***Deep Work: Rules For Focused Success In A Distracted World***

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**Introduction**

In the Swiss canton of St. Gallen, near the northern banks of Lake Zurich, is a village named Bollingen. In 1922, the psychiatrist Carl Jung chose this spot to begin building a retreat. He began with a basic two-story stone house he called the Tower. After returning from a trip to India, where he observed the practice of adding meditation rooms to homes, he expanded the complex to include a private office. “In my retiring room I am by myself,” Jung said of the space. “I keep the key with me all the time; no one else is allowed in there except with my permission.”

His afternoons would often consist of meditation or long walks in the surrounding countryside. There was no electricity at the Tower, so as day gave way to night, light came from oil lamps and heat from the fireplace.

Carl Jung went on to become one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. There are, of course, many reasons for his eventual success. In this book, however, I'm interested in his commitment to the following skill, which almost certainly played a key role in his accomplishments:

**Deep Work**: 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 ring 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.

Mark Twain wrote much of the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in the shed on the property of Quarry Farm in New York, where he was spending the summer. Twain’s study was so isolated from the main house that his family took to blowing a horn to attract his attention for meals.

J.K. Rowling was famously absent from social media during the writing of her Harry Potter novels. This coincided with the rise of the technology and its popularity among media figures.

Microsoft CEO Bill Gates famously conducted “Think Weeks” twice a year, during which he would isolate himself (often in a lakeside cottage) to do nothing but read and think big thoughts. Neal Stephenson, the acclaimed cyberpunk author who helped form our popular conception of the Internet age, is near impossible to reach electronically- his website offers no e-mail address and features an essay about why he is purposefully bad at using social media. Here’s how he once explained the omission: “If I organize my life in such a way that I get lots of long, consecutive, uninterrupted time-chunks, I can write novels. [If I instead get interrupted a lot] what replaces it? Instead of a novel that will be around for a long time… there was a bunch of e-mail messages that I have sent out to individual persons.”

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.

The reason knowledge workers are losing their familiarity with deep work is well established: network tools. This is a broad category that captures communication services like e-mail and SMS, social media networks like Twitter and Facebook, and the shiny tangle of infotainment sites like BuzzFeed and Reddit. In aggregate, the rise of these tools, combined with ubiquitous access to them for smart phones and networked office computers, has fragmented most knowledge workers’ attention into slivers.

This state of fragmented attention cannot accommodate deep work, which requires long periods of uninterrupted thinking. At the same time, however, modern knowledge workers are not loafing. In fact, they report that they are as busy as ever. What explains the discrepancy? A lot can be explained by another type of effort, which provides a counterpart to the idea of deep work:

**Shallow Work:** Non-cognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tend to not create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate.

In an age of network tools, in other words, knowledge workers increasingly replace deep work with the shallow alternative- 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. To make matters worse for depth, there is increasing evidence that this shift toward the shallow is not a choice that can be easily reversed. Spend enough time in a state of frantic shallowness and you *permanently* reduce your capacity to perform deep work. “What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation,” admitted journalist Nicholas Carr, in an oft-cited 2008 Atlantic article. “[And] I'm not the only one.” Carr expanded this argument into a book, *The Shallows*, which became a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. To write *The Shallows*, appropriately enough, Carr had to move to a cabin and forcibly disconnect.

The idea that network tools are pushing our work from the deep toward the shallow is not new. *The Shallows* was just the first in a series of recent books to examine the internet's effect on our brains and work habits. These subsequent titles include William Power’s *Hamlet’s BlackBerry*, John Freeman’s *The Tyranny of E-mail*, and Alex Soojung-Kim Pang’s *The Distraction Addiction*- all of which agree, more or less, that network tools are distracting us from work that requires unbroken concentration, while simultaneously degrading our capacity to remain focused.

Deep work is not some nostalgic affection of writers and early- twentieth-century philosophers. It's instead a skill that has great value today.

There are two reasons for this value. The first has to do with learning. We have an information economy that's dependent on complex systems that change rapidly. To remain valuable in our economy, therefore, you must master the art of quickly learning complicated things. This task requires deep work. If you don't cultivate this ability, you're likely to fall behind as technology advances.

The second reason the deep work is valuable is because the impacts of digital network revolution cut both ways. If you can create something useful, it's reachable audience (e.g., employers or customers) it is essentially limitless- which greatly magnifies your reward. To succeed you have to produce the absolute best stuff you're capable of producing-a task that requires depth.

**The Deep Work Hypothesis**: the ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. As a consequence, the few who cultivate the skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive.

This book has two goals, pursued in two parts. The first, tackled in part one, is to convince you that the deep work hypothesis is true. The second, tackled in Part 2, is to teach you how to take advantage of this reality by training your brain and transforming your work habits to place deep work at the core of your professional life.

I spent the past decade cultivating my own ability to concentrate on hard things. To understand the origins of this interest, it helps to know that I'm a theoretical computer scientist who performed my doctoral training at MIT's famed Theory of Computation group- a professional setting where the ability to focus is considered a crucial occupational skill.

