



REBUILD FOCUS:

How to Eliminate Distraction
and Improve Your Attention Span

| Overview

Technology is advancing at a rapid rate. Throughout the years, many of us have witnessed the progression of the internet, the advancement of mobile devices, and the development and integration of social media in our daily lives. Although technology supports us in our daily activities, there is a dark side to our devices. The evolution of our technology directly impacts our attention and our ability to concentrate. The smart devices we have grown to love captivate our attention and lure us away from deeper pursuits. Furthermore, in a world full of vibrant, illuminated screens, we have [forgotten how to perform some of our fundamental cognitive activities.](#)

Daily, we succumb to the [distracting draw](#) of our devices, allowing them to dictate the things we give our attention to. This estranges us from achieving our goals and accomplishing challenging work. We settle for surface-level, mindless and meaningless tasks and behaviors as

opposed to fulfilling work. It is now commonplace to rely heavily on our smartphones for all the information and entertainment we may need, but turning to our devices has caused a notable decline in our work ethic, mental health, human interaction, and productivity. In hopes of restoring our focus, it is time to eliminate distraction by choosing to put our devices down.

This whitepaper serves to explain how we, as a society, arrived at a place of consistently being distracted by our smart devices. Additionally, it seeks to highlight the purpose, value, and benefits of deep work, followed by practical philosophies, steps, and tips to implement deep work into your schedule. Incorporating the following suggestions into your life will assist you in curtailing distractions, improving your attention span, and providing you with a sense of fulfillment and an improved sense of self. Ultimately, these practices will drive you to go deep.

The Opportunity

With the introduction and advancement of technology, humans have become increasingly distracted. Smartphones and other devices are persistently beckoning after and preying on our attention. Humans are progressively becoming smartphone-dependent. The use of these devices takes a toll on our concentration.

Many people believe that having their smartphone nearby while working benefits them. The smartphone can serve as a benefit by providing support with work, maintaining contact with loved ones, offering a mental break from mentally-taxing tasks, and more. However, as people continue to reach for smartphones while working, attention becomes increasingly divided while retention of information decreases.

According to studies done by Pew Research Center, about three in ten adults in the United States say they are online “almost constantly.” Pew also reports that 95% of teens have a smartphone or have access to one. Furthermore, 45% of teens admit that they are online on a “near-constant basis.” The ownership of smartphones is increasingly present amongst all of our generations. In September 2019, Pew reported that “more than nine-in-ten Millennials (93% of those who turn ages 23 to 38 this year) own smartphones, compared with 90% of Gen Xers (those ages 39 to 54 this year), 68% of Baby Boomers (ages 55 to 73) and 40% of the Silent Generation (74 to 91)” (Vogels, 2019).

Today, 96% of Americans now own a cellphone. 81% of this group can be classified as smartphone owners. This number has increased significantly from its original 35% in Pew Research Center’s first survey in 2011. Aside from mobile phones, Americans now own a range of smart devices. “Nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults now own desktop or laptop computers, while roughly half now own tablet computers and roughly half own e-reader devices” (Pew Research Center, 2020).

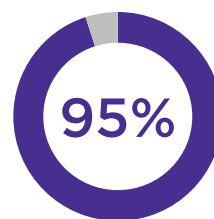
The draw of smart devices is already a notable issue within classrooms and in the workplace. Without a solution, this will persist. Smartphones will increasingly maintain the upper hand. Furthermore, people may lack the practice of deep work, as individuals may not maintain the skills necessary to generate insightful and fulfilling work. Without extensive focus and concentration, humans will become accustomed to producing surface-level work. Individuals may no longer care for assignments that require depth, ones that are daring, challenging, and thought-provoking. As people are increasingly seeking after instant-gratification, we may choose to forego depth for the shallows.

“If you are just getting into some work and a phone goes off in the background, it ruins what you are concentrating on.”

