

Announcer:

Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. A Podcast all about leadership, change and personal growth. The goal? To help you lead like never before in your church or in your business. And now your host, Carey Nieuwhof.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well hey everybody, and welcome to Episode 403 of the podcast. My name's Carey Nieuwhof, and I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before. I have been waiting for this episode for a long time, and it's a thrill to bring you Cal Newport. If you don't know who he is, you're about to find out and I think you'll love it as much as I do. We are going to talk about his new book, and why you're distracted and unproductive at work, how to structure your work life far more effectively, and how to cultivate influence without using social media. Fascinating.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Today's episode is brought to you by Gloo Connect. You can go to [gloconnect.church/Carey](https://gloconnect.church/Carey) to grow your digital outreach campaigns and get access to my free four-part course Click To Connect. And, by Belay. You can text Carey, C-A-R-E-Y, to 31996 to get your free download of Belay's Delegation Worksheet today.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I am super pumped to have Cal on this podcast. I started accessing his work maybe five years ago, around the time that Deep Work came out, read Digital Minimalism. He's published several books that have been published in over 30 languages. And, he is Associate Professor of Computer Sciences at Georgetown University, where he specializes in the theory of distributed systems. But, he's also a New York Times bestselling author who writes for a broader audience.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So, think about this: how do you become a New York Times bestselling author without having social media? I ask him that question, it's worth listening through for that. Because so many of us are like, "You know, if I could just get more followers on social, I'd be more successful." Well, he's got a different take on that, and it's really, really fascinating. He's a regular contributor to The New Yorker, The New York Times, Wired Magazine, a frequent guest on NPR. His blog Study Hacks, which has been published since 2007, attracts over three million visits a year. He's got a fantastic new podcast, too, Deep Questions with Cal Newport. I discovered it doing research for my interview, and have become a subscriber.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Speaking of which, if you haven't subscribed to this podcast, please do. We love to bring you some great leaders every chance we get. We do this about six times a month, on this show, and we try to deliver the kind of conversations you would want to have if you were sitting down with Cal Newport. I think this is really important, because we thought technology was going to make our work easier, arguably it's made it more complicated. A lot of people are working from home for the first time, or remotely, it's exhausting. Cal talks about that, and we go all over the place in this interview. But hopefully, you're going to walk away with some very practical tips on how to live in a world without email to manage your productivity, and we have some fun with that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I've also got some productivity tips for you, some ones that are close to me, at the end of the show. And then, I've got a book coming out this fall, too, which is in this field, on productivity. I don't think you can get enough of it, we are all struggling to try to keep up, so hope you find this episode interesting.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Today's episode is brought to you by our partners at Gloop Connect. If you're like a lot of church leaders, your outreach strategy looks nothing like it did a year ago. And you're probably thinking, "How do I get online?" Well, if digital is your number one outreach channel, how do you get the right message to the right people? Gloop Connect was created for just this need. It's the world's first collective outreach platform for churches. It's affordable, requires zero additional staff, and in 2021 your costs are covered by Kingdom Minded Donors, investors who want you to have access to this one-of-a-kind solution.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Here's how it works. They run professional felt need based ads off Facebook, Instagram, other digital channels. They pool funds from donors and churches to run cooperative campaigns in your city, offsetting the costs. In Kansas City, churches saw a 21% increase in new people connecting with their churches for the first time. And, as Easter is rolling out, this should be your outreach toolkit. Ultimately, it translates into more people checking out what your church has to offer. And in select cities, you can now get Gloop Connect for free for the first year, which is a \$1700 value. If you want to see if you qualify, if your city's being covered, head over to [gloopconnect.church/Carey](https://gloopconnect.church/Carey), C-A-R-E-Y, and Gloop is spelled G-L-O-O, [gloopconnect.church/Carey](https://gloopconnect.church/Carey), to learn more. As a bonus, when you sign up for Gloop Connect, you'll get free access to Click to Connect, my new four-part video course for church leaders, that's a \$250 value.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And, today's episode is also brought to you by our friends over at Belay. So, I have used their services many times, as have people like Daymond John and so many others. Let's talk about time, and how 24 hours never seems to be enough. As a leader, you want to grow, but you can't do everything on your own. A lot of us struggle with delegation. The powerful, multiplying effects of delegation are mission critical, because when you entrust others to do that for which they were hired, you not only free yourself from a busyness mountain, but you in turn develop the kind of employees that allow your business to grow.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's why Belay, an incredible organization revolutionizing productivity with their own virtual assistants, bookkeepers, and social media strategists, help growing organizations, and they are offering a free download of their Delegation Worksheet today. So to get it, you can text Carey, C-A-R-E-Y to 31996 and get your free download of their Delegation Worksheet today. You can get one step closer to reclaiming precious time, every week, to do only what you can do.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I just want to say, if you listen to this whole podcast, yeah maybe at 1.5 speed, you're probably going to reclaim all of that time in productivity alone from Cal, from what I share at the end, and from Belay and

