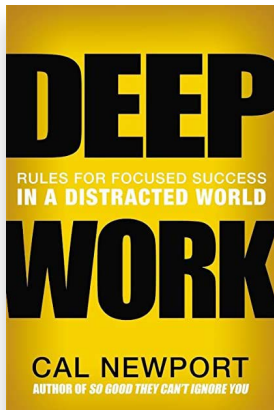


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Deep Work

THE NUTSHELL

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Deep work refers to the professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate. Deep work is necessary to wring every last drop of value out of your current intellectual capacity. We now know from decades of research in both psychology and neuroscience that the state of mental strain that accompanies deep work is also necessary to improve your abilities. The ubiquity of deep work among influential individuals is important to emphasize because it stands in sharp contrast to the behavior of most modern knowledge workers (a group that's rapidly forgetting the value of going deep).

In an age of network tools, knowledge workers increasingly replace deep work with the shallow alternative which includes constantly sending and receiving e-mail messages like human network routers, with frequent breaks for quick hits of distraction. Larger efforts that would be well served by deep thinking, such as forming a new business strategy or writing an important grant application, get fragmented into distracted dashes that produce muted quality.

Current economic thinking argues that the unprecedented growth and impact of technology are creating a massive restructuring of our economy. In this new economy, two groups will have a particular advantage: those who can work well and creatively with intelligent machines, and those who are the best at what they do.

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What's the secret to landing in these lucrative sectors of the widening digital divide? I argue that the following two core abilities are crucial: (1) The ability to quickly master hard things, and (2) the ability to produce at an elite level, in terms of both quality and speed.

Most of the intelligent machines driving the Great Restructuring are significantly more complex to understand and master. To join the group of those who can work well with these machines requires that you hone your ability to master hard things. These technologies change rapidly, so this process of mastering hard things never ends. You must be able to do it quickly, again and again. This ability to learn hard things quickly, of course, isn't just necessary for working well with intelligent machines, it also plays a key role in the attempt to become a superstar in just about any field, even those that have little to do with technology.

Now consider the second core ability from the list shown earlier, which is producing at an elite level. If you want to become a superstar, mastering the relevant skills is necessary, but not sufficient. You must then transform that latent potential into tangible results that people value. How does one cultivate these core abilities?

It's here that we arrive at a central thesis of this book. The two core abilities just described depend on your ability to perform deep work. If you haven't mastered this foundational skill, you'll struggle to learn hard things or produce at an elite level. To produce at your peak level, you need to work for extended periods with full concentration on a single task free from distraction. Put another way, the type of work that optimizes your performance is deep work. If you're not comfortable going deep for extended periods of time, it'll be difficult to get your performance to the peak levels of quality and quantity increasingly necessary to thrive professionally. Unless your talent and skills absolutely dwarf those of your competition, the deep workers among them will out produce you.

It seems that in today's business landscape, many knowledge workers, bereft of other ideas, are turning toward this old definition of productivity in trying to solidify their value in the otherwise bewildering landscape of their professional lives. Knowledge workers, I'm arguing, are tending toward increasingly visible busyness because they lack a better way to demonstrate their value. If you send and answer e-mails at all hours, if you schedule and attend meetings constantly, if you weigh in on instant message systems within seconds when someone poses a new question, or if you roam your open office bouncing ideas off all whom you encounter, you seem busy in a public manner. If you're using busyness as a proxy for productivity, then these behaviors can seem crucial for convincing yourself and others that you're doing your job well.

The ability to concentrate intensely is a skill that must be trained. Once your brain has become accustomed to on-demand distraction it's hard to shake the addiction even when you want to concentrate. Once you're wired for distraction, you crave it. Instead of scheduling the occasional break from distraction so you can focus, you should instead schedule the occasional break from focus to give in to distraction. To make this suggestion more concrete, let's make the simplifying assumption that Internet use is synonymous with seeking distracting stimuli. Similarly, let's consider

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working in the absence of the Internet to be synonymous with more focused work. With these rough categorizations established, the strategy works as follows: schedule in advance when you'll use the Internet, and then avoid it altogether outside these times. I suggest that you keep a notepad near your computer at work. On this pad, record the next time you're allowed to use the Internet. Until you arrive at that time, absolutely no network connectivity is allowed, no matter how tempting.

The value of deep work vastly outweighs the value of shallow, but this doesn't mean that you must quixotically pursue a schedule in which all of your time is invested in depth. For one thing, a non-trivial amount of shallow work is needed to maintain most knowledge work jobs. You might be able to avoid checking your e-mail every ten minutes, but you won't likely last long if you never respond to important messages. In this sense, we should see the goal of this rule as taming shallow work's footprint in your schedule, not eliminating it.

The deep life, of course, is not for everybody. It requires hard work and drastic changes to your habits, but if you're willing to sidestep these comforts and fears, and struggle to deploy your mind to its fullest capacity to create things that matter, then you'll discover that depth generates a life rich with productivity and meaning. Writer Winifred Gallagher said, "I'll live the focused life, because it's the best kind there is." I agree, and I hope you'll agree too.