

Four Ways to Get More Creative On Your Own

To be more successful, productive and creative, Cal Newport, author of *Deep Work*, explores four rules for embracing meaningful work.



How many times have you been part of a big brainstorming session — striving to come up with a breakthrough idea only to leave the session struggling for the big ah-ha? Idea generation can be a collaborative activity. But, research tells us creative ideas and innovative concepts don't always spring forth from a group. They often emerge during times of deep focus where our brains free themselves from distraction and enter a state of intense concentration. Cal Newport, author of the 2016 book *Deep Work*, offers four rules for embracing more meaningful and rewarding knowledge work.

As Newport explains in his book, deep work is the opposite of the busy, shallow work that fills so many people's days at the office. Email, instant messaging and project management platforms, all leave us feeling like a ping-pong ball — exhausted, but not sure we really made any progress. Deep work is essential to develop expertise in complex topics. It stretches your ability to enhance creativity and requires you to stop multitasking and block out distractions.

Recent Steelcase research and insights back up the idea that focus and respite are two important parts of the creative process. Creative work involves an ebb and flow between group collaboration and individual think time. Without time alone to develop our own ideas, group-think can set in, an enemy of creativity. In addition, neuroscience tells us some of our best ideas come to us when the brain has time to rest and build new connections.

To begin incorporating deep work into your routine, here's a look at Newport's four rules.

RULE #1 SCHEDULE DEEP WORK REGULARLY

Make it a habit to block out distractions and improve your ability to focus. Pick a rhythm that works best for you. Some people do this everyday, blocking out parts of their calendars for focus work. Other people choose one or two days a week and, yet others, pick certain times a year to remove themselves for a few weeks at a time.

Recently, Forbes interviewed 200 ultra-productive people including billionaires, olympians and academics to find out their secrets to success. Focus came up a number of times including following "the 80/20 rule." They said 80 percent of outcomes come from 20 percent of their business activities. Lesson: Eliminate the extraneous and focus.

RULE #2 LEARN TO LOVE BOREDOM

Distraction is everywhere. In fact, we carry the most distracting device around in our pockets almost everywhere we go. But, having a pavlovian reaction to every ping and vibration doesn't make us more creative or more successful. Instead, revise what "work" looks like. Real focus is good for you. Stop yearning for interruptions and accept a little boredom as proof that you know how to concentrate.

RULE #3 PUT DOWN THE "LIKE" BUTTON

Don't tell Mark Zuckerberg, but Newport advocates you quit social media. He says it's pretty simple - go back to "the 80/20 rule." Does social media make the top-tier of tactics that will contribute to you reaching your goals? The answer is most likely "no." In which case, your time is better spent doing deep work.

RULE #4 END SHALLOW WORK

Finally, Newport suggests what many ultra-productive people have known for a long time. Eliminate some of the "busy work" that fails to contribute to creativity and true productivity. Many of the business elite interviewed by Forbes schedule time to respond to email efficiently and just once a day. Newport advocates for rigorous adherence to a schedule, blocking off time for new activities, batching related tasks together and building in buffer time to protect deep work.



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