maybe even Gloom Connect, so all this plays together. In the meantime, let's jump into my conversation with someone I really, really appreciate, Cal Newport.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Cal, so excited to have you on, welcome to the podcast.

Cal Newport:

Well, thanks for having me on. I'm excited as well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I love your work, it's had a really positive impact on me. Partly, coming out of a burnout episode I had 15 years ago, and I had to rediscover how to work and find a sustainable pace. Where I'd love to start is something I found really interesting in Deep Work, which is the whole distinction between shallow work and deep work. Can you explain that? It resonated so deeply for me, when I first heard you.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. It's a simple concept, but sometimes just putting vocabulary to simple concepts makes all the difference.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right.

Cal Newport:

That distinction, which was at the core of that book, is we can think about our efforts, when we're doing knowledge work, into two different categories. There's deep work, which is where you are giving something your full unbroken attention, so it's a cognitively demanding task that you're giving your full attention and trying to do as well as you can. And then, there's everything else which I call shallow work. I don't mean shallow to be pejorative, but just tasks that do not require your full unbroken skilled attention, so answering emails, or preparing slides for a talk or something like this.

Cal Newport:

And, the main argument is that deep work is what really moves the needle, whereas shallow work is important and it's what keeps the lights on, but deep work is what really produces the new value, the stuff that drives most organizations, or most teams, or most personal growth, so you want to make sure that both are getting attention. We're in a time now, where accidentally, we are really condensing or compressing the time available for deep work, and I think that's to our detriment.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Can you give us some examples of ... You have a lot of content creators here, so you have preachers, a lot of entrepreneurs, CEOs, management people. Knowledge workers, which is really your field as well, as an academic. But, they're working in a white collar setting, they're working in a knowledge worker setting. What would be an example? You give a couple of shallow work. But, what would some deep work be? Because I agree, we talk on our team all the time in my communication company about working on it versus working in it. Okay, you're actually creating stuff of value, rather than just replying. But, just so people have those categories clear in their head.

Cal Newport:

Sure. Well, one of the groups I hear from a lot is preachers. What preachers tell me, for example, is sermon writing is deep work.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yes.

Cal Newport:

Of course, in the religious context we're used to this notion of the contemplative life, and only in that period of silence and contemplation can you hope to have any sort of interaction with the divine. So the preachers will say, "Okay, sermon writing is canonical deep, and I'm not giving it the time it needs because I have emails from parishioners, I have budget spreadsheets. I have all of the logistical overhead of having a building, and a physical plant, and a budget or a payroll, or something like this." This was a classic example of that shallow work is important. You need to answer emails, you need to be communicative to your parishioners. But at the same time, your sermons require unbroken concentration and it's two different types of activities. That one's a classic example that came up a lot, actually.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, yeah. Having preached for 25, 30 years, I can talk you that's a lot of deep work.

Carey Nieuwhof:

For an average office worker, let's say you're a receptionist. Does a receptionist have deep work, an admin assistant person? What about a middle manager? What would be an example of some deep work for someone in that situation?

Cal Newport:

Well, I get into that exact question with those exact examples, actually, in the new book.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Cal Newport:

I say, "Okay, let's be more nuanced about this and let's talk about three different categories of workers." I believe I used the term Makers, so people who are primarily tasked with creating valuable output with their brain, so a computer programmer producing computer code, or a writer producing books, or a preacher producing sermons. Managers, so you're primarily managing teams that, among other things, people on your team produce value. And then, just to be needlessly alliterative, I called support staff Minders. You're mainly supporting other people with administrative or support.

Cal Newport:

I said, "Okay, what is the ideal way to work in each of these situations?" That is, what's the ideal way to take advantage of the way the human brain actually functions in each of these positions. The thread that connected them all was, I would call single focus sequentiality, doing one thing at a time, and giving it

the attention it deserves until you're done with it and ready to move onto the next thing. That's actually the through-line that's going to best take advantage of how the brain works and gets the best results.

