

Nuggets and Bright Lines

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Deep Work and Why It is So Valuable

In his 2016 book *Deep Work* Cal Newport begins by introducing us to solid examples of successful individuals such as Carl Jung and more latterly Bill Gates who embodied the deep work principle. Newport swerves consciously away from a philosophical debate as to the relative rights and wrongs of the consequences of the network age and internet revolution. He instead focusses on the opportunity it has brought about. Specifically for those who develop the ability to 'go deep', focus, concentrate and complete a task so as to regularly stretch themselves and produce quality work there will be significant rewards. The reasoning behind this assertion being that the internet and network age with its plethora of information actually dents our ability to focus and concentrate.

Newport's work recognises that those then who set themselves apart with their rare ability to do do deep work and produce the results that only this type of activity can, will be in great demand.

Newport begins by defining what he means by the terms deep and shallow work. He defines shallow work as non cognitively demanding and easy to replicate. On the other hand deep work is defined as hard to replicate activity performed in a state of distraction free concentration with capabilities stretched, aimed at producing a specific outcome. As an illustration Newport cites the example of Jason Benn a young American who 'turned

his life around' from an alleged ninety eight percent time web surfer to a top earning programmer as a result of a u turn from distraction to focus. It is a great story and well worth reading. It may uncomfortably resonate.

Deep work has been called the superpower of the twenty first century. No mediocre claim. If it is true or indeed even a contender for the title, it is surely worth a depth of investigation. Newport emphasises how the financial and professional benefits of his deep work philosophy and practice are accompanied by other advantages brought about by the honed ability to focus. Is this really an acre of diamonds or 'a golden buddha? I have a strong inclination it may well be. So here's to, as he puts it, an investigation into the benefits of 'a ruthless culling of the shallows' and 'an intense cultivation of the deep'.

What drives us to do deep work is often the thing that 'owns us', the thing that wont let us go, that drives us and is our profession or passion. Who knows why the man or woman is obsessed to give up almost everything whilst chasing the answer to a scientific problem, breaking a hidden code or mastering a particular game? In the current age, Newport states, those who will benefit are those who do two things. One, use deep work to embrace and utilise advancing technologies in contrast to continuing to do things the 'old way.' This is akin to using a high powered mechanical digger instead of a shovel and pick or using a computer to calculate instead of hand written calculus. Two, use deep work to be the best in their field. The age of the internet and advanced communication means that most markets are global and consumers can take their pick in many instances from amongst across the world. Commodities are accessed seamlessly in an economically advantageous way. This availability of goods and services increases competition and necessitates a service provider having to rank highly in their field as consumers can easily choose from a vast array of suppliers. Being amongst the best at what you do is seemingly now much more important.

Newport says that the two vital attributes of thriving in this modern world economy are the ability to master hard things and the ability to produce quality at speed. He emphatically describes how we are fooled into believing that proficiency in using widely available modern technologies like ipads and iphones is accepted as a sufficient skill level to be a considered proficient. To the industry professionals such things are not considered as serious tools but are modern consumer products that allow modest tinkering and mediocrity when considered in light of serious value creation. Intelligent machines, he cites, are complicated and difficult to master requiring a challenging honing of ability for those who choose to seriously interact with and glean true value from them.

The other key attribute of learning difficult things quickly requires a depth of study to acquire uncommon knowledge that is then turned into real value for consumers. An example being a consultant in an area of medicine who understands the cutting edge research within a specialist branch of medicine. They understand the relevant pharmaceutical relationships, can give confident advice and guidance, accurately diagnose, prescribe and possibly perform world class procedures efficiently. None of us would consider this as a surprise if it took three quarters of a normal working life span to

achieve. This example provides us with what a definitive valuable end product or service may look like. In this case the consumer may get something as valuable as an extension of life from such a provider. To actually thrive requires the transformation of the hard earned knowledge and information into something of tangible value.

To cultivate these two isolated fundamentals: mastering hard things and producing high quality results at speed, Newport argues is dependant on your ability to perform deep work. This is the backbone of this subject and without it the chances of lasting success according to the author are slim.

