In the summer of 2007, a Chicago-based software company called Basecamp made national headlines by announcing that they were shortening their workweek from five days to four. It didn’t take long before some in the business press started taking shots at the company’s management team, led by its young CEO, Jason Fried. A Forbes article suggested that Fried’s strategy would actually lead to lower employee morale, because folks might not have enough time in the week to get all their work done.

Fried was quick to respond: “Very few people actually work eight hours a day. You’re lucky if you get even a few good hours of work in between all the interruptions, e-mails, Web surfing and personal business that permeate the typical workday. Fewer official working hours helps us ‘squeeze the fat’ out of the typical work week; when everyone has less time to get their work done, they stop wasting it on things that don’t matter.”

Jason Fried’s bold switch to a shorter workweek captured national attention because it highlighted an important workplace and societal issue. It reminded us of the fact that transactional and largely trivial work now dominates the majority of our time and attention as knowledge workers. In fact, a recent McKinsey study found that the average knowledge worker now spends more than 60 percent of his time engaged in electronic communication and Internet searching, with less than 40 percent left for everything else. The implications of this trend are only just starting to be understood.

In Deep Work, Georgetown professor Cal Newport takes aim at the troubling phenomenon of distracted working, and celebrates the power of sustained focus.

“If you study the lives of influential figures from both distant and recent history, you’ll find that a commitment to eliminating distractions is a common theme,” writes Newport. “Mark Twain, for example, wrote much of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer in a shed on the property of the Quarry Farm where he was spending the summer. His study was so isolated from the main house that Twain’s family took to blowing a horn to attract his attention for meals.”
There’s also Woody Allen. In the 44 year period between 1969 and 2013, Woody Allen wrote and directed exactly 44 films. He also received 23 Academy Award nominations. Allen accomplished all of this by avoiding distractions.

In a series of articles leading up to the release of his book, Cal Newport coined the term “Deep Work” to describe the practice of deliberately switching off, which has been successfully employed by many literary greats, including J.K. Rowling, as well as business leaders like Bill Gates.

For Newport, the commitment to Deep Work amongst such highly-accomplished individuals is important to emphasize because it stands in sharp contrast to how most of us behave at work these days. Thanks to the ubiquity of social networking services like Twitter and Facebook, plus e-mail and texting, we’re starting to forget how to go deep.

Of course, the argument that modern communications tools are pushing our work from the deep toward the shallow isn’t entirely new. The Shallows, by Nicholas Carr, became a finalist for the 2011 Pulitzer Prize in non-fiction by thoughtfully examining the Internet’s corrosive effect on our brains and work habits. And in 2013 The Distraction Addiction by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang made the argument that network tools are distracting us from more important work that requires unbroken concentration, while simultaneously degrading our long-term capacity to remain focused and engaged. (There are also some authors who agree that these tools are changing society, but argue that doing so is actually making us better off. Google, for example, might distract us and degrade our memory, but perhaps we no longer need particularly good memories, as we can instantly search for anything we need to know.)

Newport himself takes no position on whether smart phones, social media and other such innovations are good or bad for us. Instead, his interest in writing Deep Work comes from a more practical bent. Whether you believe it’s ultimately a good or bad thing for society, he argues that this shift toward the shallow is exposing a massive economic opportunity for those clever individuals who swim against the current. For Newport, the best way to get ahead in the new economy is by “prioritizing depth over distractedness,” and that means following his Deep Work Rules.

Why Does Deep Work Matter?

Before we get to Newport’s four rules for staying focused in a distracted world, let’s pause for a moment to think about why Deep Work is such a valuable thing. There are actually two reasons for this. The first has to do with learning.

“We live in a fast-paced, constantly changing information economy that’s dependent on complex systems,” writes Newport. So if you aspire to be a top computer programmer, for example, then you’ll constantly need to be upgrading your skills. It’s a fact of life that mastering a new computer language requires deep work. And if you don’t cultivate this ability, your career may stall since you’ll be less valuable at work.
The second reason that deep work is valuable is because the impacts of the digital revolution cut both ways. While on one hand the information economy places new burdens on us as professionals by forcing us to constantly keep our skills up to date, it also liberates us. When we create something useful in the digital economy, our reachable audience – i.e. the potential employers or customers that will see our work – is virtually limitless. So the financial rewards for Deep Work can be multiplied endlessly.

