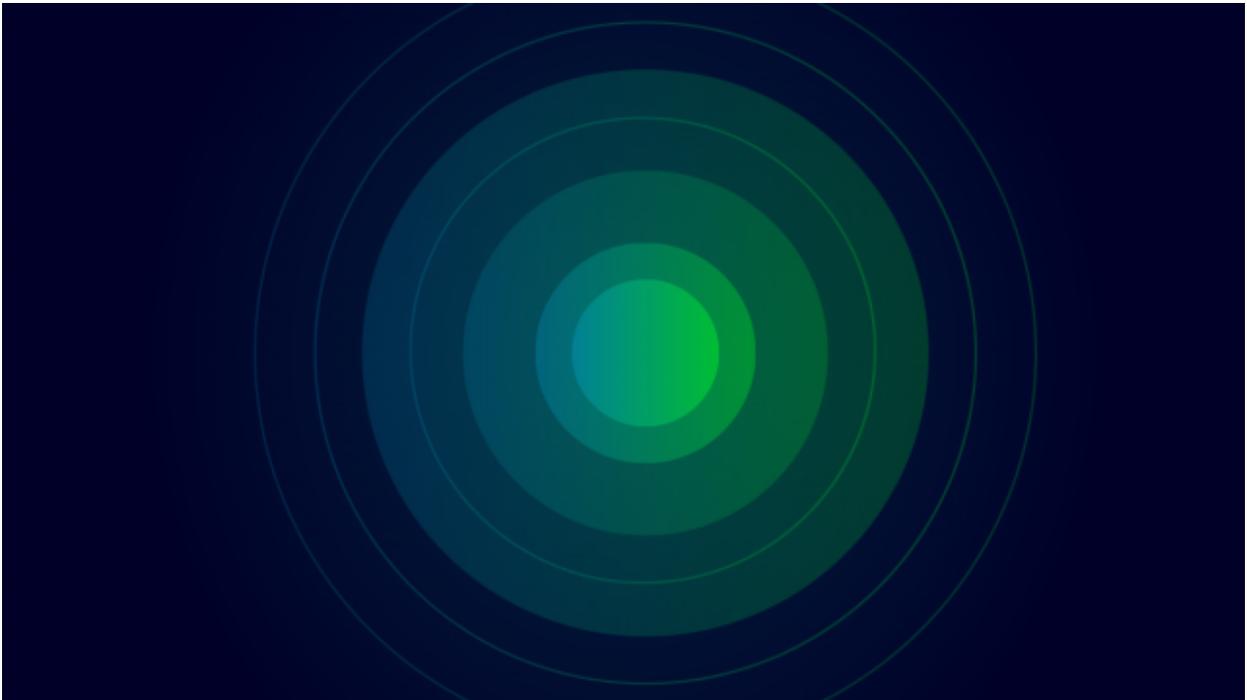


## *Why Deep Work Matters in a Distracted World*



From the moment, we wake in the morning, we're tempted.

Reach for the phone. Check texts. Read email. Scroll through social feeds. Add a few clicks to news stories and before long, you've logged what will likely be the first of more than 76 daily interactions with your mobile device.

Even though mobile devices have increased our access to information and ability to communicate with others, they've also introduced barriers that could negatively impact our work.

By understanding how to distance ourselves from distractions and improve time management, we have a better chance to dive deeper into our thinking and reach new heights of productivity.

### Battle for our attention

Today, we are engaged in a battle for attention—from a cascading waterfall of social streams, news articles, chatter, and digital noise. We unlock our iPhones an average of 80 times and rack up more than 4.7 hours actively engaged with our mobile device each day.

Thirty percent of our daily media consumption is spent surfing the internet. It's not just social noise, either. The average American watches 35 hours of television a week, and our viewing habits have taken a dramatic tilt from televisions to devices.

In the ultimate sign that change is afoot in response to our shifting spans of focus, the National Basketball League (NBA), a stalwart of the American sports scene, is exploring ways to speed up the end of games to satisfy shrinking attention spans.

According to a recent survey commissioned by Microsoft, we lose our focus faster than a goldfish. The glaring takeaway was a quote in the report by Microsoft chief Satya Nadella, who signaled the trait most essential to modern employees seeking success: "The true scarce commodity of the future will be human attention."

## Deeper connection to our work

The idea of 'deep work' is nothing new. The term was recently coined by Cal Newport, a professor, scientist, and author of "Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World."

According to Newport, deep work is classified as 'professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limits.'

It's been practiced in some ways or another by everyone from Carl Jung to United States President Barack Obama.

- President Obama, a well-known 'night guy,' logged time deep into the evening from his office, reading, writing speeches, preparing memos, examining documents, and thinking. He'd be able to finish things during the late night hours that drew constant focus from the leader of the free world during the day. "Everybody carves out their time to get their thoughts together. There is no doubt that window is his window," said Rahm Emanuel, Mr. Obama's first chief of staff. "You can't block out a half-hour and try to do it during the day. It's too much incoming. That's the place where it can all be put aside and you can focus."
- Carl Jung was so passionate about decoupling from the trappings of the world, he built a stone complex in Switzerland he could retreat to when he needed to reflect, think, and write. In his memoir, Jung credited the escape as being important to helping him be satisfied, sufficient, and restful.