To the chagrin of both my friends and various publicists I've worked with on my books, I've never had a Facebook or Twitter account, or any other social media presence outside of a blog. I don't Web surf and get most of my news from my home delivered Washington Post and NPR. I’m also generally hard to reach: my author website doesn't provide a personal e-mail address, and I didn't own my first smartphone until 2012 (when my pregnant wife gave me an ultimatum- “you have to have a phone *that works* before our son is born”).

On the other hand, my commitment to depth has rewarded me. In a ten-year following my college graduation, I published four books, earned a PhD, wrote peer-reviewed academic papers at a high rate, and was hired as a tenure-track professor at Georgetown University. I maintained this voluminous production while rarely working past five or six p.m. during the workweek.

For the most part, I don't touch a computer between the time when I get home from work and the next morning when my new workday begins (the main exception being blog posts, which I like to write after my kids go to bed). This ability to fully disconnect, as opposed to the more standard practice of sneaking in a few quick work e-mail checks, or giving in to frequent surveys of social media sites, allows me to be present with my wife and two sons in the evenings, and to read a surprising number of books for a busy father of two. More generally, the lack of distraction in my life tones down that background hum of nervous mental energy that seems to pervade people's daily lives.

This book is best described as an attempt to formalize and explain my attraction to depth over shallowness, and to detail the types of strategies that have helped me act on this attraction. I've committed this thinking to words, in part, to help you follow my lead in rebuilding your life around deep work.

**Chapter 1: Deep Work Is Valuable**

**Deep Work Helps You Produce at an Elite Level**

Adam Grant produced at an elite level. When I met Grant in 2013, he was the youngest professor to be awarded tenure at the Wharton School of Business at Penn. He's now the youngest *full professor* at Wharton.

The reason Grant advanced so quickly in his corner of academia is simple: He produces. In 2012, grant published seven articles- all of them in major journals. This is an absurdly high rate for his field (in which professors tend to work alone or in small professional collaborations and do not have large teams of students and postdocs to support their research). In 2013, this count fell to five. This is still absurdly high, but below his recent standards. He can be excused for this dip, however, because this same year he published a book titled *Give and Take*, which popularized some of his research on relationships and business. To say that this book was successful is an understatement. It ended up featured on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* and went on to become a massive bestseller. When Grant was awarded full professorship in 2014, he had already written more than sixty peer reviewed publications in addition to his best-selling book.

Though Grant’s productivity depends on many factors, there is one idea in particular that seems central to his method: the batching of hard but important intellectual work into long, uninterrupted stretches.

Grant also batches his attention on a smaller time scale. Within a semester dedicated to research, he alternates between periods where his door is open to students and colleagues, and periods where he isolates himself to focus completely and without distraction on a single research task. (He typically divides the writing of a scholarly paper into three discrete tasks: analyzing the data, writing a full draft, and editing the draft into something publishable.) During these periods, which can last up to three or four days, he'll often put an out-of-office auto-responder on his email so correspondents will know not to expect a response. -“It sometimes confuses my colleagues,” he told me. “They say, ‘You're not out of office, I see you in your office right now!’” But to Grant, it's important to enforce strict isolation until he completes the task at hand.

My guess is that Adam Grant doesn't work substantially more hours than the average professor at an elite research institution (generally speaking, this is a group prone to workaholism), but he still manages to produce more than just about anyone else in his field. I argue that his approach to batching helps explain this paradox. In particular, by consolidating his work into intense and uninterrupted pulses, he's leveraging the following law of productivity:

High-Quality Work Produced=

(Time Spent) x (Intensity of Focus)

This is not the first time I've encountered this formulaic conception of productivity. It came to my attention when I was researching my second book, *How to Become a Straight-A Student*, many years earlier. During that research process, I interviewed around fifty ultra-high-scoring college undergraduates from some of the country's most competitive schools. Something I noticed in these interviews is that the very best students often studied less than the group of students right below them on the GPA rankings. One of the explanations for this phenomenon turned out to be the formula detailed earlier: The best students understood the role intensity plays in productivity and therefore went out of their way to maximize their concentration- radically reducing the time required to prepare for test or write papers, without diminishing the quality of their results.

When we step back from these individual observations, we see a clear argument form: 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 will 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 dwarfed those of your competition, the deep workers among them will outproduce you.

**Chapter 2: Deep Work Is Rare**

**The Principle of Least Resistance**

When it comes to distracting behaviors embraced in the workplace, we must give a position of dominance to the now ubiquitous *culture of connectivity*, where one is expected to read and respond to emails (and related communication) quickly. In researching this topic, Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow found that the professionals she surveyed spent around twenty to twenty-five hours a week *outside the office* monitoring e-mail- Believing it important to answer any e-mail (internal or external) within an hour of its arrival.

You might argue- as many do- that this behavior is necessary in many fast-paced businesses. But here's where things get interesting: Perlow tested this claim. In more detail, she convinced executives at the Boston Consulting Group, a high-pressure management consulting firm with an ingrained culture of connectivity, to let her fiddle with the work habits of one of their teams. She wanted to test a simple question: Does it really help your work to be constantly connected? To do so, she did something extreme: she forced each member of the team to take one day out of the workweek completely off- no connectivity to anyone inside or outside the company.