Cal Newport:

So the converse to this is, if you're doing many things at the same time. Then, while you're working let's say as an administrative assistant you're like, "I'm trying to solve this problem, but I'm also having to checking email, and I'm on Slack." And I'm continually moving back and forth, kind of working on this, kind of working on that. For a manager, you're overwhelmed with communication, "I'm kind of talking to this person, sending this email, going back to my inbox." Or as a maker, you're trying to write the sermon or write the computer code, but you keep interrupting yourself. In all of those cases, from a brain perspective, the ideal way to execute is actually, "No, I'm just doing this one thing until I'm done. Then, I can clear that context and say what's next?"

Cal Newport:

I think that is a general umbrella that includes really long periods of deep work. If you're someone whose producing something very cognitively demanding it includes that, but also includes these other types of activities as well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

As anyone whose read Digital Minimalism, which was a great book, it came out a couple years ago, would know, you talk about the importance of undistracted work. I want to double click on that for a moment.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But, I heard you say on your podcast, which I would highly recommend ... I discovered it in researching this, and I'm a few episodes in. I'm like, "Man, this is so practical." If people are just looking for hacks, it's so ... Not hacks, because your work is not about hacks. But, you know what I mean. Practical tips, how do you make this work on a Tuesday. But you said a lot of people use, I think it's called the Pomodoro Technique, but basically your minimum allotment of time for undistracted work, is it 30 minutes? Is that what you were saying? Sometimes we have trouble staying focused for five minutes, and I think in your new book you say people are checking email, 126 emails a day, and they're checking every few minutes and that kind of thing.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What is a minimum block of undistracted time, that you think is helpful?

Cal Newport:

Yeah, that's a good question. If we're talking about administrative tasks, if you're blocking off your day, which is what I recommend doing. I talk about this a lot on my podcast, this notion of time blocking. I think you should actually give every minute of your day a job, as opposed to just having a list, and an inbox, and a meeting schedule, and just trying to get through things.

Cal Newport:

If you're going to block off your time, I think 30 minutes is the smallest block that is useful. Because once you get below 30 minutes, you're getting too precise and it's going to be too hard to try to hit that, you

don't quite know how long things are going to take. So for administrative tasks, at the very minimum I would put aside 30 minutes at a time. So if you're going to check your email, have at least 30 minutes for it.

Cal Newport:

For a cognitively demanding task, I would say at least an hour. The reason why I say at least an hour is that there is a context switching cost. When I switch from doing this over to this demanding task, there's going to be a 10 to 15 minute period where my brain is changing what it's amplifying, what it's suppressing, the attention networks are readjusting for this new thing I'm working on. Until that's done, I'm not at full capacity. So if you're only working for 30 minutes on a cognitively demanding task, well only maybe 15 minutes of that are you at full capacity. I tend to say if it's going to be really hard on your brain, you need at least an hour so that within that hour, you can get at least 45 minutes of rock and rolling at full speed. Otherwise, it's not worth all the overhead of switching your attention.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. I remember reading an article years ago in the New York Times, you can still find it, and you hinted this in some of your books as well. But, there is a cost to context switching, or to task switching. I remember the New York Times said any distractions. So, I check my phone. I'm in the middle of writing an article, or writing a talk that I want to deliver at a conference, I check my phone, I look in the notification. I think the article said there's a 25 minute reset, before your brain is back where it was before.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What's your take on that? What are your thoughts on that, Cal?

Cal Newport:

Yeah. Well hey, it's possible that I wrote that article.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You may have, that may have been you.

Cal Newport:

Yeah, I have written about this for the Times before. To me, the context switching cost is the whole ballgame. It's the biggest misunderstood thing about knowledge work, and it's the foundation on a lot of my advice, and one of the biggest issues I think we face in office work.

Cal Newport:

Now, the issue is we mistake that with multi-tasking. There was this period in the '90s where people were very proud about literally doing multiple things at the same time. I'm on phone while I'm writing, I'm answering emails while I'm in a meeting. We figured out around the early 2000s, the research was pretty clear, this doesn't work. You can actually write while you're listening, your brain has to try to switch between the two and it doesn't work very well. As we proceeded through the 2000s we all got very proud and said, "Look, we don't multi-task anymore, we do one thing at a time, we don't have notifications on. We don't keep our email inbox open, next to Microsoft Word while we're writing," so we think we had solved the problem.