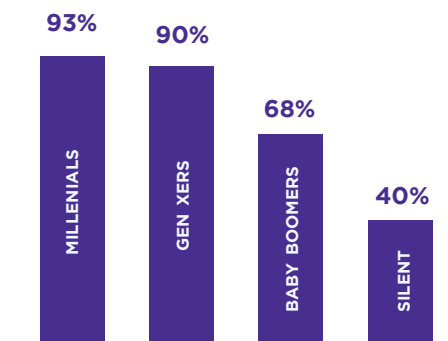
Cal Newport



Pew Research Center



Pew Research Center



Pew Research Center

How We Got Here

IBM SIMON
PERSONAL
COMMUNICATOR



The first smartphone was released in 1994 by the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM). IBM's smartphone, the Simon Personal Communicator, was revolutionary, as it had more features than its predecessors. Some of these features included a touch screen with a stylus, a calendar, an address book, fax, email, and the capability of making landline calls. Considering that IBM's Simon was the first smartphone, it took time for consumers to pique interest in owning a smartphone. Therefore some view the Simon as a [smartphone released before its time](#). Nonetheless, the Simon was a [great starting point](#) for other technology companies to build from. It became a staple in the history of smartphones.

BLACKBERRY 5810



The next notable smartphone, released in 2002, was the BlackBerry 5810, a smartphone designed for business professionals. Many of its features benefitted those who were busy, reviewing their calendars, dashing to meetings, answering emails, making important phone calls, and the like. Over time, the BlackBerry continued to evolve and broaden its appeal. By 2006, it was dubbed the "[Crackberry](#)," attributed to its addictive qualities. Politicians embraced it, celebrities endorsed it, and it found its way into the hands of ordinary people.

APPLE IPHONE



The following year, in 2007, Steve Jobs and Apple introduced the very first iPhone, which featured a sleek, stylus-free touch screen and remarkable web-browsing capabilities that resembled the experience of [browsing the internet on a desktop computer](#). This device was revolutionary, as its look, core functionality and interface appealed to the everyday user. The release of the iPhone redirected the relationship that people had with smartphones to this point. Apple's iPhone commenced the relationship that we have with our smartphones today, offering capabilities that appeal to everyone. The iPhone maintains the identity of a "full-blown multimedia powerhouse" (Nguyen, 2019), in which one can browse the web, send emails, watch videos, download and use applications, play games, share content, and keep up communication with others all in one place. Androids, revealed in 2008, contain some of the same attributes as iPhones. Although other device production companies have tried to stay the course, "IOS and Android devices continue to [dominate the market](#)" (Pothitos, 2016).

"These new attentional adversaries threaten not only the success, but even the integrity of the human will, at both individual and collective levels."

James Williams

Today, smart devices have been widely adopted. You will likely find an iPhone or Android in the pocket or hand of most people. With the advancement of both the hardware and software of smartphones, device makers are continually able to create widgets and functionalities that consumers recognize as needs they did not know they had. Smartphones, which were designed to make life activities simpler and more manageable, now house the capability of complicating our lives by captivating our attention and chipping away at our productivity.

How We Move Forward

I DEEP WORK AND ITS VALUE

In reference to Cal Newport's *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, "deep work" is characterized by, "Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capacities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate." Newport suggests that, due to society's various methods of network communication, knowledge workers are losing their grip on deep work. These services include social media networks, messaging, email, and infotainment sites. Increased use of these established services perpetuates the type of work that is common practice today: shallow work.

Due to the attachment and deep desire to be in constant use of smart devices in our society, people are moving further away from the practice of working deeply. According to Newport's deep work hypothesis, deep work is becoming rare but is also highly valuable. If one is able to recognize the need for deep work and develop the skills necessary to work deeply, they will excel. Many of these principles directly oppose some of the modern-day smartphone practices people have become accustomed to. The suggestions that Newport and others have developed to combat the strain smart devices place on our productivity may be uncomfortable and unfamiliar to the average smartphone user but refreshing and revitalizing regarding our performance. "In short, deep work is like a superpower in our increasingly competitive twenty-first century economy" (Newport, 2016).

