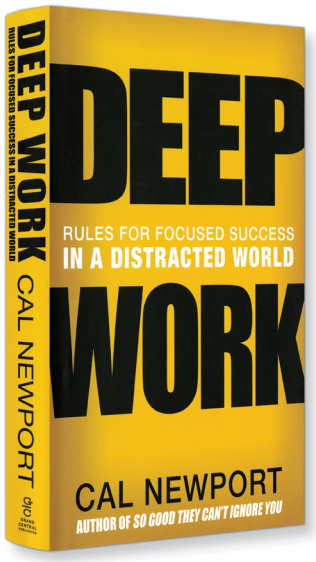
soundview
Executive Book Summaries®

Deep Work

Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World



by Cal Newport

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Deep work is the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task. It's a skill that allows you to quickly master complicated information and produce better results in less time. Deep work will make you better at what you do and provide the sense of true fulfillment that comes from craftsmanship. In short, deep work is like a super power in our increasingly competitive 21st-century economy. And yet, most people have lost the ability to go deep — spending their days instead in a frantic blur of email and social media, not even realizing there's a better way.

In *Deep Work*, author and professor Cal Newport flips the narrative on impact in a connected age. Instead of arguing distraction is bad, he instead celebrates the power of its opposite. Dividing this book into two parts, he first makes the case that in almost any profession, cultivating a deep work ethic will produce massive benefits. He then presents a rigorous training regimen, presented as a series of four "rules," for transforming your mind and habits to support this skill.

A mix of cultural criticism and actionable advice, such as the claim that most serious professionals should quit social media and that you should practice being bored, *Deep Work* is an indispensable guide to anyone seeking focused success in a distracted world.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why deep work is valuable, rare and meaningful.
- Strategies to help you learn to embrace deep work.
- What it means to embrace boredom.
- To determine the true value of social media in your work and life.

CONTENTS

Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries®, 511 School House Rd., Suite 300, Kennett Square, PA 19348 USA • www.summary.com
Vol. 38, No. 7 (3 parts), Part 1, July 2016 • Order #38-15

THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: **DEEP WORK**

by Cal Newport

The author: Cal Newport is a writer and a professor of computer science at Georgetown University. He is the author of five books and runs the popular advice blog Study Hacks, which attempts to decode "patterns of success" in both school and the working world. His contrarian ideas on building a successful, meaningful life have been featured on TV, radio and in many major publications, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and *New York Post*.

Deep Work by Cal Newport. Copyright © 2016 by Cal Newport. Summarized by permission of the publisher, Grand Central Publishing, an imprint of Hachette Book Group. 304 pages, $28, ISBN 978-1-4555-8669-1.

Introduction

Deep work is 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. We now know from decades of research in both psychology and neuroscience that the state of mental strain that accompanies deep work is also necessary to improve your abilities.

Deep work stands in sharp contrast to the behavior of most modern knowledge workers — a group that's rapidly forgetting the value of going deep. The reason knowledge workers are losing their familiarity with deep work is well established: network tools. This is a broad category that captures communication services like email and SMS, social media networks like 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 email 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.

Our work culture's shift toward the shallow (whether you think it's philosophically good or bad) is exposing a massive economic and personal opportunity for the few who recognize the potential of resisting this trend and prioritizing depth.

The Deep Work Hypothesis says that 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.

PART I: THE IDEA

Deep Work Is Valuable

MIT economists Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, in their influential 2011 book, *Race Against the Machine*, provide a compelling case that among various forces at play, it's the rise of digital technology in particular that's transforming our labor markets in unexpected ways. "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."

1-800-SUMMARY
service@summary.com

Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® (ISSN 0747-2196), 511 School House Road.,Suite 300, Kennett Square, PA 19348 USA. Published monthly. Subscriptions starting at $99 per year. Copyright © 2016 by Soundview, Inc. **Available formats:** Summaries are available in several digital formats. To subscribe, call us at 1-800-SUMMARY (240-912-7513 outside the United States), or order online at www.summary.com. Multiple-subscription discounts and corporate site licenses are also available.

Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; **Sarah T. Dayton**, Editor in Chief; **Ashleigh Imus**, Senior Editor; **Masiel Tejada**, Graphic Designer; **A. Imus**, Contributing Editor

This reality is not, however, universally grim. As Brynjolfsson and McAfee emphasize, this Great Restructuring is not driving down all jobs but is instead dividing them. Though an increasing number of people will lose in this new economy as their skill becomes automatable or easily outsourced, there are others who will not only survive but thrive — becoming more valued (and therefore more rewarded) than before.