Cal Newport:

But, what we weren't counting on was the context switching cost of doing quick checks. You say, "I'm single tasking, because I do not have my email inbox open. Oh, well I'm going to quickly check in, just every six minutes or so, but I'm not keeping it open. I'm only checking it for a minute, just because I'm looking for an important email, and then I go back to what I'm doing." You think you're still single tasking, but what you don't realize is that 30-second glance at your inbox has just wrecked your ability for the next 15, 20, maybe 25 minutes because you have exposed your mind to these other obligations, these open loops and messages that you know you need to answer but you can't answer right away and that's lingering there, and you have just jumbled all of these attention circuits. It's not the time that you spend on the distraction that matters, it's the context shift, the cost of the switch and the switch back.

Cal Newport:

So if you look at the statistics that say yeah, the average knowledge worker is checking an inbox once every six minutes, and we know it takes 10, 15, 20 minutes to get your attention back. That means the average knowledge worker is basically in a persistent state of reduced cognitive capacity. We are, by accident, making ourselves non-trivially dumber. I think this is a huge scandalous reality about how we work today, and we're only now just starting to figure it out.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. What's interesting, for anyone who may not be familiar with your work, and I would encourage them to definitely dive in, as I have over the last few years, Cal, is this is not just ... You're making the argument, just to make this absolutely clear it's not like, "Well Cal, that's great but I don't work that way, I have all these powers and all that." You're like, "No. Neurologically, brain chemistry research wise, you've got stuff spinning in the background now because you've just looked at your phone, or you just tried to answer that email, or whatever." Is this at the neurological, physiological level, we're not created to do this?

Cal Newport:

We absolutely aren't. You can study this at the neuroscience level, you can also study this at the level of psychology. The research is unequivocal about this, we are not good at quickly switching our attention, it takes time. If you're going back and forth, it is not a good state to put yourself in.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. You make the argument, I think in your new book, and it's a good book. It's a big book, actually, it's going to be a reread for me. But, it was that whole idea of your system ... If you look at most animals, if they hear something in the forest they look around, and it's a survival thing. But, you had this metaphor of, what was it, a caveman at a computer or something like that? Do you want to explore that a little bit, because I thought that was really interesting.

Cal Newport:

Well I think more generally, a lot of the ills we have with the way we work today is from these mismatches between our fundamental nature and the way that we have somewhat arbitrarily designed how our work actually happens.

Cal Newport:

I don't know if this is exact analogy that you're referencing, but there is a caveman analogy that's quite relevant. Which is, if you go back to just early human times and say, "How would you naturally coordinate?" If there's three of you, and you're on the Savannah and you're hunting an antelope or something like that, the way we'd naturally coordinate was small groups focusing on one thing, is ad hoc and on demand. "You go over there, I'll come over here. Watch out for this," we'd just let this thing unfold naturally.

Cal Newport:

The argument I make in the new book, the one that just came out, is that the way we work today with the advent of low friction tools, communication tools like emails, we've basically taken the way that three of us would have coordinated working on a single task like hunting an antelope, and we've scaled that up to whole organizations, and dozens and dozens of different objectives. So our instincts tell us it's very natural, to just ad hoc, on demand, figure things out on the fly. I'll shoot you an email, you shoot me an email, maybe we're on Slack and we can go even faster, let's just figure everything out on the fly. Again, that works great when it's three people working on one thing. But, when you have 30 people and 30 initiatives, it doesn't scale.

Cal Newport:

We get completely overwhelmed by trying to maintain all of these different conflicting conversations, it's too much communication, we're constantly context shifting, and our effectiveness drops and we get completely miserable. But, it's not surprising that we got there, because it was just our natural instinct and this new technology allowed us to scale it up to levels that are brain, never would have assumed was possible back when these networks were being evolved.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Back to deep work before we leave it, because that could be a whole episode in and of itself. But, I think you make the argument in Deep Work that the average person has the capacity of about four hours a day, max, for really concentrated efforts. If you're writing that talk, creating a business plan, writing a sermon, outlining a series, reorganizing the company, that cognitively demanding work, it's about four hours a day.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I would love for you to talk about just why that is a superpower. I think you actually call it a superpower, and that that is so scarce in the world today. What's the benefit for leaders who are tempted to say, "Cal, you don't understand my world. I've got 1000 people I'm trying to serve, I've got all these clients, I've got this big congregation. They're always wanting me, I've got a big staff." I've seen the benefit in my own life, but I want to hear it in your words. What would you say the benefit or the superpower of deep work is?

