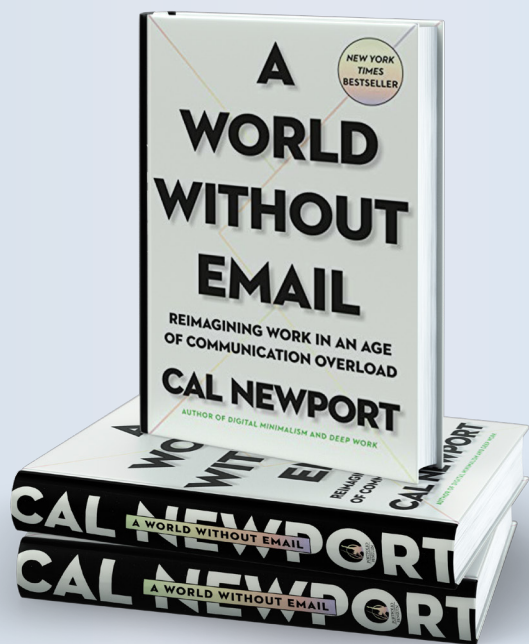


# BOOK SNAPS™

Zooming In On Your Next Read



## A World Without Email

By Cal Newport

Cal Newport is an associate professor of computer science at Georgetown University, where he specializes in the theory of distributed systems, as well as a New York Times bestselling author who writes for a broader audience about the intersection of technology and culture. He's the author of seven books, including *Digital Minimalism* and *Deep Work*, which have been published in over thirty languages. He's also a regular contributor on these topics to national publications such as The New Yorker, The New York Times, and Wired, and is a frequent guest on NPR.

Copyright © 2021 by Cal Newport • Portfolio

## Taming the Hyperactive Hive Mind

When we think of digital communication tools, like instant messaging, email and texts, we automatically assume that they improve our productivity and make work easier. After all, being easily accessible and in near-constant contact with all of the relevant players can only help workflow, right? New York Times bestselling author and associate professor of computer science at Georgetown University Cal Newport says the answer is definitively “no.” In fact, he asserts that the “relentless barrage of incoming messages and back-and-forth digital conversations” are highly detrimental to productivity and just as importantly, are a root cause of human misery. These bold stances serve as the foundation for Newport’s bestselling book.

In *A World Without Email: Reimagining Work in an Age of Communication Overload*, Newport invites readers to imagine a radically different alternative to the “tyranny of the inbox” that will open the productivity floodgates, surpassing current possibilities and simultaneously allowing for happier, more fulfilled human beings. Newport provides extensive evidence supporting the idea that the anxious chatter we are unable to disconnect from is directly tied to a hyperactive state of mind that is ruinous to the production of substantive work.

Although it will initially be difficult for readers to imagine a world in which email is not a central component to our work day, he insists that day is coming and we’d be best equipped to handle the inevitable by making big alterations to the way we work now. Entrepreneurs, leaders, and employees who are ready to get in front of the problem will be convinced that this evolution is coming and will receive crystal-clear guidance on how to make bold changes for the better.

## The Case Against Email

Let’s face it. Modern work revolves around email. The very idea of working without it seems preposterous. The integration of instant messaging and email into the working world has been nothing short of transformational. Workplaces used to be stuffy smoke-polluted environments filled with secretaries scribbling messages on carbon-copy paper that were later delivered on rolling mail carts.



Email made offices slick, quick, and wildly efficient. Sure, there is plenty of training and advice around making email work better for you through scheduling, notification tweaks, and concise composition. But there is never an outright questioning of the tool in and of itself. We assume that the “underlying value” of email trumps any and all associated “annoyances.” What if, however, we could see the flip side of that coin? What if these “annoyances” were actually serious problems for humanity and productivity?

The ubiquity of email and instant messaging in a professional capacity have created something that Newport calls “the hyperactive hive mind.” He defines it as “a workflow centered around ongoing conversation fueled by unstructured and unscheduled messages delivered throughout digital communication tools like email and instant messenger services.” In the first part of the book, Newport draws on a depth of research and experience to shine a light on this workflow crisis to make a compelling case against email.

## Argument One: Email Reduces Productivity

Email and messaging tools are not in and of themselves unproductive. Quite the contrary. It’s impossible to disregard their convenience. However, the way groups of humans use these tools together is actually counterproductive thanks to the hive mind hyperactivity. When working in a job that relies on your knowledge and information, email subjects you to a highly fragmented style of work. “The core finding of the paper is that once you eliminate formally scheduled meetings, the employees they followed shifted their attention to a new task once every three minutes on average.” The main source of this quick and constant fragmentation was identified as none other than “email.”

Interactions and information exchanges that once happened in in-person meetings over a dedicated and synchronous span of time now occur in small chunks over emails that take much longer overall. “To say we check email too often is an understatement; the reality is that we’re using these tools constantly.” And this constant, “constant multi-tasking craziness” is absolutely unproductive. Human brains are not wired to switch back and forth without an inherent loss to time and quality of thought.

## Argument Two: Email Makes us Miserable

Research has shown an idea that many of us have figured out ourselves. Email stresses us out. In fact, one study that monitored the heart rate of study participants throughout the work day found that “the longer one spends on email in [a given] hour the higher one’s stress for that hour.” That study was followed up by another that tested a commonly offered solution to improving how we work with email. Perhaps these anxious emailers would benefit from using email in a different way? According to Newport, not necessarily.