In this new economy, three groups will have a particular advantage: those who can work well and creatively with intelligent machines, those who are the best at what they do and those with access to capital. If you can join any of these groups, therefore, you'll do well. How does one join these winners? There is no secret for quickly amassing capital. The other two winning groups, however, are accessible. The following two core abilities are crucial:

1. The ability to quickly master hard things.
2. The ability to produce at an elite level, in terms of both quality and speed.

Let's begin with the first ability. To start, we must remember that we've been spoiled by the intuitive and drop-dead-simple user experience of many consumer-facing technologies, like Twitter and the iPhone. These examples, however, are consumer products, not serious tools: Most of the intelligent machines driving the Great Restructuring are significantly more complex to understand and master. To join the group of those who can work well with these machines, therefore, requires that you hone your ability to master hard things. And because these technologies change rapidly, this process of mastering hard things never ends: You must be able to do it quickly, again and again.

If you want to become a superstar, mastering the relevant skills is necessary but not sufficient. You must then transform that latent potential into tangible results that people value.

The two core abilities just described depend on your ability to perform deep work. To learn hard things quickly, you must focus intensely without distraction. To learn, in other words, is an act of deep work. If you're comfortable going deep, you'll be comfortable mastering the increasingly complex systems and skills needed to thrive in our economy. If you're not comfortable going deep for extended periods of time, it'll be difficult to get your performance to the peak levels of quality and quantity increasingly necessary to thrive professionally. Unless your talent and skills absolutely dwarf those of your competition, the deep workers among them will outproduce you.

Deep Work Is Rare

In 2015, Facebook moved into a new headquarters designed by Frank Gehry. At the center of this new building is what CEO Mark Zuckerberg has called "the largest open floor plan in the world": More than 3,000 employees work on movable furniture spread over a 10-acre expanse. Facebook, of course, is not the only Silicon Valley heavyweight to embrace the open office concept. When Jack Dorsey bought the old San Francisco Chronicle building to house Square, he configured the space so that his developers work in common spaces on long, shared desks.

Another big business trend in recent years is the rise of instant messaging. A third trend is the push for content producers of all types to maintain a social media presence.

These three business trends highlight a paradox. Deep work is more valuable than ever before in our shifting economy. If this is true, however, you would expect to see this skill promoted not just by ambitious individuals but also by organizations hoping to get the most out of their employees. This is not happening. Open offices, for example, might create more opportunities for collaboration, but they do so at the cost of "massive distraction," to quote the results of experiments conducted for a British TV special titled "The Secret Life of Office Buildings." Instant messenger systems are meant to be always active — magnifying the impact of interruption.

Forcing content producers onto social media also has negative effects on the ability to go deep. Serious journalists, for example, need to focus on doing serious journalism — diving into complicated sources, pulling out connective threads, crafting persuasive prose — so to ask them to interrupt this deep thinking throughout the day to participate in the frothy back-and-forth of online tittering seems irrelevant (and somewhat demeaning) at best and devastatingly distracting at worst.

Although our current embrace of distraction is a real phenomenon, it's built on an unstable foundation and can be easily dismissed once you decide to cultivate a deep work ethic.

The Metric Black Hole

Even though we abstractly accept that distraction has costs and depth has value, these impacts are difficult to measure. We should not, therefore, expect the bottom-line impact of depth-destroying behaviors to be easily detected. Such metrics fall into an opaque region resistant to easy measurement — a region we can call the metric black hole. None of the distracting 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.

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 emails (and related communication) quickly. Why do so many foster a culture of connectivity even though it's likely, as researcher Leslie Perlow found, that it hurts employees' well-being and productivity and probably doesn't help the bottom line?

The answer can be found in 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. 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. Constant connectivity is 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.

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. Assuming the trends outlined here continue, depth will become increasingly rare and therefore increasingly valuable.

Deep Work Is Meaningful

The science writer Winifred Gallagher stumbled onto a connection between attention and happiness after an unexpected and terrifying event, a cancer diagnosis — "not just cancer," she clarifies, "but a particularly nasty, fairly advanced kind." As Gallagher recalls in her 2009 book, *Rapt*, as she walked away from the hospital after the diagnosis, she formed a sudden and strong intuition: "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. After five years of science reporting, she came away convinced that she was witness to a "grand unified theory" of the mind: "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."

We tend to place a lot of emphasis on our circumstances, assuming that what happens to us (or fails to happen) determines how we feel. From this perspective, the small-scale details of how you spend your day aren't that important, because what matters are the large-scale outcomes, such as whether or not you get a promotion or move to that nicer apartment.