“At first, the team resisted the experiment,” she recalled about one of the trials. “The partner in charge, who had been very supportive of the basic idea, was suddenly nervous about having to tell her client that each member of her team would be off one day a week.” The consultants were equally nervous and worried that they were “putting their careers in jeopardy.” But the team didn't lose their clients and its members did not lose their jobs. Instead, the consultants found more enjoyment in their work, better communication among themselves, more learning (as we might have predicted, given the connection between depth and skill development highlighted in the last chapter), and perhaps most important, “a better product delivered to the client.”

This motivates an interesting question: Why do so many follow the lead of the Boston Consulting Group and foster a culture of connectivity even though it's likely that it hurts employees well-being and productivity, and probably doesn't help the bottom line? I think the answer can be found in the following reality of workplace behavior.

**The Principle of Least Resistance:** In a business setting, without clear feedback on the impact of various behaviors to the bottom line, we will tend toward behaviors that are easiest in the moment.

**The Cult of the Internet**

Writing in the early 1990s, as the personal computer revolution first accelerated, the late communication theorist and New York University professor Neil Postman, argued that our society was sliding into a troubling relationship with technology. We were, he noted, no longer discussing the trade-offs surrounding new technologies, balancing the new efficiencies against the new problems introduced.

He called such a culture a *technopoly*, and he didn't mince words warning against it. “Technology eliminates alternatives to itself in precisely the way Aldous Huxley outlined in *Brave New World*,” he argued in his 1993 book on the topic. “It does not make them illegal. It does not make them immoral. It does not even make them unpopular. It makes them invisible and therefore irrelevant.”

Postman died in 2003, but if he were alive today he would likely express amazement about how quickly his fears from the 1990s came to fruition- a slide driven by the unforeseen and sudden rise of the Internet. Fortunately, Postman has an intellectual heir to continue this argument in the Internet Age: the hyper citational social critic Evgeny Morozov. In his 2013 book, *To Save Everything, Click Here*, Morozov attempts to pull back the curtains on our obsession with “the Internet,” saying: “It's this propensity to view ‘the Internet’ as a source of wisdom and policy advice that transforms it from a fairly uninteresting set of cables and network routers into a seductive and exciting ideology- perhaps today's uber-ideology.”

Deep work is builds on values like quality, craftsmanship, and mastery that are decidedly old-fashioned and nontechnological. Deep work often requires the rejection of much of what is new and high-tech. Deep work is exiled in favor of more distracting high-tech behaviors, like the professional use of social media, not because the former is empirically inferior to the latter. Indeed, if we had hard metrics relating the impact of these behaviors on the bottom line, our current technology would likely crumble. But the metric black hole prevents such clarity and allows us instead to elevate all things Internet into Morozov’s feared “uber-technology.” In such a culture, we should not be surprised that deep work struggles to compete against the shiny thrum of tweets, likes, tagged photos, walls, posts, and all the other behaviors that we’re now taught are necessary for no other reason than that they exist.

**Chapter 3: Deep Work Is Meaningful**

**A Neurological Argument for Depth**

The science writer Winifred Gallagher stumbled onto a connection between attention and happiness after an unexpected and terrifying event, a cancer diagnosis- “not just cancer,” she clarifies, “but a particularly nasty, fairly advanced kind.” As Gallagher recalls in her 2009 book *Rapt*, as she walked away from the hospital after the diagnosis she formed a sudden and strong intuition: “This disease wanted to monopolize my attention, but as much as possible, I would focus on my life instead.” The cancer treatment that followed was exhausting and terrible, but Gallagher couldn't help noticing, in that corner of her brain honed by a career in nonfiction writing, that her commitment to focus on what was good in her life- “movies and walks”- worked surprisingly well. Her life during this period should have been mirrored in fear and pity, but it was instead, she noted often quite pleasant.

Her curiosity piqued, Gallagher set out to better understand the role that attention- that is, what we choose to focus on and what we choose to ignore- plays in defining the quality of our life. After five years of science reporting, she came away convinced that she was witness to a “grand unified theory” of the mind:

*Like fingers pointing to the moon, other diverse disciplines from anthropology to education, behavioral economics to family counseling, similarly suggest that the skillful management of attention is the sine qua non of the good life and the key to improving virtually every aspect of your experience.*

This concept upends the way most people think about their subjective experience of life. We tend to place a lot of emphasis on our *circumstances*, assuming that what happens to us (or fails to happen) determines how we feel. From this perspective, the small-scale details of how you spend your day aren't that important, because what matters are the large-skill outcomes, such as whether or not you get a promotion or moved to the nicer apartment. According to Gallagher, decades of research contradict this understanding. Our brains instead construct our worldview based on *what we pay attention to*. As Gallagher summarizes: “Who you are, what you think, feel, and do, what you love- here's the sum of what you focus on.”

We can now step back and use Gallagher's grand theory to better understand the role of deep work in cultivating a good life. This theory tells us that your world is the outcome of what you pay attention to, so consider for a moment the type of mental world constructed when you dedicate significant time to deep endeavors. Gallagher's theory, therefore, predicts that if you spend enough time in this state, your mind will understand your world as rich in meaning and importance.

“After running my tough experiment [with cancer]… I have a plan for living the rest of my life,” Gallagher concludes in her book. I'll choose my targets with care… then give them my rapt attention. In short, I'll leave the focused life, because it's the best kind there is.” We'd be wise to follow her lead.

