol!

As argued earlier, tasks that leverage your expertise tend to be deep tasks and they can therefore provide a double benefit: They return more value per time spent, and they stretch your abilities, leading to improvement.

What should you do with this strategy?

Here's an important question that's rarely asked: *What percentage of my time should be spent on shallow work?*

For most people in most non-entry-level knowledge work jobs, the answer to the question will be somewhere in the 30 to 50 percent range.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, part of the reason shallow work persists in large quantities in knowledge work is that we rarely see the total impact of such efforts on our schedules. We instead tend to evaluate these behaviors one by one in the moment - a perspective from which each task can seem quite reasonable and convenient.

(...) a job that [doesn't] support deep work [won't] help you succeed in our current information economy. (...) promptly start planning how you can transition into a new position that values depth.

I, too, am incredibly cautious about my use of the most dangerous word in one's productive vocabulary: "yes."

A commitment to fixed-schedule productivity, however, shifts you into a scarcity mind-set.  
LB: which is weird! Though I like the impact

Fixed-schedule productivity, in other words, is a *meta-habit* that's simple to adopt but broad in its impact. If you have to choose just one behavior that reorients your focus toward the deep, this one should be high on your list of possibilities.

Ubiquitous email access has become so ingrained in our professional habits that we're beginning to lose the sense that we have any say in its role in our life.

**\*\* Tip #1: Make People Who Send You Email Do More Work**

I call this approach a *sender filter*, as I'm asking my correspondents to filter themselves before attempting to contact me.

Not surprisingly, I used to receive a large volume of long emails asking for advice on specific (and often quite complicated) student or career questions. I like to help individuals, but these requests became overwhelming -- they didn't take the senders long to craft but they would require a lot of explanation and writing on my part to respond.

"I'll only respond to those proposals that are a good match for my schedule and interests."

Though he started from a similar motivation as me, [Clay] Herbert's filters ended up taking a different form. To contact him, you must first consult an FAQ to make sure your question has not already been answered (which was the case for a lot of the messages Herbert was processing before his filters were in place). If you make it through this FAQ sieve, he then asks you to fill out a survey that allows him to further screen for connections that seem particularly relevant to his expertise. For those who make it past this step, Herbert enforces a small fee you must pay before communicating with him. This fee is not about making extra money, but is instead about selecting for individuals who are serious about receiving and acting on advice. Herbert's filters

still enable him to help people and encounter interesting opportunities. But at the same time, they have reduced his incoming communication to a level he can easily handle.

LB: v interesting

## **\*\* Tip #2: Do More Work When you Send or Reply to Emails**

- (1) "It was great to meet you last week. I'd love to follow up on some of those issues we discussed. Do you want to grab coffee?"
- (2) "We should get back to the research problem we discussed during my last visit. Remind me where we are with that?"
- (3) "I took a stab at that article we discussed. It's attached. Thoughts?"

In particular, interrogative emails like these(^) generate an initial instinct to dash off the quickest possible response that will clear the message -- temporarily -- out of your inbox. 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.

*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?*

(...) to steal terminology from David Allen, a good process-centric message immediately "closes the loop" with respect to the project at hand. When a project is initiated by an email that you send or receive, it squats in your mental landscape -- becoming something that's "on your plate" in the sense that it has been brought to your attention and eventually needs to be addressed. This method closes this open loop as soon as it forms. By working through the whole process, adding to your task lists and calendar any relevant commitments on your part, and bringing the other party up to speed, your mind can reclaim the mental real estate the project once demanded. Less mental clutter means more mental resources available for deep thinking.

But the important point to remember is that the extra two to three minutes you spend at this point will save you many more minutes reading and responding to unnecessary extra messages later.

## **\*\* Tip #3: Don't Respond**

LB: there's also some privilege here. Due to unequal power, not everyone can maintain a healthy career by not responding to most emails. Women + POC get seen as "rude" faster than white dudes.

"Develop the habit of letting small bad things happen. If you don't, you'll never find time for the life-changing big things." - Tim Ferriss

## **/ Conclusion /**

A commitment to deep work is not a moral stance and it's not a philosophical statement -- it is instead a pragmatic recognition that the ability to concentrate is a skill that *gets valuable things done*. Deep work is important, in other words, not because distraction is evil, but because it enabled Bill Gates to start a billion-dollar industry in less than a semester.

LB: lol @ the framing on this one!

It's a commitment to this skill that allowed Bill Gates to make the most of an unexpected opportunity to create a new industry, and that allowed me to double my academic productivity the same year I decided to concurrently write a book.

LB: also being white dudes with fewer barriers than most ppl

It's safer to comment on our culture than to step into the Rooseveltian ring and attempt to wrestle it into something better.