According to Gallagher, decades of research contradict this understanding. Our brains instead construct our worldview based on what we pay attention to. 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."

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 a craftsman 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.

A Psychological Argument for Depth

Our second argument for why depth generates meaning comes from the work of one of the world's best-known (and most misspelled) psychologists, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Csikszentmihalyi's work helped validate a theory he had been developing over the preceding decade: "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."

Csikszentmihalyi calls this mental state *flow* (a term he popularized with a 1990 book of the same title). At the time, this finding pushed back against conventional wisdom. Most people assumed (and still do) that relaxation makes them happy. We want to work less and spend more time in the hammock. But the results from Csikszentmihalyi's studies reveal that most people have this wrong: "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."

The connection between deep work and flow should be clear: Deep work is an activity well suited to generate a flow state. And as we just learned, flow generates happiness. Combining these two ideas, we get a powerful argument from psychology in favor of depth.

PART II: THE RULES

Rule #1: Work Deeply

In an ideal world — one in which the true value of deep work is accepted and celebrated — we'd all have access to a work environment (and culture) designed to help us extract as much value as possible from our brains. Unfortunately, this vision is far from our current reality. We instead find ourselves in distracting open offices where inboxes cannot be neglected and meetings are incessant — a setting where colleagues would rather you respond quickly to their latest email than produce the best possible results.

This rule is designed to reduce this conflict. The 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.

1. Decide on your depth philosophy. You need your own philosophy for integrating deep work into your professional life. Here are four different depth philosophies that work exceptionally well in practice.

- **The monastic philosophy of deep work scheduling** attempts to maximize deep efforts by eliminating or radically minimizing shallow obligations. Practitioners of the monastic philosophy tend to have a well-defined and highly valued professional goal that they're pursuing, and the bulk of their professional success comes from doing this one thing exceptionally well.
- **The bimodal philosophy of deep work scheduling** asks that you divide your time, dedicating some clearly defined stretches to deep pursuits and leaving the rest open to everything else. During the deep time, the bimodal worker will act monastically — seeking intense and uninterrupted concentration. For example, on the scale of a week, you might dedicate a four-day weekend to depth and the rest to open time.
- **The rhythmic philosophy of deep work scheduling** argues that the easiest way to consistently start deep work sessions is to transform them into a simple regular habit. The goal, in other words, is to generate a rhythm for this work that removes the need for you to invest energy in deciding if and when you're going to go deep. A common way to implement the rhythmic philosophy is to have a set starting time that you use every day for deep work.
- **The journalistic philosophy of deep work scheduling** is a nod to the fact that journalists 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. 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.

2. Ritualize. An often-overlooked observation about those who use their minds to create valuable things is that they're rarely haphazard in their work habits. Charles Darwin had a strict structure for his working life during the period when he was perfecting *On the Origin of Species*. He would rise promptly at seven to take a short walk. He would then eat breakfast alone and retire to his study from eight to nine thirty. The next hour was dedicated to reading his letters from the day before, after which he would return to his study from ten-thirty until noon. After this session, he would mull over challenging ideas while walking on a prescribed route that started at his greenhouse and then circled a path on his property. He would walk until satisfied with his thinking, then declare his workday done.

Great minds like Darwin and others 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. Their rituals minimized the friction in this transition to depth, allowing them to go deep more easily and stay in the state longer.

There's no one correct deep work ritual — the right fit depends on both the person and the type of project pursued. But there are some general questions that any effective ritual must address: where you'll work and for how long, how you'll work once you start and how you'll support your work.

3. Be lazy. This strategy argues that you should inject regular and substantial freedom from professional concerns into your day, providing you with the idleness

paradoxically required to get (deep) work done. At the end of the workday, shut down your consideration of work issues until the next morning — no after-dinner email check, no mental replays of conversations and no scheming about how you'll handle an upcoming challenge; shut down work thinking completely. Downtime aids insights and helps recharge the energy needed to work deeply.

Rule #2: Embrace Boredom

Rule #1 taught you how to integrate deep work into your schedule and support it with routines and rituals designed to help you consistently reach the current limit of your concentration ability. Rule #2 will help you significantly improve this limit. The strategies that follow are motivated by the key idea that getting the most out of your deep work habit requires training, and as clarified previously, this training must address two goals: improving your ability to concentrate intensely and overcoming your desire for distraction.

1. Don't take breaks from distraction. Instead, take breaks from focus. Instead of scheduling the occasional break from distraction so you can focus, you should instead schedule the occasional break from focus to give in to distraction. To make this suggestion more concrete, let's make the simplifying assumption that Internet use is synonymous with seeking distracting stimuli. Similarly, let's consider working in the absence of the Internet to be synonymous with more focused work.