**A Psychological Argument for Depth**

Our second argument for why depth generates meaning comes from the work of one of the world's best-known psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In the early 1980s, Csikszentmihalyi, working with Reed Larson, a young colleague at the University of Chicago, invented a new technique for understanding the psychological impact of everyday behaviors. At the time, it was difficult to accurately measure the psychological impact of different activities. If you brought someone into a laboratory and asked her to remember how she felt at a specific point many hours ago, she was unlikely to recall. If you instead gave her a diary and asked her to record how she felt throughout the day, she wouldn't be likely to keep up the entries with diligence- it's simply too much work.

Csikszentmihalyi and Larson’s breakthrough was to leverage new technology (for the first time) to bring the question to the subject right when it mattered. In more detail, they outfitted experimental subjects with pagers. These pagers would beep at randomly selected intervals (in modern incarnations of this method, smartphone apps play the same rule). When the beeper went off, the subjects would record what they were doing at the exact moment and how they felt.

And because the subjects were recording responses about an activity *at the very moment* they were engaged in it, their responses were more accurate. Csikszentmihalyi and the Larson called the approach the experience sampling method (ESM ), and it provided unprecedented insight into how we actually feel about the beats of our daily lives.

Among the breakthroughs, Csikszentmihalyi’s work with ESM helped validate a theory he had been developing over the preceding decade: “the best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.” Csikszentmihalyi calls this mental state *flow* (a term he popularized with a book of the same title). At the time, this finding pushed back against conventional wisdom. Most people assumed (and still do) that relaxation makes them happy. We want to work less and spend more time in the hammock. But the results from his ESM studies revealed that most people have this wrong:

*Ironically, jobs are actually easier to enjoy than free time, because like flow activities that have built-in goals, feedback rules, and challenges, all of which encourage one to become involved in one's work, to concentrate and lose oneself in it. Free time, on the other hand, is unstructured, and requires much greater effort to be shaped into something that can be enjoyed.*

When measured empirically, people were happier at work and less happy relaxing than they suspected. And as the ESM studies confirmed, the more such flow experiences that occur in a given week, the higher the subjects’ life satisfaction. Human beings, it seems, are at their best when immersed deeply into something challenging.

The connection between deep work and flow should be clear: deep work is an activity well suited to generate a flow state (the phrases used by Csikszentmihalyi to describe what generates flow include notions of stretching your mind to its limits, concentrating, and losing yourself in an activity- all of which also describe deep work). Combining these two ideas we get a powerful argument from psychology in favor of depth. Csikszentmihalyi even goes as far to argue that modern companies should embrace this reality, suggesting that “jobs should be redesigned so that they resemble as closely as possible flow activities.”

Winifred Gallagher stated, “I’ll live the focused life, because it's the best kind there is.” This is perhaps the best way to sum up the argument for this chapter: A deep life is a good life, any way you look at it.

**Rule #1: Work Deeply**

The key to developing a deep work habit is to move beyond good intentions and add *routines* and *rituals* to your working life designed to minimize the amount of your limited willpower necessary to transition into and maintain a state of unbroken concentration. If you suddenly decide, for example, in the middle of a distracted afternoon spent Web browsing, to switch your attention to a cognitively demanding task, you’ll draw heavily from your finite willpower to wrest your attention away from the online shininess. Such attempts will therefore frequently fail. On the other hand, if you deployed smart routines and rituals- perhaps a set time and quiet location used for your deep tasks each afternoon- you'd require much less willpower to start and keep going. In the long run, you'd therefore succeed with these deep efforts far more often.

With this in mind, the strategies that follow can be understood as an arsenal of routines and rituals designed with the science of limited willpower in mind to maximize the amount of deep work you consistently accomplish in your schedule. Among other things, they'll ask you to commit to a particular pattern for scheduling this work and develop rituals to sharpen your concentration before starting each session. Some of these strategies will deploy simple heuristics to hijack your brain's motivation center while others are designed to recharge your willpower reserve.

You could just try to make deep work a priority. But supporting this decision with the strategies that follow- or strategies of your own devising that are motivated by the same principles- will significantly increase the probability that you succeed in making deep work a crucial part of your professional life.

**Decide on Your Depth Philosophy**

The famed computer scientist Donald Knuth cares about deep work. As he explains on his website: “What I do takes long hours of studying and uninterruptible concentration.” A doctoral candidate named Brian Chappell, who was a father with a full-time job, also values deep work, and it's the only way he could make progress on his dissertation given his limited time.

I mentioned these examples because although Knuth and Chappell agree on the importance of depth, they disagree on their *philosophies* for integrating this depth into their work lives. Knuth Deploys a form of monasticism that prioritizes deep work by trying to eliminate or minimize all other types of work. Chappell, by contrast, deploys a rhythmic strategy in which he works by the same hours (5:00 to 7:30 AM) every weekday morning, without exception, before beginning a work day punctuated by standard distractions.

You need your own philosophy for integrating deep work into your professional life. There are many different ways to integrate deep work into your schedule, and it's therefore worth taking the time to find an approach that makes sense for you.