Noteworthy knowledge workers in our society have taken to banishing various forms of communication to focus intently and achieve deep work. Carl Jung, Mark Twain, Woody Allen, J.K. Rowling, and Bill Gates are just a few of many successful individuals that have utilized different forms of isolation from the outside world to produce their greatest works. Throughout history, the observation of our recognized leaders and thought provokers indicates the significance and advantage of working deeply. Deep work is valuable, rare, and meaningful.

I DEEP WORK SCHEDULING PHILOSOPHIES

In preparation for working deeply, it is important to determine the most suitable approach to incorporating deep work into your life. In his book, Newport highlights four deep work scheduling philosophies:

1. **The Monastic Philosophy:** Focusing the majority of your time on deep work.
 - Beneficial for those who are capable of committing all working hours to high-level focus

"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."

Cal Newport

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 this skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive.

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.




How We Move Forward

- 1. The Bimodal Philosophy:** Strategically dividing your time, dedicating distinct portions to deep work. The remainder of your time can be committed to shallow work.
 - Beneficial for those who have the flexibility necessary to arrange days, weeks, months, etc. into large amounts of deep work
- 2. The Rhythmic Philosophy:** Creating a routine out of deep work by working in smaller portions of time regularly.
 - Beneficial for those who have a fixed schedule and are capable of blocking off time within their schedule to create a routine of deep work
- 3. The Journalistic Philosophy:** Practicing deep work randomly, whenever your schedule permits.
 - Beneficial for experienced deep workers with unpredictable schedules

Though each of these philosophies is proven to be fruitful, it is permissible to experiment with each philosophy. It is important to assess your current obligations and responsibilities. After doing so, select the philosophy that best suits your schedule, your work, and your life.

I DEVELOPING A DEEP WORK RITUAL

Newport suggests an additional prerequisite to working deeply—devising a strategy to cultivate a deep work ritual. It is important to make the following considerations when building a ritual:

-  **Location:** Where you will work and for how long.
 - Specify a distraction-free location for your deep work efforts and plan for a specific time frame to work deeply.
-  **Duration:** How you will work once you start to work.
 - To maintain structure, set rules and processes for your deep work efforts. What do you need to ban? What metrics can you apply?
-  **Requirements:** How you will support your work.
 - Determine your personal focus essentials. What supports your brain and energy in the midst of deep work? Do you need music? Headphones? Coffee or tea? Should you integrate light exercise?

It may take time to develop a deep work ritual that proves effective for you. However, if you persevere, the reward of developing your ritual will be significant. Your ritual will construct the space you need; an environment that is conducive to the quality of work you produce.

The Benefits

The results of working deeply are undeniable. Once deep work has begun, many positive outcomes can be identified. Some of these outcomes include better sleeping habits, improved human interaction, high-quality output, efficiency, better use of time, and an overall healthier relationship with smart devices. Furthermore, implementing deep work in your daily life has proven to result in the following:

I CURTAILED DISTRACTIONS

When concentrating on a task, suddenly diverting your attention to something else causes you to switch gears. Returning to your post-distraction work requires recalibration, which takes time. To work deeply is to limit distraction. From choosing a distraction-free location to silencing notifications, deep work requires intentionality in distancing oneself from counterproductive things. [Psychology researchers](#) have found that individuals work best when their smartphones are placed in another room in comparison to those with their phones nearby. If the guidelines and suggestions of deep work are implemented and maintained, the individual performing the work will become more inclined to focusing deeply with little distraction.

I INCREASED ATTENTION SPAN

Deep work also helps increase your attention span. In our society today, we are over-stimulated. Our smart devices are hijacking our concentration. Our attention spans are shrinking. [Studies have shown](#) that people who use smartphones frequently are more likely to behave in an absent-minded manner. Our attention is continuously divided between a plethora of things, whether it be breaking news, our work, emails, social media, or other factors. Shifting our attention between demanding activities [degrades our performance](#). Deep work requires us to dedicate significant time blocks to being attentive and focusing on the task at hand. Deep work is like a muscle. The more we cultivate the practice of deep work, the more we will be able to focus for longer periods of time. Our mental clarity will improve, and our attention spans will lengthen and mature.