With these rough categorizations established, the strategy works as follows: Schedule in advance when you'll use the Internet, and then avoid it altogether outside these times. Keep a notepad near your computer at work. On this pad, record the next time you're allowed to use the Internet. Until you arrive at that time, absolutely no network connectivity is allowed — no matter how tempting.

The idea motivating this strategy is that the use of a distracting service does not, by itself, reduce your brain's ability to focus. It's instead the constant switching from low-stimuli/high-value activities to high-stimuli/low-value activities, at the slightest hint of boredom or cognitive challenge, that teaches your mind to never tolerate an absence of novelty. This constant switching can be understood analogously as weakening the mental muscles responsible for organizing the many sources vying for your attention. By segregating Internet use (and therefore segregating distractions) you're minimizing the number of times you give in to distraction, and by doing so you let these attention-selecting muscles strengthen.

If you're required to spend hours every day online or answer emails quickly, that's fine: This simply means that your Internet blocks will be more numerous than those of someone whose job requires less connectivity. The total number or duration of your Internet blocks doesn't matter nearly as much as making sure that the integrity of your offline blocks remains intact.

2. Meditate productively. 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. Depending on your profession, this problem might be outlining an article, writing a talk, making progress on a proof or attempting to sharpen a business strategy. As in mindfulness meditation, you must continue to bring your attention back to the problem at hand when it wanders or stalls.

You don't necessarily need a serious session every day, but your goal should be to participate in at least two or three such sessions in a typical week.

By forcing you to resist distraction and return your attention repeatedly to a well-defined problem, it helps strengthen your distraction-resisting muscles, and by forcing you to push your focus deeper and deeper on a single problem, it sharpens your concentration.

The key to this strategy is not the specifics but, instead, the motivating idea that your ability to concentrate is only as strong as your commitment to train it.

Rule #3: Quit Social Media

The idea that a drastic Internet sabbatical is the only alternative to the distraction generated by social media and infotainment has increasingly pervaded our cultural conversation. The problem with this binary response to this issue is that these two choices are much too crude to be useful. The notion that you would quit the Internet is, of course, an overstuffed straw man, infeasible for most (unless you're a journalist writing a piece about distraction).

This rule attempts to break us out of this rut by proposing a third option: accepting that these tools are not inherently evil and that some of them might be quite vital to your success and happiness, but at the same time also accepting that the threshold for allowing a site regular access to your time and attention (not to mention personal data) should be much more stringent, and that most people should therefore be using many fewer such tools.

1. Apply the Law of the Vital Few to your Internet habits. The first step of this strategy is to identify the

main high-level goals in both your professional and your personal life. Once you've identified these goals, list for each the two or three most important activities that help you satisfy the goal. These activities should be specific enough to allow you to clearly picture doing them. On the other hand, they should be general enough that they're not tied to a onetime outcome. A good activity in this context would be something like "regularly read and understand the cutting-edge results in my field."

The next step in this strategy is to consider the network tools you currently use. For each such tool, go through the key activities you identified, and ask whether the use of the tool has a substantially positive impact, a substantially negative impact or little impact on your regular and successful participation in the activity.

Now comes the important decision: Keep using this tool only if you concluded that it has substantial positive impacts and that these outweigh the negative impacts.

This radical reduction of priorities is not arbitrary but is instead motivated by an idea that has arisen repeatedly in any number of different fields, from client profitability to social equality to prevention of crashes in computer programs: The Law of the Vital Few: In many settings, 80 percent of a given effect is due to just 20 percent of the possible causes.

2. Quit social media. This strategy offers you a different but complementary approach, in which you ban yourself from using social media services for 30 days. All of them: Facebook, Instagram, Google +, Twitter, Snapchat, Vine — or whatever other services have risen to popularity. Don't formally deactivate these services, and (this is important) don't mention online that you'll be signing off: Just stop using them, cold turkey. If someone reaches out to you by other means and asks why your activity on a particular service has fallen off, you can explain, but don't go out of your way to tell people.

After 30 days of this self-imposed network isolation, ask yourself the following two questions about each of the services you temporarily quit:

- Would the last 30 days have been notably better if I had been able to use this service?
- Did people care that I wasn't using this service?

If your answer is "no" to both questions, quit the service permanently. If your answer was a clear "yes," then return to using the service. If your answers are qualified or ambiguous, it's up to you whether you return to the service.

This strategy picks specifically on social media because among the different network tools that can claim your time and attention, these services, if used without limit, can be particularly devastating to your quest to work deeper. They offer personalized information arriving on an unpredictable, intermittent schedule — making them massively addictive and therefore capable of severely damaging your attempts to schedule and succeed with any act of concentration.