On the other hand, if what we’re producing is mediocre, then we’re in trouble, as it’s too easy for our potential customers to find better alternatives online. To succeed, we have to produce the absolute best stuff we’re capable of producing, a task that requires depth.

Deep work is a crucial ability for anyone looking to move ahead in a globally competitive economy that tends to chew up and spit out those who aren’t earning their keep.

So why, you might ask, do workplace cultures of “connected distraction” persist, if the evidence is so overwhelmingly against them from an efficiency and effectiveness perspective? The answer, according to Newport, is because it’s easier to work in a distracted way. Also, let’s face it, it feels pretty satisfying to press “send” on an e-mail response to your boss, or an important client, with a lightning quick turnaround time. In the moment, we feel like a superstar – even if our answer wasn’t needed right away.

“As knowledge workers, we often kid ourselves into thinking that ‘busyness’ is synonymous with ‘productivity,” writes Newport. And sometimes we can even fool others too. Like, if we send and answer e-mails at all hours of the day and night, and if we roam around our open-concept office randomly bouncing ideas off all whom we encounter, we can appear to be real “movers and shakers.” The problem is, while we may come across as super busy and important, we’re mostly wasting our time because we’re not accomplishing anything of real consequence. Sooner or later, our general lack of productivity will catch up to us. And then what?

Deep Work Makes Us Happier

But there’s more to Newport’s argument in favor of Deep Work than money and career advancement. There’s also the psychological argument that Deep Work leads to more happiness, which emanates from one of the world’s best-known (and most misspelled) psychologists, Mihaly Csikszenmihalyi. In the early 1980s, Csikszenmihalyi, working with a colleague of his from the University of Chicago, pioneered a new technique for understanding the psychological impact of everyday behaviours.

Mihaly Csikszenmihalyi and Reed Larson used pagers to track a group of experimental subjects throughout the day to monitor what made them happy. Prior
to these experiments, conventional wisdom held that highly pleasurable acts, such as relaxing in front of a fire with a nice glass of wine, were what made people happiest. But Csikszentmihalyi’s work turned conventional wisdom on its head. It turns out that people are actually happiest when they’re working.

“Our happiest moments usually occur when our bodies and minds are stretched to their limits in an earnest effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile,” explains Csikszentmihalyi. He refers to this mental state as flow (a term he popularized with a 1990 book of the same title). Csikszentmihalyi explains that when we’re in a state of flow, we take great pleasure from overcoming obstacles in pursuit of a particular goal.

The point here is that there’s ample scientific proof to back up Newport’s claims that Deep Work is both more productive and more fulfilling. Building on Csikszentmihalyi’s work, some Harvard researchers recently convinced a team of consultants at the Boston Consulting Group – a high-pressure management consulting firm with a well-ingrained culture of connectivity – to leave their mobile devices at home for a whole day during the work week, and then report back on whether there were any ill effects. At first, the consultants noticed a small drop in productivity. But once they made slight adjustments to their work patterns, the consultants reported that they were actually having better communication amongst themselves, which resulted in better quality products delivered to the client. On top of that, they had more fun with the assignment.

Unfortunately, even though the benefits of Deep Work are so compellingly clear, when it comes to replacing distraction with focus, matters aren’t always so simple. This is why Newport devised his four Deep Work Rules, which are essentially strategies for training our brains to fight back against encroaching distractions.

Let’s see how they work:

**Deep Work Rule #1 – Create Routines**

The first of Cal Newport’s four Deep Work Rules is designed to help us counteract the distracting influences of our work environments by creating routines. Importantly too, our routines must also account for down time.

“The key to developing a Deep Work habit is to move beyond good intentions and add routines and rituals to your working life,” writes Newport. “An often-overlooked observation about those who use their minds to create valuable things is that they’re rarely haphazard in their work habits.”