**The Monastic Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling**

Knuth goes on to acknowledge that he doesn't intend to cut himself off completely from the world. He notes that writing his books requires communication with thousands of people and that he wants to be responsive to questions and comments. His solution? He provides an address- a *postal mailing* address. He says that his administrative assistant will sort through any letters arriving at that address and put aside those that she thinks are relevant. Anything that's truly urgent she'll bring to Knuth promptly, and everything else he'll handle in a big batch, once every three months or so.

Knuth deploys what I call the *monastic philosophy* of deep work scheduling. This philosophy attempts to maximize deep efforts by eliminating or radically minimizing shallow obligations. Practitioners of the monastic philosophy tend to have a well-defined and highly valued professional goal that they’re pursuing, and the bulk of their professional success comes from doing this one thing exceptionally well.

**The Bimodal Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling**

This book opened with a story about the revolutionary psychologist and thinker Carl Jung. He began regular retreats to a rustic stone house he built in the woods outside the small town of Bollingen. When there, Jung would lock himself every morning into a minimally appointed room to write without interruption. He would then meditate and walk in the woods to clarify his thinking in preparation for the next day's writing.

In recalling this story I want to emphasize something important: Jung did not deploy a monastic approach to deep work. Donald Knuth attempted to completely eliminate distraction and shallowness from his professional life. Jung, by contrast, sought this elimination only during the periods he spent at his retreat.

Jung's approach is what I call the *bimodal philosophy* of deep work. This philosophy asks you to divide your time, dedicating some clearly defined stretches to deep pursuits and leaving the rest open to everything else. During the deep time, the bimodal worker will act monastically- seeking intense and uninterrupted concentration.

The bimodal philosophy believes that deep work can produce extreme productivity, *but only if* the subject dedicates enough time to such endeavors to reach maximum cognitive intensity- the state in which real breakthroughs occur. This is why the minimum unit of time for deep work in this philosophy tends to be at least one full day. To put aside a few hours in the morning, for example, is too short to count as deep work for a adherents of this approach.

People will usually respect you are right to become inaccessible if these periods are well defined and well-advertised, and outside these stretches, you're once again easy to find.

**The Rhythmic Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling**

Jerry Seinfeld stated that “the way to be a better comic was to create better jokes,” and then explained that the way to create better jokes was to write every day. Seinfeld continued by describing a specific technique he used to help maintain this discipline. He kept a calendar on his wall. Every day that he writes jokes he crosses out the date on the calendar with a big red X. “After a few days you'll have a chain,” Seinfeld said. “Just keep at it and the chain will grow longer every day. You'll like seeing that chain, especially when you get a few weeks under your belt. Your only job next is to not break the chain.”

This *chain method* soon became a hit among riders and fitness enthusiasts- communities that thrive on the ability to do hard things consistently. For our purposes, it provides a specific example of a general approach to integrating depth into your life: the *rhythmic philosophy*. This philosophy argues that the easiest way to consistently start deep work sessions is to transform them into a simple regular habit. The goal, in other words, is to generate a *rhythm* for this work that removes the need for you to invest energy in deciding if and when you're going to go deep. The chain method is a good example of the rhythmic philosophy of deep work scheduling because it combines a simple scheduling heuristic (do the work every day), with an easy way to remind yourself to do the work: the big red Xs on the calendar.

**The Journalistic Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling**

In the 1980s, the journalist Walter Isaacson was in his thirties and well along in his rapid ascent through the ranks of *Time* magazine. What interests me about Isaacson, however, is not what he accomplished with his first book but *how* he wrote it. My uncle John Paul Newport, who was also a journalist in New York at the time, shared a summer beach rental with Isaacson. To this day, my uncle remembers Isaacson's impressive work habits:

*It was always amazing…he could retreat up to the bedroom for a while, when the rest of us we're chilling on the patio or whatever, to work on his book… he'd go up for twenty minutes or an hour, we'd hear the typewriter pounding, then he'd come down as relaxed as the rest of us… the work never seemed to faze him, he just happily went up to work when he had the spare time.*

Isaacson was methodic: Any time he could find some free time, he would switch into a deep work mode and hammer away at his book. This is how, it turns out, one can write a nine-hundred-page book on the side while spending the bulk of one’s day becoming one of the country's best magazine writers.

I call this approach, in which you fit deep work whenever you can into your schedule, the *journalist philosophy*. This name is a nod to the fact that journalists, like Walter Isaacson, are trained to shift into a writing mode on a moment’s notice, as is required by the deadline-driven nature of their profession.

I'm partial to the journalistic philosophy of deep work because it's my main approach to integrating these efforts into my schedule. In other words, I'm not monastic in my deep work , I don't deploy multiday depth binges like the bimodalists, although I am intrigued by the rhythmic philosophy, my schedule has a way of thwarting attempts to enforce force a daily habit. Instead, in a ode to Isaacson, I face each week as it arrives and do my best to squeeze out as much depth as possible. To write this book, for example, I had to take advantage of free stretches of time whenever they popped up. If my kids were taking a good nap, I'd grab my laptop and lock myself in the home office. If my wife wanted to visit her parents in nearby Annapolis on a weekend day, I’d take advantage of the extra childcare to disappear to a quiet corner of their house to write. If a meeting at work was cancelled, or an afternoon left open, I might retreat to one of my favorite libraries on campus to squeeze out a few hundred more words. And so on.

