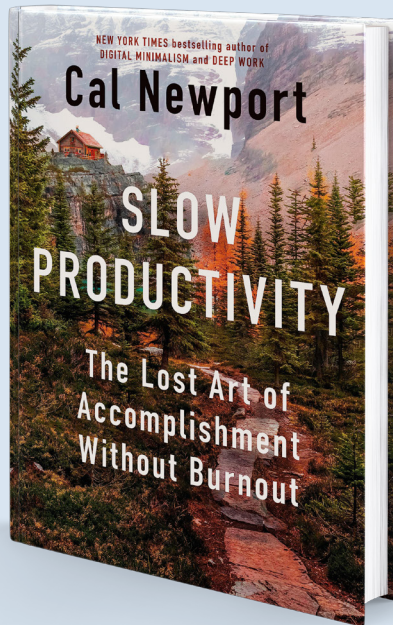


Book Snaps™

In-depth reviews of best-selling business books.



Slow Productivity

The Lost Art of Accomplishment Without Burnout

By Cal Newport

Cal Newport is a professor of computer science at Georgetown University where he is also a founding member of the Center for Digital Ethics. In addition to his academic work, Newport is a New York Times bestselling author who writes for a general audience about the intersection of technology, productivity, and culture. His books have sold millions of copies and been translated into over forty languages. He is also on the contributor staff for The New Yorker and hosts the popular Deep Questions podcast.

A Book Review by Soundview

Redefining Productivity

The large majority of productivity books are focused on helping readers get more work done in less time. They are focused on increasing output while decreasing input, making productivity king. This is not Cal Newport's purpose in writing *Slow Productivity: The Lost Art of Accomplishment Without Burnout*. Newport's book is primarily directed at knowledge workers, and he believes that factory models of production do not work for knowledge work. While he realizes that knowledge work encompasses many different types of work, he believes that most knowledge workers can exhibit enough control and autonomy over their work that they can put steps in place to decrease their workload and extraneous work activities in order to buy them a slower work day. This slower pace, he maintains, often leads to greater achievement over time.

Factory Versus Knowledge Work

Newport opens the main part of his book with a vignette detailing a memo that Leslie Moonves, 1995 CEO of CBS, wrote to his employees when the studio was third in rankings. He noticed that at 3:30 on a Friday, many employees had already left for the day, and his missive berates these employees by stating that he is sure that the employees at rival stations were likely still in their offices at that time. This philosophy postulates that being in an office for more hours rather than for less provides greater results. Newport questions this notion by saying, "When it comes to the basic goal of getting things done, we actually know much less than we're letting on."

Many non-knowledge based sectors, Newport maintains, have clear benchmarks for productivity. Farm, mill, and factory work can all be measured by "the amount of output produced for a given amount of input," and this is experimented on in order to determine how to produce more output with less input. This can take a toll on the humans working in this system, but it also drives economic growth. This type of metric simply is not possible for most knowledge workers who work on various tasks and problems throughout the work day. He uses the example of an academic who chairs an important committee who is deemed less productive because he or she produced fewer papers as a result of this added but important responsibility. A lack of concrete benchmarks in knowledge work creates uncertainty

for managers of knowledge workers as well as for freelancers and others who work solely for themselves as they have no clear cut guidelines for managing their time or managing the time of those beneath them. He believes that because of this, people started “using visible activity as a crude proxy for actual productivity.” Newport calls this as pseudo-productivity.

Newport goes on to elaborate more on the situation facing CBS employees in 1995. He believes this occurred during a critical time in the productivity saga because it is around this time that employers started bringing networked computers into offices, and this act made it possible for employees to talk about work through email and other means rather than actually do work. He refers to a study done by a software company that showed employees checking their email, on average, every six minutes. This talking about work combined with the twenty-first century worker’s ability to work at all hours from home on mobile devices and laptops supercharged “our sense of overload and distraction, pushing us onto a collision course with the burnout crisis that afflicts us today.”

“It seems,” a quoted but unnamed strategic planner says, “like the benefits of technology have created the ability to stack more into our day and onto our schedules than we have the capacity to handle while maintaining a level of quality which makes the things worth doing.” It is this lessening and devaluing of quality that Newport sees as a major casualty of the way knowledge work productivity is seen today.

Slow Productivity

To explain his alternate view of productivity for knowledge workers, Newport turns to the slow movement. This movement began after McDonald’s planned a 1986 opening of a new and very large restaurant in Rome’s Piazza di Spagna. At the same time McDonald’s was facing opposition from Italians, a man named Carlo Petrini was launching the Slow Food movement, saying, “Against those – or, rather, the vast majority – who confuse efficiency with frenzy, we propose the vaccine of an adequate portion of sensual gormandise pleasures, to be taken with slow and prolonged enjoyment.” Petrini believes, according to Newport, that people find pleasure in pointing out a system’s flaws but that “sustainable change... requires providing people with an enjoyable and life-affirming alternative.” This became a revolution in Newport’s eyes when other slow systems started coming into vogue, including Slow Cities, Slow Medicine, and Slow Media, among others.