“Human beings, it seems, are at their best when immersed deeply in something challenging.”

Cal Newport

“Better concentration makes life easier and less stressful and we will be more productive. To make this change means reflecting on what we are doing to sabotage personal concentration, and then implementing steps towards behavioural change that will improve our chances of concentrating better. This means deliberately reducing distractions and being more self-disciplined about our use of social media, which are increasingly urgent for the sake of our cognitive and mental health.”

Harriet Griffey

The lost art of concentration: being distracted in a digital world

The Benefits

I FULFILLMENT

Working deeply can be comparable to exercising in that it can be exhausting yet greatly exhilarating. Though working deeply requires a great deal of energy, you will become more fulfilled in knowing that you are producing valuable work. Deep work implores people to challenge themselves by accomplishing difficult and meaningful tasks. Newport states that “deep work will make you better at what you do and provide the sense of true fulfillment that comes from craftsmanship.”

Deep work is often connected to flow, a concept identified by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow is “a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (1990). Like deep work, flow is characterized by **complete concentration** with no distraction. Both flow and deep work produce a space to challenge oneself creatively and push limits. While working deeply, you produce your best work, which results in gratifying feelings of accomplishment, satisfaction, and peace. If you want to feel more fulfilled overall, strive to become an avid deep worker.

I BETTER SENSE OF SELF

Finally, deep work promotes an overall better sense of self. Constant distraction coupled with menial tasks limits the time we have to reflect on our lives and focus on what truly matters. Deep work requires us to evaluate how we spend our time and seek to perform significant tasks. It allows us to reach our goals and accomplish things far beyond our expectations. Just as Csikszentmihalyi suggests that a flow state causes individuals to become more **productive, creative, and happy**, Newport suggests that deep work promotes eudaimonia, a Greek term that roughly translates to welfare, prosperity, and happiness. Engaging in deep work causes us to go about our life experiences with intention, making the most of our energy and mental capability. Deep work leaves us with improved self-worth, valuing the work we produce, feeling that our work is purposeful, and feeling as though we are achieving our full potential.

“The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times... The best moments usually occur if a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.”

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Psychologist, Flow Concept

Practical Tips & Resources

I SIMPLE PRACTICES TO IMPROVE YOUR WORK

• Schedule your Time:

To be successful, you need to [plan what you want to accomplish](#). Before you begin work, create a schedule with time blocks dictating the time you will spend working, and when you will take breaks. Maintain a metric for how much time you will commit to each block.

- Consider using this time to create a [to-do list](#).
- Consider making use of project management tools to balance out your workload and assist you in working through tasks.

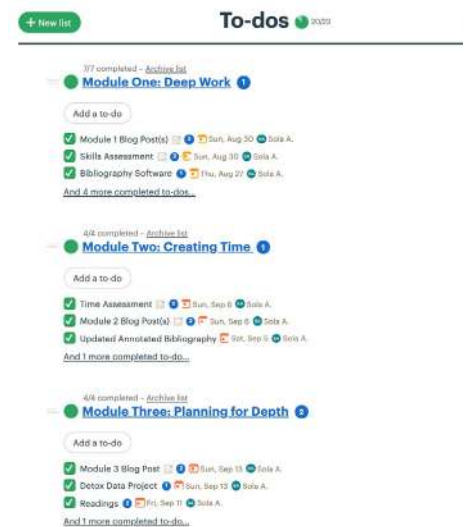
• Rework Time with your Smartphone:

Your smartphone is likely your main source of distraction and the biggest thief of your time. [Research indicates](#) that actively checking your smartphone decreases your productivity. To transform your unhealthy relationship with your smartphone into a healthy one, try to [create distance](#).