**Ritualize**

An often-overlooked observation about those who use their minds to create valuable things is that they're rarely haphazard in their work habits. When Charles Darwin was perfecting the *Origin of Species*, he would rise promptly at 7:00 to take a short walk. He would then eat breakfast alone and retire to his study from 8 to 930. The next hour was dedicated to reading his letters from the day before, after which he would return to his study from 10:30 until noon. After this session, he would mull over challenging ideas while walking on a prescribed route that started at his greenhouse and then circled a path on his property. He would walk until satisfied with his thinking and then declare his workday done.

There is no one *correct* deep work ritual- the right fit depends on both the person and the type of project pursued. But there are some general questions that any effective ritual must address:

* **Where you'll work and for how long**. Your ritual needs to specify a location for your deep work efforts. This location can be as simple as your normal office with the door shut and desk cleaned off.
* **How you'll work once you start to work.** Your ritual needs rules and processes to keep your efforts structured. For example, you might institute a ban on any Internet use, or maintain a metric such as words produced per twenty-minute interval to keep your concentration honed.
* **How you'll support your work.** Your ritual needs to ensure your brain gets the support it needs to keep operating at a high level of depth. For example, their ritual might specify that you start with a cup of good coffee, or make sure you have access to enough food of the right type to maintain energy, or integrate light exercise such as walking to help keep the mind clear.

**Make Grand Gestures**

When you study the habits of other well-known deep workers, the grand gesture strategy comes up often. Bill Gates, for example, was famous during his time as Microsoft CEO for taking Think Weeks during which he would leave behind his normal work and family obligations to retreat to a cabin with a stack of papers and books. His goal was to think deeply, without distraction, about the big issues relevant to his company.

The MIT physicist and award-winning novelist Adam Lightman also leverages grand gestures. In his case, he retreats each summer to a “tiny island” in Maine to think deeply and recharge. At least as of 2000, when he described this gesture in an interview, the island not only lacked Internet, but didn't even have a phone service. As he then justified: “It's really about two and a half months that I'll feel like I can recover some silence in my life… which is so hard to find.”

**Don’t Work Alone**

The relationship between deep work and collaboration is tricky. It's worth taking the time to untangle, however, because properly leveraging collaboration can increase the quality of deep work in your professional life.

When it comes to deep work, consider the use of collaboration when appropriate, as it can push your result to a new level. At the same time, don’t lionize this quest for interaction and positive randomness to the point where it crowds out the unbroken concentration ultimately required to wring something useful out of this swirl of ideas all around us.

**Be Lazy**

At the end of the workday, shut down your concentration of work issues until the next morning- no after dinner e-mail check, no mental replays of conversations, and no scheming about how you'll handle an upcoming challenge; shut down work thinking completely. If you need more time, then extend your workday, but once you shut down, your mind must be left free to encounter butter cups, stinkbugs, and stars.

**Rule # 2: Embrace Boredom**

Efforts to deepen your focus will struggle if you don't simultaneously wean your mind from a dependence on distraction. Much in the same way that athletes must take care of their bodies outside of their training sessions, you'll struggle to achieve the deepest levels of concentration if you spend the rest of your time fleeing the slightest hint of boredom.

We can find evidence for this claim in the research of Clifford Nass, the late Stanford communications professor who was well known for his study of behavior in the digital age. Among other insights, Nass’s research revealed that constant attention switching online has a lasting negative effect on your brain. Here’s Nass summarizing these findings in a 2010 interview with NPR's Ira Flatlow:

*So we have scales that allow us to divide a people into people who multitask all the time and people who rarely do, and the differences are remarkable. People who multitask all the time can't filter out irrelevancy. They can’t manage a working memory. They’re chronically distracted. They initiate much larger parts of their brain that are irrelevant to the task at hand… they're pretty much mental wrecks.*

At this point Flatlow asks Nass whether chronically distracted recognize this rewiring of the brain:

*“The people we talk with continually said, “look, when I really have to concentrate, I turn off everything and I am laser-focused*.” And unfortunately, they’ve developed habits of mind that make it impossible for them to be laser-focused. *They’re suckers for irrelevancy. They just can't keep on task*. [emphasis mine]

Once your brain has become accustomed to on-demand distraction, Nass discovered, it's hard to shake the addiction even when you want to concentrate.

Rule #1 taught you had to integrate deep work into your schedule and support you with routines and rituals designed to help you consistently reach the current limit of your concentration ability. Rule #2 will help you significantly improve this limit. The strategies that follow are motivated by the key idea that getting the most out of your deep work habit requires training, and as clarified previously, this training must address two goals: improving your ability to concentrate intensely *and* overcoming your desire for distraction. These strategies cover a variety of approaches, from quarantining distraction to mastering a special form of meditation, that combined to provide a practical road map for your journey from a mind wracked by constant distraction and unfamiliar with concentration, to an instrument that truly does deliver laser-like focus.

**Don't Take Breaks from Distraction. Instead Take Breaks from Focus.**

Many assume that the switch between a state of distraction and one of concentration is needed, but as I just argued, this assumption is optimistic: once you're wired for distraction, you crave it. Motivated by this reality, this strategy is designed to help you rewire your brain to a configuration better suited to staying on task.

To summarize, to succeed with deep work you must rewire your brain to be comfortable resisting distracting stimuli. This doesn't mean that you have to eliminate distracting behaviors; it's sufficient that you instead eliminate the ability of such behaviors to hijack your attention.