3. Don't use the Internet to entertain yourself. A class of network tools that are particularly relevant to the fight for depth are entertainment-focused websites designed to capture and hold your attention for as long as possible. These sites share 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.

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.

This strategy suggests that when it comes to your relaxation, don't default to whatever catches your attention at the moment, but instead dedicate some advance thinking to the question of how you want to spend your "day within a day." It's crucial, therefore, that you figure out in advance what you're going to do with your evenings and weekends before they begin. Structured hobbies provide good fodder for these hours, as they generate specific actions with specific goals to fill your time. A set program of reading, where you spend regular time each night making progress on a series of deliberately chosen books, is also a good option, as is, of course, exercise or the enjoyment of good (in-person) company.

If you want to eliminate the addictive pull of entertainment sites on your time and attention, give your brain a quality alternative.

Rule #4: Drain the Shallows

The shallow work that increasingly dominates the time and attention of knowledge workers is less vital than it often seems in the moment. For most businesses, if you eliminated significant amounts of this shallowness, their bottom line would likely remain unaffected. If you not only eliminate shallow work but also replace this recovered time with more of the deep alternative, not only will the business continue to function; it can become more successful.

This rule asks you to apply these insights to your personal work life. The strategies that follow are designed to help you ruthlessly identify the shallowness in your current schedule, then cull it down to minimum levels — leaving more time for the deep efforts that ultimately matter most.

1. Schedule every minute of your day. We spend much of our day on autopilot — not giving much thought to what we're doing with our time. This is a problem. It's difficult to prevent the trivial from creeping into every corner of your schedule if you don't face, without flinching, your current balance between deep and shallow work, and then adopt the habit of pausing before action and asking, "What makes the most sense right now?"

At the beginning of each workday, turn to a new page of lined paper in a notebook you dedicate to this purpose. 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 lines 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.

When you're done scheduling your day, every minute should be part of a block. You have, in effect, given every minute of your workday a job. Now, as you go through your day, use this schedule to guide you. If your schedule is disrupted, you should, at the next available moment, take a few minutes to create a revised schedule for the time that remains in the day. Your goal is not to stick to a given schedule at all costs; it's instead to maintain, at all times, a thoughtful say in what you're doing with your time going forward — even if these decisions are reworked again and again as the day unfolds.

2. Quantify the depth of every activity. Some activities clearly satisfy the definition of shallow work. But the classification of other activities can be more ambiguous. To do so, ask a simple (but surprisingly illuminating) question: "How long would it take (in months) to train a smart recent college graduate with no specialized training in my field to complete this task?"

If our hypothetical college graduate requires many months of training to replicate a task, then this indicates that the task leverages hard-won expertise. 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. On the other hand, a task that our hypothetical college graduate can pick up quickly is one that does not leverage expertise, and therefore it can be understood as shallow. What should you do with this strategy? Once you know where your activities fall on the deep-to-shallow scale, bias your time toward the former.

3. Ask your boss for a shallow work budget. Here's an important question that's rarely asked: "What percentage of my time should be spent on shallow work?" If you have a boss, have a conversation about this question. If you work for yourself, ask yourself this question. In both cases, settle on a specific answer. Then try to stick to this budget. 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.

Obeying this budget will likely require changes to your behavior. You'll almost certainly end up forced into saying no to projects that seem infused with shallowness while also more aggressively reducing the amount of shallowness in your existing projects.

The reason why these decisions should start with a conversation with your boss is that this agreement establishes implicit support from your workplace. If you work for yourself, this exercise will force you to confront the reality of how little time in your "busy" schedule you're actually producing value.

By ruthlessly reducing the shallow while preserving the deep, this strategy frees up our time without diminishing the amount of new value we generate.

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. If you're willing to struggle to deploy your mind to its fullest capacity to create things that matter, then you'll discover, as others have before you, that depth generates a life rich with productivity and meaning.

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Deep Work*, you'll also like:

1. ***Focus*** **by Daniel Goleman**. Goleman argues that we must learn to sharpen our focus in order to contend with and thrive in a complex world. It requires "smart practice" to improve habits, add new skills and sustain excellence.

2. ***Extreme Productivity*** **by Robert C. Pozen**. Pozen reveals the secrets to workplace productivity and high performance.

3. ***The 80/20 Manager*** **by Richard Koch**. Koch describes how managers can apply the 80/20 Principle — the idea that just 20 percent of our time, effort and key decisions generate 80 percent of our success.