Deep Work Summary

By Cal Newport

Have you ever asked yourself what the price of distraction really is?

In an increasingly digitized world, *Deep Work* looks at the price of distraction, and argues that to be at our most productive, we need to engage in deep and highly focused work. Cal Newport believes that multitasking doesn't work, and the best work occurs when we're single-minded, and in the zone.

How often do we focus on a single task, without taking calls, checking email, or opening another web browser to look at the latest news or social media? How often do you aimlessly check your cell phone? The constant intrusion of technology means that we frequently disengage from deep thought and focus. The problem with this, is that if we're not thinking deeply, we aren't working deeply either.

Dr. Cal Newport's book *Deep Work*, asks the question, 'When was the last time you sat down to focus intensely on a single task, without distraction?' We're facing a focus epidemic where productivity is suffering due to the plethora of distractions we're faced with, not just daily, but on an hourly basis.

Cal Newport, Associate Professor in computer science, popular author, and social media avoider, delves into the world of work, focus, and productivity. By distinguishing the two fundamental types of work, shallow and deep work, he offers practical advice on using your time more productively to produce better, more focused work.

This summary briefly looks at how to work smarter, not harder, how to avoid and negate distraction, and it busts the myth of multitasking. Furthermore, Newport advocates rest and rejuvenation and argues that downtime and relaxation are essential components to productivity.

Shallow Work Versus Deep Work

It's probably accurate to assume that your typical office day involves much of what Newport refers to as, "shallow work." This work involves activities such as checking emails, writing reports, and attending meetings. Shallow work leaves you feeling tired, and without the satisfaction of real accomplishment. A lot of the reason for this, is that shallow work is all of the tasks that we can perform when distracted, don't demand much thinking, and are easy to replicate. This kind of work means we don't create anything of value. So why is it that we gravitate towards shallow work?

The truth is that shallow work is easy, and deep work is difficult. Furthermore, shallow work is deceptive; it disguises itself as productivity. Think about all of those little concrete tasks that make you look busy, but add very little value to your work output.

In contrast, deep work is difficult because it's hard to spend uninterrupted time routinely dedicated to your craft. Deep work isn't for

the faint-hearted because it's the space where feelings of discomfort, frustration, and ambiguity occur. We refer to things like "writer's block" or "hitting the wall" because deep work isn't easy and involves working on tricky problems or perfecting performance.

During this process, you're always going to be pushing yourself, and there will appear to be dead ends along the way. That's why most people tend to stay and play in the shallow end. It's comfortable, and it's safe.

Busyness without real exertion, comes at a considerable cost. As the saying goes: "use it or lose it." Newport argues that if you don't engage at a deep level, your brain stops building the neural pathways that engage attention, and enable you to tackle complex problems. As a result, your mind gets more used to shallow work, and a low attention span. The knock-on effect of this, is that companies who ignore shallow work practices, will ultimately lose out on innovative, high-quality work produced quickly. And, even more so, the world loses out on new creative ideas that might shape the future.

Newport argues that the future doesn't need busy people. It needs people who solve complex problems, people who innovate, and people who can focus, so we all need to know what limits our capacity for deep work.

Multitasking Kills Productivity

Connection often means distraction. Living in the digital age means that we're hyper-connected, but ironically, this can disconnect us from completing the essential tasks at hand.

Research indicates that most of us spend only 3 minutes on a task before switching to something else. We think we can multitask, but it's neurologically impossible. Our brains can't attend to two things, with equal attention. Studies show that task switching leaves us with divided attention. When we swap tasks, the mental residue from the first task remains. This switching makes it hard for our brains to adjust and return to a focused state of mind.

Newport asserts that it's time to practice digital minimalism. We should all be focusing on one thing at a time, and for as long as possible.

Practicing deep work can change the function and structure of your brain. Research shows that uninterrupted periods of intense focus, strengthen the protective layers around the brain's neurons. The information then travels faster between these brain cells, allowing us to process, and understand information quickly.