And so, this first rule asks you to divide your time, dedicating some clearly defined stretches to a deep pursuit, and leaving the rest open to more mundane tasks, like filing your expenses or making phone calls. This division of time between deep and open can happen in various ways. For example, on the scale of a week, you might dedicate four days to depth and the rest to open time. Similarly on the scale of a year, you might dedicate one season for the majority of your deep stretches (as
Charles Darwin ritualized his working life during the period when he was perfecting his seminal publication, *On the Origin of Species*. As his son Francis later remembered, Darwin would rise promptly at seven to take a short walk. He would then eat breakfast and always be done by nine thirty. The next hour was dedicated to proof-reading his work from the day before. Then he would take a five minute break, after which he would return to his study until noon. After lunch, he would mull over challenging ideas while walking briskly along a prescribed route that circled his greenhouse. He would then return to his study for one final hour, and then declare his work-day done. Rarely, if ever, did Darwin vary from this schedule.

Like Darwin, Newport also believes strongly in the importance of scheduling downtime. It has great restorative power. And when Newport says “down time,” he really means it. If you keep interrupting your lunch break, or your evening hours, to check and respond to e-mail, you’re robbing your brain’s attention centers of the rest they need for restoration. Even if these little bits of work consume just a small amount of time during your evening, they can still prevent you from reaching the levels of relaxation your brain requires. Only by having the confidence that you’re truly done with work until the next day, can you convince your brain to downshift to the level where it’s able to recharge. Put another way, trying to squeeze a little more work out of your evenings might reduce your effectiveness the next day, enough that you end up getting less done than if you had respected a proper shutdown.

To make this work you need a strict ritual for shutting down. According to the author, this ritual should be a series of steps you always conduct, one after another in the same order, such as clearing off your desk and powering-down your computer. Then when you’re done with those tasks, he recommends you utter out loud a “shut down catch phrase” that indicates completion (for his own ritual, Newport says “Shut down complete!”). He acknowledges that all of this may sound a bit cheesy, but it actually provides a powerful cue to your mind that it’s safe to release work-related thoughts for the rest of your waking hours.

**Deep Work Rule #2 – Embrace Boredom**

Efforts to deepen your focus will fail if you don’t wean yourself from a dependence on electronic distractions. Much in the same way professional athletes learn to take care of their bodies in between their training sessions, we must train our minds in between periods of Deep Work. This means leaving our smart phones in our pockets or purses when we’re in line at the grocery store, or waiting for a bus, and being willing to “embrace boredom.”

Researchers have discovered that once our brains have become accustomed to “on demand” electronic stimulation, it can be very hard to shake the addiction. If every moment of potential boredom in your life is relieved with a quick glance at your smartphone, then your brain won’t be ready for Deep Work when the need arises.
Newport suggests scheduling the times when you’ll glance at your iPhone or BlackBerry (say once every hour), and then avoid it altogether outside these set times. If you’re expecting an important e-mail or text from a loved one, that’s fine – keep an eye on your phone. But this shouldn’t be the norm. For most of the time, it’s better to be alone with your thoughts, not staring at your phone.

**Deep Work Rule #3 – Quit Social Media**

Malcolm Gladwell doesn’t do Twitter. In a 2013 interview he explained why: “Who says my fans want to hear from me all the time on Twitter?” Gladwell believes that his followers can simply wait to see what he has to say in his next article or book.

Michael Lewis, another mega-bestselling author, also doesn’t use the service. Lewis worries that adding more accessibility will sap his energy and reduce his ability to research and write great stories. J. K. Rowling of Harry Potter fame feels much the same way. She often goes months, or sometimes even a year, in between tweets.

“Services like Twitter and Facebook aren’t necessarily as advertised,” argues Newport. “The companies behind these services would like you to believe they are the lifeblood of our modern connected world. But they’re just commercial products, developed by private companies, funded lavishly, marketed carefully and designed ultimately to capture too much of your attention, and sell your personal information to advertisers.” Sure, they can be fun, but Newport argues that social media sites should be thought of purely as a “want,” as opposed to a “need.”

Maybe Newport is wrong and, in fact, social media tools are truly indispensable in your life. But you’ll never know for sure until you spend a month without them.

Newport recommends his readers voluntarily ban themselves from using social media for thirty days. By this, he means every single social media site: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Vine … you name it.

After thirty days have passed, ask yourself two questions about each of the services:

1. Would the last thirty days of my life have been significantly better had I been able to use this service?

2. Did people that matter to me truly care that I wasn’t using this service, or were they able to communicate just fine with me anyway?

If your answer is “no” to both questions, Newport recommends you quit the service permanently. If your answer was “yes” then return to using the service but do so more sparingly before jumping right back in with both feet. You might just find that life without Facebook isn’t so bad.