It is often suggested that people should set aside particular times

to check and respond to batches of email instead of responding every time the inbox pings. The same team of researchers found that this can actually make some people feel more stressed than they would answering emails as they arrive. To further muddle things up, stressed out people are shown to respond more quickly to emails, but with lower-quality responses.

Anxiety, stress, worry, anger, frustration—are these the words we want to associate with a tool that we rely on continually to perform our jobs? Surely there is a better way. Email is making us miserable and aside from the fact that humans have a right to happiness and a real need to reduce stress in their daily lives, miserable workers produce subpar results. Over time, stress and overwhelm can lead to full-blown burnout. This email-associated misery index is bad for our workers and bad for our businesses.

## Argument Three: Email Has a Mind of Its Own

Email had a bit of a slow start when it was first introduced in a corporate setting, but once it took off, it skyrocketed in popularity with astounding speed. Articles from 1987 call it a “clunky tool useful to only a niche market.” By 1994, it was being touted as the technological advancement of the decade and was “the foundation of a half-billion dollar software industry.” Newport says that this is “about as close to an overnight transformation as you’re likely to find in the history of commercial technology adoption.”

The meteoric rise of email should not be that surprising. After all, it solved a major problem by allowing people to engage in asynchronous communication really quickly and relatively inexpensively. The problem is that we didn’t just turn to email to replace handwritten memos and mail carts in offices of the past. This was an unintended, but important consequence. It illustrates how email, in a sense, has a mind of its own. It took us to places we never intended to go.

This is a key property of a term called “technological determinism,” which states that technological advances can alter our behavior in ways that were not or could not be predicted. When email was introduced, human behavior changed in unexpected ways. It multiplied the amount of communication and number of people we engage in communication with many times over. It fundamentally changed the way we do work and created the hyperactive hive mind mental state that is so detrimental to productivity and happiness.

## Principles of a World Without Email

Newport’s arguments against email are easy to understand and difficult to rebuke. Taken in the greater context of the well-established and increasingly accepted idea that constant communication and digital connection are erosive to real human connectedness and effective, clear communication, one can begin to see that maybe, just maybe, email is misused in our work. We can see that our working world may be better without it, but it’s hard to imagine how we could reduce our reliance on it. That’s where the second part of the book takes readers,



# In order to ‘tame the hyperactive hive mind, we must first tame the trend toward non-specialization.’

focusing squarely on how to work without email. The answers lie within four principles.

## The Attention Capital Principle

The industrial revolution that resulted from the implementation of factory assembly lines is an excellent example of how relatively small changes to the way people work can have massive implications for profit and productivity. Knowledge work is poised “to make similarly massive increases in the economic effectiveness of the knowledge sector, if we’re willing to get serious about questioning how we work.”

In knowledge work, the main resource is the human brain itself. Different results will be achieved with different strategies that are aimed at getting the most value from our human brain resources. A leader can make workflow changes to extract a greater amount of attention from their human capital, or the collection of brains that make up their team of knowledge workers.

## The Process Principle

The problems that get identified in unproductive workflows are often not attributable to the people handling the work themselves. Often, it comes down to a failing in how the work is coordinated, assigned, or organized. In knowledge work, we have become especially adept at focusing on how to make people work faster, or how to identify star players, or how to motivate team members to do right by their work. However, this energy is misplaced.

In knowledge work, people are producing work with their minds, not their hands, but can still leverage principles from manufacturing and other hands-on work to improve outcomes. No matter if the output is a physical product or an innovative idea, leaders must have processes in place that determine who is working on what and how that work will evolve. Work must be formally organized with formal processes. The process principle states that “introducing smart production processes to knowledge work can dramatically increase performance and make the work much less draining.”

## The Protocol Principle

Workers within a team or organization must communicate and coordinate with one another about various issues, such as “agreeing on a time for a meeting, determining the next step for a joint project, answering a client question, or providing feedback on an idea.” Some of this coordination is done via implicit rules and others are performed under a set of formal norms. Either way, “many office activities are structured by some manner of rules” that Newport refers to as “coordination protocols.”

The protocol principle asks leaders to accept a short-term frustration in exchange for a long-term benefit. It says, “designing rules that optimize when and how coordination occurs in the workplace is a pain in the short term but can result in significantly more productive operation in the long term.” In practical terms, this principle is applied with strategies like reduced office hours with strict focus policies in place, limiting client access to workers, placing rules on how internal emails can be structured, and regularly scheduled coordination meetings that replace back and forth email communications.

## The Specialization Principle

The rise of technology in knowledge work has created a decrease in specialization. “Knowledge workers with highly trained skills, and the ability to produce high-value output with their brains” spend a great deal of their time working on tasks far outside of their area of skill or expertise. We have to troubleshoot errors on our computers, design pretty presentations, and of course, engage in a flurry of frenzied digital communication.

In order to “tame the hyperactive hive mind, we must first tame the trend toward non-specialization.” The specialization principle says, “in the knowledge sector, working on fewer things, but doing each with more quality and accountability, can be the foundation for significantly more productivity.” In practice, this simply looks like being given the opportunity to focus your efforts where they really matter. Work should be focused and in your own lane. Anything outside of your area of specialization should be the responsibility of someone else.

The first step in addressing the major frustrations and barriers to productivity that are inherent to the modern workplace is to admit that digital communication tools are not the end all, be all answer to how we work. We must understand that these tools can contribute to reduced productivity and worse still, increased unhappiness with our work. But we have the potential to make massive improvements. “There is a better way to do good work in a culture currently obsessed with constant connectivity.” Thanks to Newport’s *A World Without Email*, leaders can make sweeping changes to how their teams work and reap huge rewards in the process.