Cal Newport:

Well, there's two big things you get from unbroken concentration. One, you can learn things faster. If you need to learn something that's new or complicated, doing it with unbroken concentration is immensely more productive than trying to learn something with more distracted concentration. There's a lot of reasons why that's true. But we know that in many contexts today, the ability to learn new things, new systems, new ideas, new philosophies is crucial for success. Two, you produce higher quality with less total time invested when you're very concentrated versus scattered. If you have to, whatever,

produce a book chapter or write a sermon, you can take half as much time to do it, if the time you spend on it is actually very concentrated.

Cal Newport:

This is one of these paradoxes is that you assume well, if I'm also checking email while I'm working on this hard thing, I'm more productive because I'm making progress on these issues in my inbox at the same time that I'm working on this. But, what you don't factor is that it's going to take you twice as long, three times as long to get that same thing done. And even then, the quality might be less than if you gave it unbroken concentration. Those two factors, you've got to be pretty careful about preserving unbroken concentration in your workday because it can make a big difference.

Carey Nieuwhof:

This could be a total rabbit trail, and if it is we'll leave it. But, it's got me thinking, you make the argument that deep work is so scarce, therefore it's so valuable, the people who can really bring value to an organization, create a coherent thought these days. Do you think there is a correlation between the rise of shallow work and what we might call the rise of shallow thinking?

Carey Nieuwhof:

I've also followed Tristan Harris' work, and so on, when it comes to social media and the polarized, trivialized debate that we have in public. Do you think shallow thinking and shallow work go together?

Cal Newport:

It's an interesting question, because there's two related forces there but it's unclear how related. I've dealt with both.

Cal Newport:

In my 2016 book Deep Work, and in my new book A World Without Email, I'm looking at the world of work and the impact of technology. But in between those two books, in 2019 as you mentioned, I published Digital Minimalism which looks at technologies in our personal life, so things like social media, things like our phone. They're similar in the sense that they both really fragment our attention and bring us away from things that are more valuable, but they're different in the sense that the motive force behind them are quite varied.

Cal Newport:

If you look at what's happening in the public sphere with our conversation with polarizations be driven by things like social media, you have these companies that are actually intentionally trying to get you to use these things as much as possible, to spend as much time as possible on these platforms, to make them as engaging as possible in a completely value agnostic, algorithmic driven way. Whereas in the world of work, the force that's driving us to more distraction, the force that's driving us to more fragmented attention is tools like email and Slack, which there's not someone behind these tools saying, "We want people to use email more." Or, "We're going to make money if we use email more."

Cal Newport:

So actually, the dynamics that got us into this world of constant communication and email use in work are much more interesting and emergent. I basically argue that it was accidental, that we ended up in this place where we email all the time.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:24:04]

Cal Newport:

Whereas in the world of our personal interaction with technology, what we see today is actually the somewhat inevitable result of an intentional business plan. How do we get people looking at this thing as much as possible, so we can get as much data and sell them as much ads, and it was Skynet invented the Terminator and things got out of control. Anyway, I'm glad you're bringing it up because these two magisterial, the world of work and the world of technology outside of work, in some ways seem very similar. But in some ways, when you look underneath the covers, there's really different and interesting ways, different forces going on.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, and they converged for a lot of leaders on their phones. I've been at this a long time, 25 years in leadership, and to go back to the '90s, which you're younger than I am, but to go back to the '90s, here was the big debate in pastoral ministry: home phone versus work phone. It was landlines, it was pre cell phone. You had to be mega wealthy to have a cell phone in the '90s. It was like, "oh, please call me on my work phone," right? Of course, all those categories are out the window. The challenge with most leaders, it's true in sales, it's true in ministry, it's true ... It's like on this phone, and I write about it in my next book, I've got at least 11 inboxes, and it follows me all the time.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I want you to speak to the leader who's trying to set up boundaries, and they're like, "My congregants, they're trying to reach me 24/7. I look at Facebook, there's five new messages. Then I go to Instagram, there's messages there and they're like, 'Hey, can you come and deal with this?'" And then I open my inbox" ... We have this fused world right now. And salespeople have the same thing, right? There are some corporate cultures where it's like, my boss emails 24/7 and all weekend long. Any good guidance, and I know that could be a deep dive of its own, for leaders who are living in that world, where they're like, "Cal, I can't catch a break. From morning until night people are trying to reach me, and get my intention, and get me to act. It's causing me to burn out."

