

Deep Work Is Dying, but It's What We Desperately Need



Have We Made Focus Impossible?

The modern workplace is a masterpiece of distraction.

Open-plan offices. Slack pings. Meeting overload. “Quick calls.” Shared calendars that bleed into every hour of the day. Even when we *aren't* in a

meeting, we're preparing for one, summarising one, or recovering from the last.

We're constantly connected, perpetually responsive, but rarely *truly* focused.

In this environment, **deep work doesn't just go unrewarded. It barely stands a chance.**

What Is Deep Work, and Why Don't We Have Time for It?

The idea of **deep work** was popularised by computer science professor and author **Cal Newport** in his 2016 book, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. In it, he draws a clear distinction between the kind of work that creates true value and the kind that just fills time.

Newport defines deep work as:

“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.”

In contrast, he describes **shallow work** as non-cognitively demanding tasks, often performed while distracted, that tend not to create much value and are easy to replicate, think checking email, status updates, or routine admin.

Want to explore the idea further?

- *Deep Work* by Cal Newport (the foundational book)
- *Digital Minimalism* by Cal Newport (on reclaiming attention in a noisy world)
- Newport's blog and podcast “Deep Questions”

So why don't we have time for deep work?

We've allowed shallow work to take over, and built environments that make sustained focus nearly impossible. Most knowledge workers find their days fragmented by meetings, notifications, and constant context-switching. There's no space to think, let alone to *create*.

When the culture rewards responsiveness over results, it's no surprise that the first casualty is *depth*.

Are We Drowning in Shallow Work?

Most modern jobs are defined by shallow work, the kind that keeps us busy but not necessarily productive.

- Responding to messages
- Attending meetings
- Posting updates
- Chasing tasks
- Managing inboxes

It's not bad work, but it's reactive, often low-leverage, and it fragments attention. The more time we spend here, the less cognitive space we have for the kind of work that moves the needle, make the boat go faster.

So why do we default to shallow work?

It's visible, rewarded and because the environments we've built make deep work harder than ever.

Could Our Workplaces Be Designed for Distraction?

Let's look at what surrounds us:

Open Offices

Are open-plan offices really about collaboration, or just cost-saving?

- Constant background noise
- No visual or auditory privacy
- Social cues to “be available”
- Interruptions as a default, not an exception

Even putting on headphones can feel like you're signalling you're *not a team player*. Without boundaries, there's no focus.

Without focus, there's no depth.

Always-On Culture

Do we really need to respond instantly, or have we just normalised interruption?

- Teams pings at all hours
- Meetings on a moment's notice
- Urgency as the default tone
- The illusion that speed equals value

We've confused responsiveness with productivity, being busy isn't the same as being effective.

Fragmented Calendars

How often do you see a full hour free in your diary, let alone three?

- Meeting overload
- No time for solo thinking
- Days chopped into 15-minute or 30-minute intervals
- No recovery time between context switches

Deep work takes *time* to warm up, but most calendars are so fragmented we never even get to the starting line.

What's the Cost of Losing Deep Work?

The cost of losing deep work isn't just a minor productivity dip, it's a slow erosion of a company's *ability to think*.

When deep work disappears, we don't just lose output we lose:

Cognitive Capacity

Switching between tasks (emails, chats, meetings) burns mental energy. According to cognitive science research, **context switching can reduce efficiency by up to 40%**. We're constantly rebooting our brain between shallow tasks, which means we rarely reach a state of flow or do our best thinking.

Strategic Thinking

Without time to think deeply, strategy becomes reactive. It's driven by urgency instead of clarity. Teams spend their energy responding to the now instead of designing the future. The long view gets lost in a sea of short-term tasks.

Creativity and Innovation

Ideas need space. Innovation doesn't happen between back-to-back meetings or in the five minutes between Teams messages. When people don't have time to mentally *wander*, connect concepts, or explore without immediate pressure, the creative edge dulls. Teams start recycling instead of reinventing.

Complex Problem Solving

Real problem-solving is messy. It requires immersion, sitting with a challenge long enough to understand its contours and complexities. When work is constantly interrupted, problems stay half-solved, or solutions stay surface-level.

Team Satisfaction and Purpose

When people are stuck in cycles of shallow work, they start to feel like cogs; always busy but never satisfied. Burnout becomes a cultural norm, not because people aren't working hard, but because they're never given the *space to do meaningful work*. Morale declines, retention suffers and high performers disengage.

It's Especially Hard for Neurodivergent Professionals

Shallow, reactive work environments aren't just inefficient they're often *exclusionary*. For many neurodivergent people, especially those with ADHD, autism, or sensory sensitivities, constant context-switching and interruption-heavy workflows are mentally exhausting. The demand to jump between tasks, conversations, and tools can overload executive functioning and erode concentration completely.

Deep work offers a kind of cognitive relief. Focused, meaningful tasks tackled in a consistent, distraction-free environment allow people to work with their strengths instead of constantly masking or compensating. When we protect deep work, we don't just improve productivity, we create a more accessible workplace, one where more people can thrive on their own terms.

For a deeper look at how to lead with inclusion in mind, especially when managing neurodivergent team members, you might also like:

[Not Broken, Just Different: How to Lead Neurodivergent Teams](#)

Is There a Way Back to Depth?

Absolutely. But it requires a shift in how we *design* work, not just how we *do* it.

What Helps:

- **Protected time** for deep work, visibly blocked and respected
- **No-meeting mornings or days** to create breathing room
- **Asynchronous communication** to reduce context switching
- **Clear team norms** around when people are expected to respond, and when they're not
- **Focus on outcomes** over presence or speed

What Doesn't:

- More tools to manage more tools
- "Time management" hacks that ignore systemic problems
- Cultures that idolise urgency but neglect value
- Assuming people can do deep work in 15-minute bursts between meetings

What If We Treated Focus Like a Resource, Not a Bonus?

Because it is.

Deep work isn't a luxury for "when we have time." It's the *engine* of real progress.

If you want better thinking, clearer strategy, stronger products, and more fulfilled people, then **make space for depth**.

The truth is, **we're not short on talent, we're short on time to think**.

Further Reading & References

- Newport, C. (2016). *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. Grand Central Publishing.
- Newport, C. (2019). *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*. Portfolio.
- Podcast: Deep Questions with Cal Newport
- Article: “The Rise and Fall of the Open-Plan Office” — *The Atlantic*
- Study: “The Cost of Interrupted Work” — Gloria Mark, UC Irvine (2008)
- Research: Microsoft Work Trend Index — “The Rise of the Triple Peak Workday”

By [Nik Charlson](#) on [July 7, 2025](#).

[Canonical link](#)

Exported from [Medium](#) on November 15, 2025.