- Make use of the settings on your phone that promote a productive work environment. Set your phone to silent, use the 'Do Not Disturb' setting, make use of Screen Time to manage and limit your time spent on various apps.
- While working, store your phone in another room. If necessary, check-in during your scheduled work breaks.
- Compartmentalize and weigh your use of social media. Try to use social media solely during a preset time block. Avoid "[low-value distraction](#)" by filtering past the posts that are not useful or beneficial, targeting the useful posts.

Project Management Tools

- [Basecamp](#)
- [Trello](#)
- [Asana](#)
- [Monday](#)
- [Podio](#)



Basecamp To-Do List



Trello Board

Practical Tips & Resources

I ADVANCED PRACTICES TO IMPROVE YOUR WORK

• Detox/Delete Social Media:

Newport's chapter entitled, *Quit Social Media*, entreats his audience to go into network isolation to evaluate their current relationship with social media. Some of Newport's [thoughts regarding social media](#) seem radical, but, to achieve deep work, assessing your engagement with social media is necessary. Start by detoxing your favorite social media outlet for a week. Be sure to be intentional during this time and observe the way the detox affects you. Were you more productive? If so, consider the following next steps:

- Try a 30-day detox
- Delete social media apps from your smartphone. Moving forward, visit these sites in your browser.
- Disable your social media accounts until further notice
- Delete some or all of your social media accounts altogether

• Dumb Down Your Smartphone:

Some people achieve this step by turning their current [smartphones into dumbphones](#). Others choose to seek out an entirely different device. Find what works best for you. If you choose to change devices, remember this: just because you may not have a smartphone does not mean you live in the stone age. Information is easily accessible with or without a smartphone. Consider switching your smartphone out for these options:

- iPod Touch/iPad/Tablet - These devices promote the connectedness we seek after without the full functionality of a smartphone.
- [Light Phone](#) - Designed to be an alternative phone for when you need a break from your smartphone.
- [Gabb Phone](#) - Intended to be a dumb phone for kids, the Gabb phone is just smart enough with useful functionality while limiting distraction.
- Flip Phone - There are various devices available for returning to the basic use of a cell phone, calls and messaging.

"When you give something, you get something in return. In this case, you trade the often-uncontrollable urge to check for new messages for a bit of light that invites you to read a book instead or just focus on your work. What remains is the simple solution 'Out of sight, out of mind.'"

Klemens Schillinger

*Product and furniture designer,
Substitute Phone, Offline Lamp*

Detox Steps:

- **Step 1:** Determine what you are going to give up
- **Step 2:** Determine how you are going to measure, track, and collect the data.
- **Step 3:** Begin the experiment and collect the data. Be as thorough as possible and document your data collection as you go.
- **Step 4:** Evaluate the data. Determine your next steps.

Final Remarks

Productivity is not characterized by how connected we feel to others or how quickly we can respond to all of our emails, notifications, and messages. The amount of small tasks we can complete in a specific timeframe does not translate the depth or significance of each task. In our society, we are moving at an increasingly fast rate, causing us to forget the profit of devoting our attention to extraordinary ventures, ones that cause us to ask questions, research deeply, evaluate our perspectives, and challenge the viewpoints of others.

Though deep work can be intimidating in a shallow world, we cannot forfeit deep work, as it is essential to improving our society. We must begin to challenge ourselves to be intentional about how we spend our time. Instead of wasting our time away in insignificant efforts, we need to ready ourselves to step away from the digital stimuli and turn our energy toward deeply engaging practices. In our efforts, we should seek to be insightful, perceptive, and understanding.

To return to productivity, we must embrace a slow-paced route. Productivity is about quality more than quantity. To rebuild focus, restore concentration, produce valuable results in our work, and utilize our cognition for our betterment, we must be willing to assess our current relationships with our devices, limit distraction, restructure our schedules, and plunge into the deep. In working deeply, we will achieve our potential and produce our best work. We will mature into better versions of ourselves and better humans with the willingness to think deeply, work deeply, and continually pursue the depths.

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