In fact, you might even discover the life without social media is pretty darn good. Newport has never had a Facebook or Twitter account, or any other social media presence. He resisted buying a smart phone for years, and now that he owns
one he makes a point of rarely turning it on. While this might seem like a terrible sacrifice at first, keep in mind that his serious commitment to depth has rewarded him professionally and financially. In the ten-year period following his college graduation, Newport published four books, earned his PhD and was hired as a tenured professor at Georgetown. He maintained this production rate without working more than forty hours a week, and never taking work home. He lives in a nice house in a good neighbourhood, spends lots of time with his kids, and takes great vacations every year.

If that's the payoff from ditching social media, some might argue it is well worth the cost.

Deep Work Rule #4 – Drain the Shallows

As Basecamp CEO Jason Fried discovered, if you eliminate shallow activities from your day, not only will your business continue to function just fine, it might even become more successful. “Draining the Shallows,” as Newport puts it, means steering away from time-wasting activities that others try to rope you into. Sure, in most workplaces, it can be difficult at first to turn down small shallow commitments that seem harmless in isolation – be it accepting an invitation to go grab coffee right when you’re in the middle or something, or spontaneously agreeing to “jump on a call.” It’s a lot easier to continue to allow the forces of internal whims and external requests to drive your day. But if you want to be someone who creates things that really matter – if you want to leave a legacy – then you must abandon this easy-going approach to work.

Deep Work involves adopting a scarcity mindset. Just as the folks at Basecamp came to appreciate, they now have only four days instead of five to complete their work so they need to make better use of their time – and so can you.

When you have a scarcity mindset, your default answer becomes “no,” when someone asks you to do something that’s outside of your schedule. The bar for gaining access to your time and attention rises precipitously. Of course, if the boss calls you into her office regarding an urgent matter, or if something unexpectedly blows up, you’ll need to deal with that in the moment. But for the most part, the little things that drain our time and energy at work are not crises and angry bosses. They’re friendly, well-meaning co-workers who just want to “keep you in the loop” on something, or folks that drop by unannounced on a Friday afternoon to ask about your weekend plans. Make these people work harder to gain access to your time.

Okay, But What About Jack Dorsey?

Now, let’s say that you’re nearly sold on Newport’s argument that Deep Work is the best pathway to productivity, fulfilment and happiness. But you might still wonder: are there some circumstances where distraction offers a quicker pathway to success? For instance, what about Jack Dorsey, the co-founder of Twitter? Dorsey seems constantly distracted, but he’s doing just fine. (Dorsey helped found Twitter,
became its first CEO, then he promptly quit and launched the super-innovative payment processing company Square. In interviews, Dorsey claims that he doesn’t believe in “down time.” In fact, he doesn’t even believe in sit-down meetings. His life is one big endless distraction.

Admittedly, what Jack Dorsey does is incredibly valuable and highly rewarded in our economy (as of this writing he was among the one thousand richest people in the world, with a net worth over $1 billion). So that begs the question, if Deep Work is really the way to go, then how could a hyper-distracted person like Jack Dorsey be so successful?

“Individuals like Jack Dorsey can absolutely survive, and indeed even thrive, without depth because the lifestyle of a chief executive officer of a big technology company is famously and unavoidably distracted,” writes Newport. Junior people are now expected to do more of the research and the deep thinking, not the CEO.

But it would be a terrible mistake to extrapolate the approach of a top-tier executive like Jack Dorsey as a recipe for success in most other professional jobs. The fact that Dorsey covets interruptions and checks his e-mail constantly doesn’t mean that you’ll share in his success if you follow suit. “Unless you’re already a big-shot CEO, then you’re better off following the principles of Deep Work,” writes Newport.

Conclusion

Cal Newport knows that the deep life is not for everybody. As we’ve seen, it requires a lot of discipline and some pretty drastic changes to your habits. It means no more checking Pinterest while you’re in line at the bank. It means no more spontaneous 20 minute coffee breaks with co-workers. And it means leaving your laptop closed during the evening hours, when your mind should be at rest.

For many of us, these little compromises may be too much to ask. But Newport believes if you’re willing to set aside a few modern day comforts, and make a serious commitment to use your mind to its fullest capacity, then you may soon discover, as others have before you, that Deep Work is the ultimate pathway to a happier and more productive life.