These two examples seem almost contradictory. In fact, they are classic illustrations of escaping to a place of comfort as a way to get stuff done. If deep work is a vehicle for concentration and thinking that produces work, it can happen in the Oval Office or in the mountains of Switzerland. It's the ritual, scheduling, and location of the work that matter.

## FOMO

Newport examined the cognitive impact that social media and office distractions have, and the importance of undivided attention in completing meaningful work. By removing distractions, he argues, we can move beyond “shallow work” to reach new levels of productivity and produce a substantial amount of work.

Of course, social media is not bad, and we’d be silly to suggest otherwise. Most of us have an irrational fear of missing out, (FOMO)—so we’ve become dependent on social media, groomed to *always* check in. But, if we understand that distraction can negatively impact our deep work, then we can start to take steps to help us focus on complicated cognitive functions. What do we get out of that? We’re rewarded with mastery of complicated tasks, better information processing, and producing more in less time.

“We have a growing amount of research which tells us that if you spend large portions of your day in a state of fragmented attention—where your regular workflow is constantly broken up by taking frequent breaks to just check in with social media—that this can permanently reduce your capacity for concentration,” said Newport.

Much of social media is specifically built to fragment your time. Not unlike a slot machine, it rewards you with “shiny things”—likes, hearts, retweets, comments, and other positivity in exchange for time. Before long, your day becomes disrupted as you push, pull, and swipe for updates and notifications.

Even a quick glance at Twitter or reviewing an email has a negative impact on your ability to focus on tasks. In fact, that one quick glance costs you about 15 to 20 minutes of attention loss. Our brains are simply not wired for that level of distraction. The barrage of the social media world is changing the landscape of our brain’s reward centers. In addition to impacting our cognitive ability to get work done, it also concerns medical professionals, who are seeing increased rates of anxiety other psychological issues among college students.

Distractions are a growing part of interruptions knowledge workers experience in the office on a daily basis. It’s not just self-imposed interruptions from social media. In the office, we’re bombarded with instant messages, chat and communications from colleagues using collaboration software, email notifications, co-worker “drive-bys,” last-minute meeting requests, and even distractions caused by open floorplans designed to bring us closer together.

## The New Economy

A new competitive information economy is here. And Newport argues that it's one that will reward workers who understand that the currency is work that produces 'unambiguously rare and valuable output.

"Our work culture's shift toward the shallow ... is exposing a massive opportunity for the few who recognize the potential of resisting this trend and prioritizing depth...." Newport writes in *Deep Work*.

The rarest commodity of all is the employee who's able to devote significant time to deep work and its byproduct — high-quality material that is incredibly difficult to automate or to replicate by a machine, an algorithm, or globalization.

"Anything a six-year-old can do with a smartphone is not something the market will reward," Newport says.

Deep work is a tool you need to build and produce things like a craftsman. Think of the time it takes a glassblower to perfect a beautifully-sculpted vase, or how a master woodworker uses both art and craft to create furniture worthy of display in a museum.

Computer programmers, visual designers, academics, and writers all have a huge competitive advantage because of this ability to concentrate and turn out that rare and valuable commodity—the craft that drives the information age.

*"If you can write an elegant algorithm, write a legal brief, write a thousand words of prose, look at a sea of unambiguous data—If you can do these types of activities to produce outcomes that are rare and valuable, people will find you—regardless of how many Instagram followers you have."* —Cal Newport

## How to create meaningful work

Deep work does not have to be tedious. In fact, it can be enjoyable, creative, meditative, and thought-provoking. Here are some tactics to integrate the principles of deep work into your schedule:

1. Work deeply. It takes great patience and practice to get to the point where you can integrate long stretches of deep work into your schedule. Newport created an equation to explain the intensity required of deep work and compared it to students who pulled all-nighters in college.

*Work accomplished = (time spent) x (intensity)*

Work at a high level with dynamic and intense intervals that increase over time to produce a desirable outcome. Get in the zone for at least 90 minutes and build up to periods that last anywhere from two to four hours, or more.

2. Protect your time. Maintain a set of rituals and routines to ease deep work into your day more easily. Try implementing scheduling tactics into your workflow like:

Tallies – Keep a tally of the hours you spend working, or when you reach important milestones like pages read or words written.

Deep scheduling – Try scheduling deep work hours well in advance on a calendar, like two or four weeks ahead of time.

Scheduling and tracking time has a huge benefit of giving time back. Many academics, authors, and scientists have been able to produce ample amount of work while working normal hours and having time for personal pursuits or family on evenings and weekends.

3. Train your brain to do nothing. Try for a moment, to sit still and do nothing. How long do you find it takes until the social stimuli and buzzing signals of your mobile device prove too much? If you can embrace sitting quietly meditating or thinking, or even staring into space, then you can train your brain to spend more time in deeper work.
4. Quit swimming upstream. Decide for yourself what restrictions you can place on email and social media by removing it from your work week altogether, or by logging out and staying off for an entire day. Evaluate your personal and professional life and experiment where social fits and where it doesn't. Your result may be a month-long digital detox, or completely cutting the cord on social.
5. Cut the shallow work. Endless meeting requests and instant email responses are turning knowledge workers into 'human routers' that create the shallow work that defines many of workplaces. We've been groomed to reply and respond because it feels like we're accomplishing something, when in reality, we're not.

“Spend enough time in a state of frenetic shallowness,” Newport warns, “and you permanently reduce your capacity to perform deep work.”

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