K. Anders Ericsson has been credited with the term 'deliberate practice'. His belief is that it is the long periods of focussed attention on a specific task that create the unique results and the eventual state we call expertise. In a reference to prior decades Newport describes the writings of a Dominican Friar called Antonin-Dalmace Sertillanges, a professor of moral philosophy. Sertillanges is quoted as saying in his work 'The Intellectual Life' that to achieve and advance it is necessary to cultivate and use intense concentration. It could be Ericsson speaking.

More recently the work of Malcolm Gladwell in 'The Outliers' and Daniel Coyle in 'The Talent Code' promote the idea of prolonged focussed practice on a particular subject as the key to success, high level production and the path to expertise.

The physiological explanation of the key changes that occur when we practice something are considered to occur at a neurological level primarily in the pathways and connections in the brain. Brain activity can be considered like an electrical circuit with interlinked wires and connectors. If an activity has never been performed before the brain creates new and initially delicate pathways and connections in response to the willed request or attempts at the activity. As the activity is repeated the pathways and their connections become more established and are more easily fired. The process in the body that is considered to facilitate this is called myelination. Myelin is the name of the substance that forms the outer covering of some types of nerves. Well myelinated nerves, those with a thicker covering of myelin, are more easily fired than those with thinner coatings. The more an activity is practiced or repeated the thicker the myelin sheaths become and the stronger and more 'permanent' the circuits become. An important aspect of focus and deep work though, as Newport discusses, is that the less peripheral activity there is in the brain, that is the less distractions, the more focus there is on specific neural pathways and the faster the myelination process can occur. With distractions and multiple influences on the brain the changes occur but it appears from results that the less distractions and the more focus the faster the myelination process occurs and hence the more efficiently the mastery process is enhanced.

Newport does discuss 'the outliers' who appear to spend their lives in shallow distraction in their work and yet have achieved undoubted success in their fields. He particularly focusses on chief executives. They often head up massively profitable, sizeable organisations and are seemingly available personally and electronically for much of the

time to key people in their organisations. He concludes that their current positions although seemingly at odds to the deep work principle have been achieved as a result of prolonged periods of attaining excellence in niche areas with specialised knowledge as a result of, yes you guessed it, deep work.

If we need more convincing to become disciples of a deep work philosophy in addition to the evidence of its economic value Newport cites three arguments to underpin his beliefs. These are namely neurological, psychological and philosophical.

Neurologically, he argues, our brains and nervous systems work more efficiently with focus and less multi tasking. There is, according to research, an overhang or delay that exists when we switch from one activity to another. If we are engaged in activity 'a' and we switch to activity 'b' our brains take a while to 'let go' of activity 'a' and become fully engaged in activity 'b'. This reduces our effectiveness at activity 'b' until we are fully engaged in it. If this task switching is our frequent modus operandi our effectiveness is reduced by our ever moving magnifying glass which is never still long enough to start the fire.

It seems that not only is it a way to greater efficiency but engaging in deep work is what makes us happiest. The structure and challenge of work which forces us to immerse ourselves in problem solving activities, according to research, makes us feel happy. This almost directly opposes the common thought process that the road to happiness is a life where we can relax and do whatever we wish with minimal restrictions and demands; a life of luxury and indulgence. Apparently this common conception is pretty much a fake idol. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work on happiness substantially underpins this argument. So bring on the challenges and projects and maybe ditch the longing for the beach and cocktails!

The final argument for deep work used by Newport is a philosophical one in which he discusses how deep work and immersion in a project provides vital meaning to our existence. He dives into the evolution of human beings and how at this point in history we have much more freedom to choose how we live our lives which brings with it the double edged sword of choice. Essentially our need to focus and immerse ourselves in activities in order to survive has for the most part been taken away leaving us with choices as to how we spend our time. If we choose to spend our time specifically concerned with a goal or project this gives our lives vital meaning. Without such if you believe in Frankl's writings you will not thrive. It does seem that a life of meaning is the best life.