**Meditate Productively**

The goal of productive meditation is to take a period in which you're occupied physically but not mentally- walking, jogging, driving, showering- and focus your attention on a single well-defined professional problem. Depending on your profession, this problem might be outlining an article, writing a talk, making progress on a proof, or attempting to sharpen a business strategy.

I suggest that you adopt a productive meditation practice in your own life. You don't necessarily need a serious session every day, but your goal should be to participate in at least two or three sessions in a typical week. In fact, you might even consider scheduling a walk during your workday specifically for the purpose of applying productive meditation to your most pressing problem at the moment.

By forcing you to resist distraction and return your attention repeatedly to a well-defined problem, it helps strengthen your distraction-resisting muscles, and by forcing you to push your focus deeper and deeper on a single problem, it sharpens your concentration.

To succeed with productive meditation, it's important to recognize that, like any form of meditation, it requires practice to do well. To help accelerate this ramp-up process, however, I have two specific suggestions to offer.

**Suggestion #1**: *Be Wary of Distractions and Looping*

As a novice, when you begin a productive meditation session, your minds first act of rebellion will be to offer unrelated but seemingly more interesting thoughts. My mind, for example, was often successful at derailing my attention by beginning to compose an e-mail that I knew I needed to write. When you notice your attention slipping away from the problem at hand, gently remind yourself that you can return to that thought later, then redirect your attention back.

Distraction of this type, in many ways, is the obvious enemy to defeat in developing a productive meditation habit. A subtler, but equally effective adversary, is looping. When faced with a hard problem, your mind, as it was evolved to do, will attempt to avoid excess expenditure of energy when possible. One way it might attempt to sidestep this expenditure is by avoiding diving deeper into the problem by instead looping over and over again on which you already know about it. For example, when working on a proof, my mind has a tendency to rehash simple preliminary results, again and again, to avoid the harder work of building on these results toward the needed solution. You must be on your guard for looping, as it can quickly subvert an entire productive meditation session. When you notice it, remark to yourself that you seem to be in a loop, then redirect your attention toward the next step.

**Suggestion #2**: *Structure Your Deep Thinking*

In my experience, it helps to have some structure for this deep thinking process. I suggest starting but the careful review of the relevant *variables* for solving the problem and then storing these values in your working memory.

**Rule #3: Quit Social Media**

Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and infotainment sites like Business Insider and BuzzFeed fragment our time and reduce our ability to concentrate. This reality no longer generates much debate; we all feed it. This is a real problem for many different people, but the problem is especially dire if you’re attempting to improve your ability to work deeply. To master the art of deep work, therefore, you must take back control of your time and attention from the many diversions that attempt to steal them.

If you can find some extra benefit in using a service like Facebook- even if it's small- then why not use it? I called this way of thinking the *any-benefit* mind-set, as it identifies any possible benefit as sufficient justification for using a network tool. In more detail:

**The Any Benefit Approach to Network Tool Selection**: You're justified in using a network tool if you can identify any possible benefit to its use, or anything you might possibly miss out on if you don't use it.

The problem with this approach, of course, is that it ignores all the negatives that come along with the tools in question. These services are engineered to be addictive- robbing time and attention from activities that more directly support your professional and personal goals (such as deep work). The use of network tools can be harmful. If you don't attempt to weigh pros against cons, but instead use a glimpse of some potential benefit as justification for unrestrained use of a tool, then you're unwittingly crippling your ability to succeed in the world of knowledge work.

I propose that if you're a knowledge worker- especially one interested in cultivating a deep work habit- you should treat your tool selection with the same level of care as other skilled workers, such as farmers. Following is my attempt to generalize this assessment strategy. I call it the *craftsman approach* to tool selection, a name that emphasizes that tools are ultimately aids to the larger goals of one's craft.

**The Craftsman Approach to Tool Selection**: Identify the core factors that determine success and happiness in your professional and personal life. Adopt a tool only if it's positive impacts on these factors substantially outweighs its negative impacts.

Notice that this craftsman approach to tool selection stands in opposition to the any-benefit approach. Whereas the any-benefit mind-set identifies any potential positive impact as justification for using a tool, the craftsman variant requires that these positive impacts affect factors at the core of what's important to you and that they outweigh the negatives.

Even though the craftsman approach rejects the simplicity of the any-benefit approach, it doesn't ignore the benefits that currently drive people to network tools, or make any advance proclamations about what's “good” or “bad” technology: It simply asks that you give any particular network tool the same type of measured, nuanced accounting that tools in other trades have been subjected to throughout the history of skilled labor.

**Apply the Law of the Vital Few to Your Internet Habits**

Malcolm Gladwell doesn't use Twitter. In a 2013 interview he explained why: “Who says my fans want to hear from me on Twitter?” He then joked: “I know a lot of people would like to see less of me.” Michael Lewis, another mega-bestselling author, also doesn't use the service, explaining in The Wire: “I don't tweet, I don't Twitter, I couldn't even tell you how to read or where to find a Twitter message.” The award winning *New Yorker* scribe George Packer also avoids the service, and indeed only recently even succumbed to the necessity of owning a smartphone.