Newport credits the pandemic with giving people the opportunity to question the way work is produced, and he uses Apple employees as an example of people’s desire for a change from the status quo when they protested an imperative that they return to the office for at least a portion of the work week. Meanwhile others began to consider other options for their work week. For example, a UK study showed that many companies chose to follow a four day work week after participating in a study in which this work week demonstrated very positive results. While Newport believes shorter work weeks and telecommuting can be beneficial, he does not see them as sufficient for reversing the current level of burn-

out because it will not affect the overall culture that makes haste the default in the first place. He believes that pseudo-productivity must be abandoned and a new alternative must come to fruition.

Newport proposes the following definition for knowledge work: “The economic activity in which knowledge is transformed into an artifact with market value through the application of cognitive effort.” He believes that people can look to traditional knowledge workers such as artists and writers to come to a clearer understanding of how more mainstream knowledge workers like HR professionals can manage their productivity. He believes that it is freedom that allows for the creation of value, and people in these traditional knowledge fields generally have this freedom. While the solutions for different types of knowledge workers will not all be the same, he believes insights can be gleaned from the freedom some knowledge workers generally have. Eventually Newport coined slow productivity, in line with other slow movements. He describes this as “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.”

Do Fewer Things

“Do fewer things” is Newport’s first principle of Slow Productivity. He describes the picture painted of Jane Austin writing her four major novels all before she died at the age of 41. The picture painted of her is of a woman stealing free moments to write out her novels on pieces of paper throughout the day. This gives off the impression that the key to creative success is to simply squeeze more into the day. This is not the lesson that Newport derives from Austin’s story. Rather, he attributes her success to her steady work over the course of many years, the rather slow pace at which she actually wrote her novels. He says that a closer look at Austin’s life reveals that when her father closed the school the family was running, she was suddenly afforded a lot of free time, and it was during this period that she was particularly productive. He quotes Austin biographer Claire Tomalin as saying that it was because she was able to “abstract herself from the daily life going on around her” that she was able to develop her literary voice. When her home situation shifted again and asked much more of her, she halted her writing, ultimately finishing her books a decade later when her home life once again afforded her plenty of unstructured time. Newport uses this to emphasize how better results come from doing less rather than more. He lays this out in his first principle stating, “Strive to reduce your obligations to the point where you can easily imagine accomplishing them with time to spare. Leverage this reduced load to more fully embrace and advance the small number of projects that matter most.” He believes that this can be possible in most professional settings.

One problem facing modern knowledge workers is overhead, referring to the amount of tasks that need to be completed for each new project. He says, “As your to-do list grows, so does the total amount of overhead tax you’re paying.” These extraneous but necessary tasks begin to take away much of a person’s work time since there will necessarily be a limited number of hours in each day. He believes that as workload increases, people can



When people focus on fewer projects, they can also focus on quality more than quantity.”

begin to spend their entire day on overhead activities. This problem increased during the pandemic for multiple reasons, not least of which because collaboration is less efficient when it is not performed in an office. Instead of walking to a colleague's office to ask a question, while working remotely, an employee may need to set up a zoom call which requires further attention to overhead tasks and lengthens the entire process. He explains how a person who can complete a single report in seven hours, can write an entire report in one day. If that same employee, however, works on four different reports over the course of that day, it will ultimately take more hours to complete because so much time will be spent on various overhead activities, doubling the amount of time it takes to complete a report.

Newport believes that when people take on fewer projects, they can limit the time spent on overhead activities. This is not the only benefit, however, to reducing the number of projects. When people focus on fewer projects, they can also focus on quality more than quantity. He says that science as well as intuition teach us that “our brains work better when we're not rushing.” By doing fewer things, he maintains that we are not actually accomplishing fewer things because “focusing intensely on a small number of tasks, waiting to finish each before bringing on something new, is objectively a much better way to use our brains to produce valuable output.” This is not what most people do, however. Saying no is difficult for people, so many will choose to only say no to Zoom meetings or other tasks when they are so distressed that they are willing to let the other party down. This level of distress is usually quite high. He shares numerous examples of knowledge workers who were able to say no to more tasks and found themselves happier and producing better work. He does not believe that overload is a necessary component of knowledge work: rather, he attributes it to the “crude ways in which we self-manage our work volume.”