Whatever we call it whether that be deep work, focus, concentration or non distraction it can and should be applied to our practice if we want superior results. It is likely to be a habit that requires establishing so an initial recognition of its absence or frailty in our lives is step one. Now we have moved from being unconsciously incompetent to consciously incompetent. For the first time we know what we do not know.

The decision to set a positive trajectory is the next step. So let's not be too concerned with the quality but make a decision to set up the day and environment so we can at least do some uninterrupted work. An example as a coach may be setting aside a space and time to do duly diligent session preparation and committing to what may be doing that now matter how well for every session we coach. This can be added to with the addition of the discipline of a session review, again initially irrelevant of the quality. These are seemingly small steps. Just two coaching sessions per week for forty weeks is eighty well planned, and reviewed sessions. This can be just the start to becoming the more professional coach you desire to be. Look back in three years with a granite practice of preview deliver and review and see how far you have come, how confident you are and how much you have grown.

If deep work is a serious consideration you wish to implement in your life Newport offers a number of strategies to ponder. He suggests that making a wise decision as to which type best fits your life is important. Trying to fit a strategy into your life that is a poor fit with your professional demands will likely result in failure and frustration.

The first method he discusses he calls The Monastic Way. He cites a successful author and a computer scientist both of whom are renowned for their open admittance of disengagement with communication and trivia outside their singular focus. Both make it clear on their websites that there is no e mail address, that they are unlikely to respond, certainly in a timely way, to any correspondence as they are focussed on a definite major purpose. These are examples of people who are clear disciples of long, uninterrupted periods of deep concentration, have purposely ordered their lives to facilitate this and are very comfortable with it and its consequences.

Carl Jung's approach to insight, discovery and psychological expansion in the 1920s was to create a rural hideaway where he would work for a few hours each day totally undisturbed. He also had a busy social life and psychiatry practice. Jung, it appears, 'chunked' his time into periods of 'monasticism' and periods of busy commitments involving others. This approach seemed to have worked well for Jung. It is less brutal with more obvious flexibility, allows a more balanced approach and seems likely to facilitate a more rounded life.

The next approach Newport calls the rhythmic method. This is where you set a daily scheduled time for your work. He cites a writer who decided to get up at five thirty each morning and do two hours of work. By establishing the activity as a habit, no matter how productive, it is a way of compounding regular gains. This is in contrast to the stark methods of locking oneself away for hours and days and again seems more aligned with demands of modern life and therefore more likely to succeed. It may not allow the movement into a depth of thought and concentration that a stretch of hours does but it certainly will produce significant quantities of work over a period. Many athletes, for example, do their two hours of training at scheduled times, often in the early morning and then go off to work to do a regular job before maybe fitting in some more time later on if applicable on certain days.

The final approach discussed, Newport calls the 'journalistic, approach. This is where you drop in and out of your deep work activity whenever the opportunity arises. He says that this is the method that he utilises himself. He says it was responsible for the writing of the book that stimulated this article. Newport considers it better suited to more advanced or established professionals who have a level of experience and the ability to switch in and out of focus. Initially this method can seem to be a precarious way of attempting deep work in comparison to the previous methods. As Newport suggests though it may not suit the rigours of cutting edge extrapolative cognition for certain individuals but as a tool it certainly has a value.

Amongst the referenced successful proponents of deep work, in whatever form, there is a relatively common thread. This thread is the presence of rituals. It seems that the establishment of rituals facilitates maximum productivity via the process of significant and frequent, if not constant, environmental, circumstantial and cognitive friction reduction.

Newport cites phenomenons of achievement like Charles Darwin and author Robert Caro both of whom had strict rituals regarding what they did, when they did it and for how long. Although we are discussing people who were able to think and create at a high level the key point is that if the consistency of focussed activity and deep work had been absent would they have achieved what they have? These two men used the power of routine and ritual to underpin their achievements.

Newport discusses the work of a journalist called Mason Currey who has spent half a century analysing famous thinkers and writers. Currey believes that rituals strip inspiration almost completely and that waiting for inspiration to come along is a very bad idea if you have any ambition to achieve or produce. Lesson: ritualise your life, specifically your deep work activities. Be prepared to experiment to see what works best for you. The world will think you are weird and obsessed, Congratulations welcome to the club.

