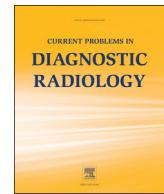




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Deep Work: A Productivity Superpower



A radiologist's life is full of constant distractions and interruptions especially in the reading room. Cultivating focused attention is increasingly becoming very valuable. We cannot really afford NOT to be doing "deep work." Deep work is the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task and about increasing our intensity to get more work done in less time. Acquiring the ability to do deep work is critical to our success. I recently read a book by Cal Newport titled "Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World." I learnt several important productivity lessons, which I will share in this editorial.^{1,2}

Cal Newport defines deep work as "professional activities performed in a state of distraction free concentration that push our cognitive capabilities to their limit." These efforts create new value, improve our skill, and are hard to replicate. In contrast, shallow work is defined "as noncognitively demanding, logistical style task, often performed while distracted." These efforts do not create much value and are easy to replicate. The author makes a great case that deep work actually makes people happier, more focused, and productive.

The 4 rules for deep work are as mentioned below.

(1) *Work deeply:* Deep work, just like any other productivity skill is not something we are born with but something we can train and cultivate with constant practice and planning. The concept of rhythmic workflow is worth understanding. This involves splitting our time into deep and shallow work on a daily (or another periodic) basis. The author J.K. Rowling famously stayed in an expensive hotel while writing the final Harry Potter book to get deep work done.

$$\text{Quality of work} = (\text{time spent}) \times (\text{intensity of focus}).$$

(2) *Embrace boredom:* Our minds are in a constant state of hyperstimulation from social media, on-demand videos, entertainment, etc and we need to occasionally embrace boredom. The classic example in the book is to resist the urge to pull out our smart phone while waiting in line at the post office; our mind needs boredom. It is important to completely turn off from the work is done or during breaks to recharge since cognitive work involves a heavy cognitive burden. Squeezing on more work out of our evening or night might actually reduce our productivity the next day. Some of my best ideas came when I was on vacation away overseas in a different timezone doing nothing of substance.

(3) *Quit social media:* Although most people I know use social media and it is increasingly important to embrace the new opportunities it brings to form connections that were previously not possible. I myself am active on twitter and follow numerous leaders and geeks. The point here is though

that we are more easily distracted than we realize. Social media activity can be a huge time sink until we restrain ourselves.

(4) *Drain the shallows:* The author emphasizes that we should aggressively eliminate the nonessential from our working lives. Richard Branson once famously turned down the offer of \$500,000 to deliver an hour long key note because giving a talk did not fit in well with the 3 goals he was trying to achieve. The elimination should be merciless and the best way to finish projects that no longer matter is to discard them at the earliest.

Here are some ideas that might help to get started in the pursuit of deep work³⁻⁸:

- (1) Block off a large chunk of time dedicated to deep work, preferably 2-4 hours either early in the morning or late at night to avoid distractions. Disconnect from e-mail and other sources of stimuli to focus on a single item that leads to true progress.
- (2) Start your day with spending a few minutes to reflect on the larger purpose, and plan your day.
- (3) Schedule your e-mail time by batching and not overusing this medium. Spend sometime to create some e-mail macros using text expanders and be brief. Encourage colleagues to discuss issues in person. Face-to-face interactions are more personal, effective, and save a lot of time.
- (4) Stop work at a set time every day, to give yourself the time to relax and rejuvenate. Avoid connecting to the Internet at the end of your day and go completely off-line for 1 day per week. Sleeping 7-8 hours per day is ideal preferably at the same time most days. My ideal day includes 30 minutes of exercise and 10 minutes of meditation.
- (5) Select a day of the week where you spend at least an hour to reprioritize, and focus on learning outside of radiology. For example, this day could be spent learning about personal finance, the business of radiology, or leadership.
- (6) Create good habits. We are a creature of our habits. How we manage a single day is a good reflection of our life. Make good habits convenient as best you can and make bad habits inconvenient. For example, wearing workout clothes and shoes first thing in the morning can make getting to the gym a lot more convenient. Not having our credit card information stored on amazon.com makes Internet shopping more inconvenient.
- (7) Track closely. Elite athletes track everything to the minutest details. I encourage you to track everything you do for 21 days and analyze. I did this and was astonished how much I overestimated the time I spent in deep work. I am constantly

monitoring my food portion sizes based on the input from MyFitnessPal application on my phone. Track everything you want to get better at.

I encourage you to try out some of these ideas to supercharge your productivity. *Give it a shot!*

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