

***Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*** by Cal Newport. Grand Central Publishing: New York (2016). 303 + xv pages. US\$28.00 (hardcover).

Like many companies today, ExxonMobil's new campus at The Woodlands, Texas, features an open work space without traditional offices. The theory behind open work spaces is to drive collaboration and the chance encounters that will trigger an idea that leads to the next great thing.

Unfortunately, as Cal Newport argues in his new book, ***“Deep Work,”*** such open work spaces not only fail to drive magical chance encounters but are indeed quite harmful to the productivity of workers. Newport defines “deep work” as *“professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit”* (pg. 3). He contrasts deep work with “shallow work,” defined as *“non-cognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted”* (pg. 6).

In Part I of ***“Deep Work,”*** the author makes the case for today's knowledge worker to increase his/her focus and concentration. The most elite and successful practitioners in a number of fields use the tools of deep work to gain spans of uninterrupted time, allowing them to delve into a topic with more energy and intensity. To be a valuable engineer or manager, then, Newport argues, we must be able to learn quickly and apply knowledge to new problems. Both tasks are enhanced by a person's ability to focus deeply on information and data, and to create new knowledge and applications.

Of course, we fundamentally recognize that open work spaces are noisier and have more traffic than a traditional office layout. Newport points out that serendipity rarely occurs by the virtue of an open office plan (Chapter 2) and that historical examples of such chance encounters are often misinterpreted. In addition to taking aim at obvious distractions (like the open office environment), the author firmly places email and social media in his crosshairs.

Most people report spending 25 to 50% of their work day on email. Atlantic Media found the company spent over \$1M per year for its employees to process email (pg. 54). Some of the successful people Newport studied completely shun email. But, most of us don't have that luxury. Instead, the author offers several tips in Part II of ***“Deep Work”*** to tackle email and social media to make our work and personal lives more productive.

First, Newport recommends scheduling every minute of the day (Chapter 4). A daily schedule should allow extended time for deep work in a place that is quiet and free from distractions or interruptions. While he provides extreme examples of people renting hotel rooms or taking trans-Pacific flights to find a distraction-free environment (pg. 121-122), most of us can identify a quiet place at home, work, or the library in which to engage in deep work. Even though coffee shops are busy, I personally can accomplish a lot of deep work in an hour or two at Starbucks since I treat the hustle and bustle as white noise.

Next, the author recommends embracing boredom. A lot of people today can't seem to stand quiet or idle time. TVs blare in waiting rooms at the doctor or the auto repair shop. Folks check Facebook on their phone while waiting in the queue at the supermarket. Twitter has taken an outsized space in our conversations and in the media. Instead, Newport advises we use this time to recharge our mental batteries from the periods of intense, deep work that was already scheduled (Chapter 5). Personally, I often have my best ideas after a long run or bike ride, embracing boredom by listening to birds chirp and the scenery pass by. We can't have deep work without resting and refreshing our brains.

Third, Newport recommends quitting social media (Chapter 6). This is a radical idea and many people will label him as a heretic for this advice! However, consider and record how much time you spend in a day on social media. Is it advancing your career as an engineering manager or simply a diversion into the world of entertainment and gossip? Instead of quitting all social media cold turkey, stop posting for a month. If someone misses your input on a particular network (e.g. LinkedIn), then renew your commitment to that single social channel. Newport asserts that we gain a lot of time transformed from shallow work to deep work by halting social media chat. In my own personal life, I tried Facebook for about a year and found I didn't really get value out of the service –learning what children of high school peers were doing in local sports programs did not advance my career. Yet, reading posts and participating in professional groups (like ASEM) on LinkedIn gives me valuable insights and information that are helping to build my knowledge base as an engineering manager.

Finally, the author's fourth rule is to minimize shallow work (Chapter 7). Again, he addresses email. At first it might seem impolite or rude to *not* reply to every single email in our inboxes, but not every email needs acknowledgment. Newport also gives several examples of carefully crafted email responses that can eliminate the annoying back and forth of scheduling meetings or reviews. It's also important, he stresses, to stop checking email at all hours of the night and weekends. If it's urgent, your employees will phone you.

***“Deep Work”*** is an enjoyable and educational book that can help any engineer or manager improve his or her productivity. In addition to time-saving tips on email and social media, Newport successfully presents the case for intense concentration for greater accomplishment in our careers. Engineering managers can benefit from reading ***“Deep Work”*** not just by implementing the strategies in their own lives but also by structuring work places to encourage high level contributions from staff engineers and technical team members. As I begin the journey to deep work, I'd love to hear from you as you delve into these ideas. I can be reached at [teresa@globalnpsolutions.com](mailto:teresa@globalnpsolutions.com).

***What tip or tool can you deploy to increase your deep work concentration as an engineering manager?***

*Teresa Jurgens-Kowal, PhD, PE, PMP, PEM, NPDP*

*Global NP Solutions, LLC*