There are examples of individuals who valued deep work so much that they did such things as book themselves into high end exclusive hotels and even flew across the world just to create the best conditions to be able to complete what it was they needed to do. These particular actions were taken by writers.

The pro activists for social media and collaboration may be thinking that all this reference to monastic type activities is not helpful in terms of accessing the minds of others and facilitating joint ventures. Newport addresses this issue and cites examples of industrial and academic organisation, some created purposefully and some accidentally, that point to a balanced way of accessing the best of both worlds of being able to do your deep work as well as access the benefits of collaboration. Newport categorically states that working alone is not the sole answer and uses examples of scientific and innovative breakthroughs that resulted from collaborative efforts.

The modern trend for open plan, hot desk, 'no fixed abode' work environments almost forces collaboration. It has been adopted by companies like Facebook, who allegedly have the largest open plan office on the planet. The whole idea being to allow serendipitous occurrences to manifest regularly and naturally as a way of growing and developing.

In terms of purposeful collaboration Newport discusses what he calls the whiteboard effect. This is where individuals come together with a common goal and work together completely focussed on the matter in hand. He gives examples of scientific breakthroughs as a result of two scientists working side by side on a particular problem and 'pushing' each other towards success.

Newport looks at examples of such environments which have been created accidentally. He calls them hub and spoke places. He gives examples of buildings housing a multitude of differing specialities in separate offices connected by a large central corridor, perhaps leading to the dining area or washrooms. It is this particular feature, the long corridor, where people 'bump' into each other and begin conversations he believes that allows collaboration to occur or at least begin. All the time this being balanced by the ability for the professionals to return to their private offices to do deep work. It seemingly gives the best of both worlds: the facility to do both deep and collaborative work.

In the twenty first century there exists a widespread belief that in order to succeed we must work long hours. This is a common mantra in many niches, possibly driven by the self interest of those it serves, that we need to push ourselves to the limit in terms of hours worked in order to succeed. Research findings suggest a direct contradiction to this. Newport again discusses this in detail and evidences the findings that strongly indicate the positive effects of down time as well as the negative effects of constantly 'being on' by checking e mails, websites and apps for example. There are examples of decision making being better in groups of subjects who focussed on other things after doing some basic research on specific subject in comparison to another group who spent the whole allotted time analysing the subject in detail.

Evidence is strong that we have limited attention ability. Baumeister found that we have a limited amount of will power and in the same vein it seems our ability to concentrate is similarly finite. Research findings indicate that we achieve more by being totally focussed for a period of time, around the sixty to ninety minute mark, followed by around a twenty minute break. Studies of elite performers indicate that this cycle can be repeated twice daily or in exceptional circumstances three times before our ability to concentrate and produce good results begins to seriously fade, thus rendering the additional time spent considerably less valuable.

Furthermore, findings indicate that spending time in nature is highly restorative and has positive effects on performance when tasks are returned to. Studies show that subjects who walked in nature compared to subjects who walked in urban areas during breaks performed better in subsequent concentration tasks. It is hypothesised that the relaxed and undemanding stimuli of nature replenishes the brain where as complex and more demanding cognitive activity necessary in busy urban areas or in performing other logistical or administrative tasks is much less effective at allowing mental recovery.

Newport devotes considerable time to explain why he values an evening shutdown to allow him to rest and relax. He describes the process of performing an end of work day ritual to capture the necessary next steps in incomplete projects to relieve the mind of memory demands. He swears by this as a truly life enhancing habit.

There is not much doubt that the evolution of communication platforms, technical advancement and commercial progress seems to make solid deep work and focus harder to achieve. It appears as if these advancements are changing how we use our brains. Being subjected to this 'instant plethoric' world seems to make it rare and difficult to focus and concentrate. It is likely that the majority of the generations born since the widespread availability of the smartphone and the internet as we know it today will be largely unconsciously incompetent about this deep work philosophy and the effect this is having on them and their lives. This is not the place to discuss in depth the subject of happiness but suffice to mention that anyone who is addicted to smartphone checking, as Nash indicates in his research, is not in control which is a barrier to peace and happiness. If we are in doubt as to Nash's standpoint we will do well to digest the language he uses to describe his subject. He says those who are unable to focus are 'suckers for irrelevancy and pretty much mental wrecks'. If that is not a stark wake up call for anyone with any intention of leading a life of meaning, I don't know what is.