These three writers don't think Twitter is useless. They're quick to accept that other writers find it useful. At the same time, however, Gladwell, Lewis, and Packer don't feel like the service offers them nearly enough advantages to offset its negatives in their particular circumstances. Lewis, for example, worries that adding more accessibility will sap his energy and reduce his ability to research and write great stories, noting: “It's amazing how overly accessible people are. There's a lot of communication in my life that's not enriching, it's impoverishing.” While Packer, for his part, worries about distraction, saying: “Twitter is crack for media addicts.”

These services aren't necessarily, as advertised, the lifeblood of our modern connected world. They're just products, developed by private companies, funded lavishly, marketed carefully, and designed ultimately to capture and then sell your personal information and attention to advertisers. They can be fun, but in the scheme of your life and what you want to accomplish, they’re lightweight whimsy, one unimportant distraction among many threatening to derail you from something deeper. Or maybe social media tools are at the core of your existence. You won't know either way until you sample life without them.

**Don’t Use the Internet to Entertain Yourself**

In more detail, in the strategies discussed so far, we haven't spent much time yet on a class of network tools that are particularly relevant to the fight for depth: entertainment-focused websites designed to capture and hold your attention for as long as possible. At the time of this writing, the most popular examples of such sites include the Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, Business Insider, and Reddit. The list will undoubtedly continue to evolve, but what this general category of sites shares is the use of carefully crafted titles and easily digestible content, often honed by algorithms to be maximally attention catching.

*Put more thought into your leisure time*. In other words, this strategy suggests that when it comes to your relaxation, don't default to whatever catches your attention at the moment, but instead dedicate some advanced thinking to the question of how you want to spend your “day within a day.” Addictive websites of the type mentioned previously thrive in a vacuum: If you haven't given yourself something to do in a given moment, they'll always beckon as an appealing option. If you instead fill this free time with something of more quality, their grip on your attention will loosen.

It's crucial, therefore, that you figure out in advance what you're going to do with your evenings and weekends before they begin. Structured hobbies provide good fodder for these hours, as they generate specific actions with specific goals to fill your time. A set program of reading where you spend regular time each night making progress on a series of deliberately chosen books, is also a good option, as is, of course, exercise for the enjoyment of good (in-person) company.

In my own life, for example, I managed to read a surprising number of books in a typical year, given the demands of my time as a professor, writer, and father (on average, I'm typically reading three to five books at a time). This is possible because one of my favorite preplanned leisure activities after my kids’ bedtime is to read an interesting book. As a result, my smart phone and computer, and the distractions they can offer, typically remain neglected between the end of the workday and the next morning.

If you give your mind something meaningful to do throughout *all* your waking hours, you'll end the day more fulfilled, and begin the next one more relaxed, then if you instead allow your mind to bathe for hours in semiconscious and unstructured Web surfing.

To summarize, if you want to eliminate the addictive pull of entertainment sites on your time and attention, give your brain a quality alternative.

**Rule #4: Drain the Shallows**

Treat shallow work with suspicion because its damage is often vastly underestimated and its importance vastly overestimated. This type of work is inevitable, but you must keep it confined to a point where it doesn't impede your ability to take full advantage of the deeper efforts that ultimately determine your impact. The strategies that follow will help you act on this reality.

**Schedule Every Minute of Your Day**

We spend much of our day on autopilot- not giving much thought to what we're doing with our time. *This is a problem*. It's difficult to prevent the trivial from creeping into every corner of your schedule if you don't face, without flinching, your current balance between deep and shallow work, and then adopt the habit of pausing before action and asking, “What makes the most sense right now?”

Deep work habit requires you to treat your time with respect. Decide in advance what you're going to do with every minute of your workday. It's natural, at first, to resist this idea, as it's undoubtedly easier to continue to allow the twin forces of internal whim and external requests to drive your schedule. But you must overcome this distrust of structure if you want to approach your true potential as someone who creates things that matter.

**Finish Your Work by Five Thirty**

I don't send e-mails after five thirty. But given how intertwined e-mail has become with work in general, there's a more surprising reality hinted by this behavior: I don't *work* after five thirty p.m.

I called this commitment *fixed-schedule productivity*, as I fix the firm goal of not working past a certain time, then work backward to find productivity strategies that allow me to satisfy this declaration. It's been crucial to my efforts to build a productive professional life centered on deep work.

Even though I don't work at night and rarely work on weekends, between arriving at Georgetown in the fall of 2011 and beginning to work on this chapter and the fall of 2014, I've published somewhere around 20 peer-reviewed articles. I also won two competitive grants, published one (nonacademic) book, have almost finished writing another (which you're reading at the moment).

**Become Hard to Reach**

No discussion of shallow work is complete without considering e-mail. Ubiquitous e-mail access has become so ingrained in our professional habits that we’re beginning to lose the sense that we have any say in its role in our life. As John Freeman warns in his 2009 book, *The Tyranny of Email*, with the rise of this technology “we are slowly eroding our ability to explain- in a careful, complex way- why it is so wrong for us to complain, resist, or redesign our workdays so that they are manageable.” E-mail seems to fait accompli. Resistance is futile.

This strategy pushes back at this fatalism. Just because you cannot avoid this tool altogether doesn't mean you have to cede all authority over its role in your mental landscape.