Newport encourages his reader to create a concrete system to follow in order to limit projects. First this can be done by limiting the number of missions you focus on. He defines a mission as “any ongoing goal or service that directs your professional life.” With regards to missions, it is best to err on the side of too few than too many, and he believes many people feel distress with five or more missions. Then he goes on to suggest limiting projects, and a project is defined as “a work-related initiative that cannot be completed in a single session.” He says that most of the tasks he performs during his day are in the service of projects. He suggests that when approached with a new project, it is best to tell the person assigning the project exactly how much you are working on at the moment and when they could expect you to reasonably complete this task. They can then determine if they have someone with more time to complete the project or if the project should be delayed. Lastly, Newport

encourages people to focus on one project per day. Likely other tasks will be required during the average day, but focusing primarily on one project allows a person to see real progress made. Other tactics he suggests are to put tasks on auto-pilot when possible and make other people work more by completing small tasks that can make your large tasks more manageable.

A Natural Pace

Newport discusses the importance of seasonality in work. This seasonality is natural to agricultural workers whose days and lives are dictated by the seasons. He also refers to great thinkers of times past who would have found the current frenetic pace of life unnerving and who focused primarily on what could be produced over a lifetime rather than on what could be produced over a set period of time. He explains his second principle by saying, “Don't rush your most important work. Allow it instead to unfold along a sustainable timeline, with variations in intensity, in settings conducive to brilliance.”

To explain this concept, he refers to studies comparing the lives of hunter gatherer cultures in the world with that of agricultural workers, showing that hunter gatherers have more free time in their days, interspersed between working hours. Their work is not evenly spread out; it is completed in bursts. The Industrial Revolution eliminated much of the seasonality of work because employees could work evenly throughout the day and night and also year round. They were not limited by seasonal or daily cycles. Knowledge workers generally have additional hurdles because their work tasks are not conducive to unionization, and as such, these tasks can infringe on entire days, surpassing the traditional eight hour work day.

Newport suggests his reader become more comfortable with taking longer at tasks, and this can be accomplished by making a five year plan and focusing on that for important goals. Workers can also double project timelines in order to complete them in a more intentional manner. Workers can also simplify their daily schedule by including fewer tasks and appointments. The latter can be accomplished by scheduling time to work on your own tasks for every amount of time you dedicate to working with other people. Finally, he suggests workers embrace seasonality by ushering in slow seasons in which less work is accomplished by turning down more work and leaving the office at 5:00. This works best when knowledge workers plan to finish major projects before this slow time and wait to start new ones until after. This doesn't have to be on a months-long basis, however, as seasonality can apply to the work week as well by implementing practices such as declining meetings occurring during a certain day or time period each week.

Obsession with Quality

Newport's last principle is to "Obsess over the quality of what you produce, even if this means missing opportunities in the short term. Leverage the value of these results to gain more and more freedom in your efforts over the long term." He explains that in most professions, there are a couple of activities that are core to that position, and he urges his readers to insist on quality in these core activities. This is important because people "should be focused on the quality of what you produce because quality turns out to be connected in unexpected ways to our desire to escape pseudo-productivity and embrace something slower." Newport uses the example of how Steve Jobs limited the different types of computers Apple produced in order to make the ones they did produce as good as possible. Newport maintains that in many other fields "the pursuit of quality demanded simplicity," and his own study reinforced this. One way one person implemented this idea was to limit emails to one hour per day, simplifying his day. Another simplified her work life by focusing on just two major projects. Newport believes "that an obsession with quality... both demands and enables slowness."

Central to quality is taste. Newport explains how people who excel in a field such as writing have great taste in good writing, but their skills do not necessarily live up to their taste when they begin. He reiterates the advice of NPR's Ira Glass who tells people to keep producing work as you work to bridge the gap between your taste and your abilities. Also crucial is a desire to improve your tastes so that you can keep growing to meet your ever expanding standards. Newport details C.S. Lewis and his writing group, the Inklings which included some notable writers including J.R.R. Tolkien. Groups like this are not just effective for writers. He explains that professional groups such as these can help professionals elevate their own taste and give them more to strive for. People can elevate their taste when they work with like minded colleagues.

While Newport focuses on three primary principles to lay out his plan for a more sane professional schedule for knowledge workers, he intersperses his book with numerous examples of people who have succeeded both professionally and personally by limiting the number of tasks and pursuits they pursue in order to live a more simple work life that allows for more quality work. Because he does not believe that quantity should be the main benchmark of success for knowledge workers, he details ways in which to limit the quantity of time spent in order to increase the quality of output. Some of the examples he provides are of unknown people who completed his survey and others are well known musicians, writers, and artists. He maintains that while it might be easier for knowledge workers in certain fields to have control over their schedule, he maintains that most knowledge workers can implement his strategies and principles in order to be proactive, high quality workers while avoiding the burnout that seems endemic today in the field of knowledge work.