To illustrate that all is not doom and gloom and that there are pockets of hope, Newport discusses his personal interactions with individuals, who in their religious communities, undertake daily study to comprehend ancient texts. The outcomes stated by those who undertake these practices in their daily lives are two fold. As well as helping them to understand the content of the texts, it builds their 'mental muscles' which has significantly positive effects in their chosen professions and businesses.

Newport soberingly and simply states you can tell how able you are to focus and control your attention by observing yourself when you are subject to a traffic jam or a supermarket queue. If you immediately have this uncontrollable urge to get out your smartphone you may well be in some form of bondage. He goes on to talk about how, if we wish to develop and become intellectually and cognitively what we are capable of, that this is one thing we need to master and control. It is a little like an athlete instead of spending two to three hours a day doing specific training just haphazardly jogging, throwing an object or swimming a few lengths when the inspiration takes them and expecting a quality outcome.

Newport says that we need to learn to be able to at least embrace boredom, or more likely at least endure it in the beginning of this quest. There are a number of strategies he discusses to help with this mastery.

A journalist called Powers is credited with the labelling of a schedule of one day a week free from technology and the internet as the 'Internet Sabbath'. Newport however logically states that as positive as this may be it is a little like a plan to lose weight where you eat and drink whatever you desire for six days whilst starving yourself on the seventh. Instead he suggests scheduling regular blocks of time, according to the demands of your day, where you use the internet and outside this strictly adhering to abstinence. He adds in caveats about responding to urgent issues which are helpful but it seems a much more plausible way of controlling things.

Newport uses the example of Roosevelt, the past American president who in his student days was known for his ability to create in a variety of fields. It is said he carefully planned each day to ensure the essentials were scheduled. Then with the remaining time he worked with a furious intensity that ensured he was one of the top achieving students whilst most importantly to him also leaving him free to pursue his other interests, which he did successfully.

Reading about such feats brings a realisation that we are probably operating at a good percentage less than our real capabilities. Newport challenges us to set deadlines so the only way of completion is a brutal and total focus on the task with no internet breaks, no coffee machine time and no distractions and to use this like interval training for the brain. Over a period of months this will see you on your way to being an efficient mental giant with an ability to produce volumes of quality work, and be in control of potential distractive impulses. Continue to train this ability and you will set yourself apart and be of immense value with significant and well founded confidence in your abilities.

In the quest for solving problems Newport suggests introducing regular periods of what he calls productive meditation into your life. As an example he recalls a time in his life when he took regular planned walks, no matter what the weather, to and from work. He used these to come up with solutions to specific and pressing problems. His advice in using this as a technique is to review what you already know about your subject and then come up with a specific question you want the answer to. This will facilitate your mind to work on it whilst you are physically occupied. He describes the process where you repeat the review process once you have gained further clarity to progress another step further and continue on in this manner. The warning is also made clear about how your mind will initially balk at the idea of being 'forced' to do deep work. It will likely 'play up' by attempting to review alternative subjects and repeating what it is you already know instead of doing the hard work of going deeper into the subject of importance.

It appears from research into memory athletes who can perform seemingly impossible feats of recall that one of the most valuable side effects of the training is the improvement in concentration. It is not so much the actual ability to retain information that is the real value but the honed ability to concentrate that has positive effects in other areas of life.

As a part of the methodology in achieving a deep work process in our lives Newport uses the story of a farmer to highlight the common mistake of taking the a simple binary stance on whether something is either good or bad without paying it due diligence. In the story the farmer came to a considered and logical decision as to why he did not employ a particular tool in his business. The essence of the story and its value is in the meticulous analysis done in order to weigh up all aspects of the situation before coming to a grounded decision as to the use of this machine. Newport implores us to take the same approach to the internet, e mail and network tools in our life and decide on their value using such a rounded approach rather than just allowing the addictive nature of the tools to decide for us.

