BOOK REVIEWS

A Review of "Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World"

Cal Newport, New York: Grand Central Publishing (2016)

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For most of us, living within the COVID-19 pandemic has been an exercise in flexibility and change. Before the pandemic, we may have walked into a coworker's office. Today, we check a Team's page or tune into a Zoom meeting (while making a sandwich for our demanding 4-year old). Although necessary, most would argue that we are more reliant and connected to our devices than one year ago. Any moment of concentration can be interrupted by a beep, buzz, notification, or alert.

In *Deep Work*, author Cal Newport, Ph.D., makes the case that the ability to focus on a cognitive task and produce lasting results has become increasingly rare and increasingly valuable. To understand his argument, Newport explains deep work as "professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that pushes your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate." Deep work stands in contrast to shallow work that is "non-cognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted....that do not create value and are easy to replicate" (p. 3). The author concludes that most individuals gravitate toward shallow work because it is easier. "As a consequence, the few who cultivate deep work as a skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive (p. 14)."

Newport is a computer science professor at Georgetown University. He completed his Ph.D. from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2009, and has made a habit of disrupting the status quo. Newport's other interests include digital minimalism, where individuals should reduce time spent online and focus on fewer activities that provide value. He also writes on the "Zen Valedictorian"; the idea that many students focus on a dizzying quantity of meaningless things that drive them crazy, whereas most people judge you on what you do best. [1]

Deep Work is broken into two parts. The first seeks to convince the reader that deep work is valuable and scarce. The second educates the reader on how to accomplish deep work. Newport provides several case studies to include Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, who conducted "think weeks" twice a year (p. 123). Gates isolated himself on a lake

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[1] "Do Less, Do Better." https://www.calnewport.com/about/

and only read and thought "big." Or famed psychiatrist Carl Jung who in 1922 built a retreat on Lake Zurich and spent hours in seclusion, meditation, and writing (p. 130). Newport makes the vital distinction that while Jung had clinical responsibilities, he chose to accomplish deep work at a secluded location. "Not to escape his hectic city life, but to advance his professional life" and eventually change the world's perception of unconscious thought (p. 2).

Newport clarified that certain jobs require skillsets outside the scope of deep work. He cites Jack Dorsey, creator of Twitter and Square, as an example. Dorsey is known for his ability to move quickly between tasks. Newport explains that Dorsey operates at the CEO level and acts upon limited information every day. His ability to lead a large organization directly results from openness to different forms of communication that enable Dorsey to comprehend the big picture.

But Dorsey didn't begin his career as a CEO. Instead, after building a "repository of experience and a proven instinct for his market," Dorsey's value lies in his ability to quickly and effectively comprehend a complex situation and decide the correct way forward (p. 46). Simply put, deep work isn't the only skill required to succeed in today's world but deserves serious consideration. And the deep work accomplished earlier in one's career builds the foundation for strategic leadership at latter stages.

I currently work as a staff officer in the U.S. Air Force. My job description is to build relationships and connect two large academic institutions; it's not deep work, but I believe it is certainly strategically important. Yet, previous to my current position, I spent 13 years flying helicopters at varying organizational levels. In this capacity, the ability to focus and learn technical skills were critical to safety and success. Newport states that deep work is integral to master "intelligent and complicated machines (p. 31)."

I would argue that most military members must master intelligent, complicated machines— whether in land, sea, air, space, or cyberspace. Although not machines, the business and sports arenas have their own complicated systems to master. The deep work accomplished at earlier points in one's career is exactly what makes higher-level leadership successful.

As for improving at deep work, Newport applies ideas from *The Talent Code* by Daniel Coyle, where improvements on complex tasks (either physical or mental) are through myelin generation. Myelin is the fatty tissue surrounding neurons that allow cells to fire "faster and cleaner (p. 36)." As you improve on a complex skill, the myelin increases or thickens, and the circuits fire more "effortlessly and effectively (p. 36)." The fastest way to improve this circuitry is to focus on a specific task and have the circuit fire repeatedly. Most will argue that myelin generation is limited while checking emails, texts, or Teams messages every two minutes.

Newport uses the "Four Disciplines of Execution" from Coyle to explain developing deep work habits. The fundamental premise of this framework is that execution is more difficult than strategizing. Or another way to say this is that "talk is cheap."

- Discipline 1: Focus on the Wildly Important: When it comes to deep work, focus on "a small number of ambitious goals" (p. 136). The more you try to do, the less you accomplish.

- Discipline 2: Act on "Lead Measures": Once the goal is defined, analysis of success is defined by lead or lag measures. As for deep work, an example of lag measures could be a set goal to publish five papers in a year. When you look back at the year, there's not much to be done if you miss the mark. In contrast, lead measures look to the future and are actionable. For example, "I will block off two hours of deep work per day." As

a result of actionable future metrics, you have a better chance of reaching your wildly important goal (p. 137).

- Discipline 3: Keep a Compelling Scoreboard: "People play differently when they keep score" (p. 139). Once the lead measure is defined, track it visibly. For deep work, track the number of focused hours that correlate with output. For example, two hours equates to five pages of writing. This exercise allows the individual to connect deep work to tangible results.

- Discipline 4: Finally, Create a Cadence of Accountability: Build a rhythm where accountability is discussed and tracked within a team. For individuals who seek deep work, this level of responsibility is equally important. Review your weekly progress and identify where you can improve (p. 141).

Anyone who seeks excellence in their trade should read *Deep Work* to include undergraduate, graduate, and young men and women entering the workforce, either in the military or the civilian world. I believe awareness of deep and shallow work is a starting point for success.

We enjoy the distractions because deep work is hard, and humans naturally gravitate toward easy. In this book, Newport highlights the well-beaten path to success includes hours of focused concentration. His many examples of pioneers and leaders across a broad spectrum of vocations clearly supports his theory.

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