Furthermore, exercising the "attention muscle," burns energy. But, just like any physical training, we can only keep going for so long. Research shows that initially, most of us can only concentrate deeply for up to an hour a day. Experts at deep work can expand this to 4 hours, but few exceed this.

Work Smarter, Not Harder

We've all heard the phrase, "work smarter, not harder." It's a big adjustment to make, because we've put so much value into working longer hours. Just because you're spending more time at the office, doesn't mean you're performing any better. You're probably just working harder at shallow work.

Newport encourages working smarter and developing your ability to delve into deep work. It's not easy - especially if you get distracted quickly. *Deep Work* offers some practical tips to help boost your focus fitness and, in turn, maximize your output.

Firstly, make deep work part of your routine. Understand that willpower alone, won't ensure you commit to doing deep work: you need to make it part of your routine. Think of the things and environment that might support you, like a nice cup of coffee to get you going.

You can schedule deep work, so look at your calendar and make time for it. It's best to find a dedicated space, where you know you won't be interrupted, and also when you feel you're most likely to be productive. Start slowly, by scheduling just an hour, and choose a time when you feel most alert. Once you've got the process started, try turning this into a daily habit that you can sustain. If you can only schedule time weekly, then be sure to set aside at least one full day.

If you work from home, find your space, put up the do-not-disturb sign, and practice digital minimalism. Switch off your phone or set it to airplane mode, shut down all web browsers, and, if you can, disconnect from the internet altogether.

If you're in an office environment, it's a good idea to use noise-canceling

headphones, or ask if you can work remotely.

The key to making deep work part of your life is to commit to this schedule ruthlessly. A scoreboard can help with motivation, and to help keep you on track. For example, Newport keeps a calendar on his wall, where he records the hours he spends each day doing deep work.

Another huge motivating factor, is cultivating time awareness. Try doing a time cost analysis. Question how much time you spend on shallow work instead of deep work. Bring intention to what steals your attention and get rid of the distractions.

Newport divides his day into time blocks of half-hour slots. The night before, he allocates tasks to these slots and is disciplined about sticking to time limits. He ends each week with a review where he evaluates what works and what doesn't, and he adjusts accordingly.

The good news is, it's not all work and no play.

The Importance of Downtime

Downtime is just as significant as focused time. Every single one of us needs to be as committed as possible to making time for restorative rest. As with deep work, downtime requires scheduling and commitment.

Rest restores the energy needed for focused attention, and it's important to plan things during downtime that make you feel revitalized. And no, Netflix alone doesn't cut it. The idea is to take long walks, go for a jog, hang out with friends, play sports, listen to music or read a book. Newport advises doing anything that will help you to unwind, because

when you unwind, your brain re-energizes.

Most of us are guilty of bringing work home with us. Newport argues that when you finish your workday, you should close it off completely. So, clear everything to be neutral on your computer, and then schedule tasks for the following day.

The premise is that once your workday is over, relaxation should begin. Relaxation time is when the magic happens. This time is when your conscious mind rests, and the unconscious mind takes over, which can lead to new and creative insights.

At this stage, the brain switches from a focused mode of thinking to a mind-wandering mode. This mode is when we absorb the stored information, and start to make creative connections. It's that "shower moment" epiphany when the solution to that sticky problem hits you - the one that's kept you puzzled for weeks.

In Conclusion

Perhaps *Deep Work* offers a somewhat idealized view of the world where everyone is highly productive, creative, efficient, and fulfilled. But, if you look at the current work landscape, it's a mess of distractions, needless busywork, and grandiose claims of multitasking ability.

All of the best, and most creative work, emerges from a state of clear focus and careful attention. So, perhaps deep work, along with restorative rest is just the antidote we need. *Deep Work* is a guide that shows us that we can take back control of our time, eliminate distractions, and improve our overall focus.

Focus, and not time, is what we all need more of, to do the work that matters.