Newport suggests in the first instance we get to know what the key objectives are in our life, whether this be professional, a relationship or a personal objective. The goals do not need to be too specific for this purpose. For example a professional one may be: to become an established coach in a professional team in league one. The second stage is to identify the specific activities necessary to move towards this objective. In this situation it may be something akin to: complete my current certification by four hours designated study per week. The third and final part of the process is to make a quality judgement call on whether any of the network tools you currently use has a positive or negative impact on the key activities and therefore the achievement of the goal. This approach will bring you to a rational and solid decision. If, for example, your use of social media is not contributing positively to your objective it will in terms of the time and attention taken be having a negative impact so there is only one decision here. If on the other hand it, following analysis it is a tool contributing a vital piece to your work then keep it and use it efficiently.

To further assist with your crusade towards deep work Newport goes back a century to one of England's esteemed writers, Arnold Bennett. In a book he wrote explaining how to make the most of your twenty four hour day Bennett discusses in depth both why it is vital to do so and how to go about it. He clearly states that the hours before and after the normal eight hour day are to be considered as time to use well in the pursuit of betterment in whatever form the individual chooses. Whether that is in the form of friendship meetings, quality reading, a passion or hobby. The important thing is is pre planning your time as a major tool in preventing time wasting rather than waiting for the time to arrive and then deciding. Bennett goes as far as to explain how the human is happier for having a focus and something concrete to challenge and occupy him or herself in contrast to bobbing around on the ocean of currents chosen by others.

There is a well known maxim that states the time a task takes to complete increases in accordance with the time available to do it. In other words the less time we have the less

time it takes. It seems we are more scrupulous with our time when it is limited, something backed up by practical examples of companies who made their employees work a four day week instead of a five. What they noticed was that there was no reduction in productivity. Going one step further the company experimented with giving employees a whole uninterrupted month off to work on a project of their own choice with no interference or demands. This is in effect akin to facilitating a prolonged period of deep work. At the end of the period the employees had produced a collection of works some of which have subsequently gone on to be used with positive effect on the companies value. The lesson appears to be two fold: one reduce the shallow and two: replace with deep.

Newport sagely advises potential recruits to the school of deep work to schedule as far as possible every minute of the day by blocking off time for planned tasks. He urges the re scheduling of tasks if necessary without concern if situations demand. This allows for the benefits of both structure and flexibility to be a part of life but guided by conscious consideration.

A simple way of deciding what actually constitutes deep and shallow work is provided by Newport. The suggestion is to ask yourself one simple question about each of your tasks. The question being: how long would it take a bright college graduate to learn to do this task sufficiently well? The idea being that if, after analysis of the task, you consider it would take a couple of months of training then this is probably a shallow task whereas if it would require a number of years to develop an understanding and experience in order to produce the required quality of result then this is a deep work task worthy of your time.

In terms of practicality Newport suggests a real conversation with your senior if you are employed regarding your deep to shallow work ratio. This is to get a level of understanding from those you work with and for which will allow the flexibility that may be needed in terms of certain shallow things not getting done as a result of a change in focus.

Dealing with e mail as a significant tyrannical time stealer is attended to with pertinent advice. Newport champions consolidating your personal stance on this so you only fight the battle once, creating clarity about what you are going to allow to take your time. Newport suggests we follow advice to be prepared to not respond to everything and to be prepared to accept that people may be upset by our choices not to respond. He also discusses the use of filters and a proactive process response technique he describes in depth to facilitate e mail being a more productive tool.

There is a timely reminder to us to be on our guards against being a 'yes' person and a suggestion of having a 'no default setting' as an excellent method of helping us control our lives.

In wrapping up the book Newport reminds the readers as to why joining the focussed few and embracing the depth way of life is a better way to work and live although, as he reminds the reader, his argument was purely intended as a pragmatic one not a philosophical one.

The Author

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