Cal Newport:

This is the big problem of the time. To put some chronology to my thinking on this, so it's 2016 is when my book *Deep Work* came out, and that book was about, hey, concentration is more important than we realize. We've accidentally built these work cultures where we're distracted all the time. I don't think we realize how negative that is. There's a big competitive advantage if you're one of the few to prioritize focus. But part of the feedback to that book was, Cal, this culture of constant communication, I always have to be communicating, always have to be servicing messages, I always have to be servicing Slack, et cetera, is incredibly deeply entrenched and seemingly impossible to escape." That's what led to the new book, *A World Without Email*, where I asked the question of, "why?" If it's so damaging, why do we work this way, and what can we do about it?

Cal Newport:

My big point in the new book, which gets to your question, is that you have to look beneath habits and tips and etiquette and norms, because what really matters is, what is the underlying workflow that your organization uses to actually organize work, to identify tasks, to assign tasks, to review tasks? If you don't have an answer to that question, then you probably have just implicitly adopted a workflow based on ad hoc unstructured messaging.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Totally.

Cal Newport:

I call that the hyperactive hive mind. I want to give it a name, just like I gave deep work a name in that book Deep Work. In the new book I call the new workflow the hyperactive hive mind. The big observation is, if hyperactive hive mind is the primary way by which your organization actually coordinates, you cannot escape tons of messaging. You cannot escape the need. If you try to back away from messaging, it's a problem. No one individual can leave this. If you try to just throw etiquette at it, if you try to say, "Look, let's do email free Fridays, let's try to do no expectation of responses after 5:00", these are going to fail because constant communication is the fundamental way that your organization actually grows.

Cal Newport:

My big argument is, to solve this problem you have to go deeper and say, "Let's replace the hyperactive hive mind with a different approach to doing our work that doesn't generate so many messages." You got to kill the root to get rid of the weed. I think a lot of what we've been doing with a lot of inbox hacks and, let's have better subject lines, let's have better etiquette, is we're just cutting at the leaves of this invasive weed and saying, "Why does this thing not go away?" We got to actually get down and poison the roots. To me, that is the fundamental question of, how does information come into our organization? How do we organize it? How do we assign tasks? How do we review tasks? How does that all happen, and can we be doing it better?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Can you define the hyperactive hive mind? I thought that was a really fascinating metaphor.

Cal Newport:

Well, so that's my name for the workflow that says the primary way that work unfolds in your organization is through ad hoc, unscheduled, unstructured messaging. Like the three cave men that were in the Savannah hunting the antelope, you just figure things out on the fly with messaging, whether it's for email, or Slack, or whatever tool you use, I'm somewhat agnostic, but that is the fundamental way that most organizations organize themselves right now. When I named my book A World Without Email, what I actually meant is a world without the hyperactive hive mind workflow as the primary way of organizing things.

Carey Nieuwhof:

The whole idea, I call it Whack-a-Mole sometimes, where you clear out your inbox, and then Slack's blowing up, and then you get five text messages. It's that flitting from activity to activity, to inbound to inbound, that has become work for most people. Your argument is, because that is the typical work day

for most knowledge workers, any productive work or deep work tends to get moved into the early morning hours, evenings, or weekends.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. It's an incredibly inefficient deployment of this, what I call attention capital. You have all this latent value in the brains and attention reserves of the individuals in your organization, and you're getting a very low return on this capital if you're doing this constant back and forth communication and people are trying to squeeze more productive value production to the morning, to the afternoon. But the key thing is, when you understand it's the underlying workflow that's the problem, then you realize that the common reaction, people are very frustrated with this way of working, but this common reactions is, "Hey, if I stopped using email, I wouldn't be able to get any work done." That's true, so long as the underlying workflow that dictates your work demands that email is the primary way to organize it.

Cal Newport:

To get past that reaction of just, the way I work today requires I email all the time, and so we actually have to ask, "well, how do we actually work?" There's where I think the huge opportunity is. Not just an opportunity, I think, that's the argument I make in the book, I think it is inevitable, if we look at the history of technology and commerce intersecting at various points throughout our economic history, that it's inevitable that this early highly improvisational way that we work as digital knowledge workers today, it's inevitable that we're going to move past it. 10 years from now, we're not going to have an inbox with a thousand messages that, it's just our name at company dot com, or we're doing emails all day. We're going to look at that as rudimentary as Henry Ford thought that the way that Benz was making the original automobiles was rudimentary, that we are going to get more sophisticated, because there's a lot of value be left on the table, because we're not making very good advantage of all these attention capital resources we have.

Cal Newport:

I think it's inevitable. This is just the story that repeats again and again in the history of technology business, that a new technology comes in, we deploy it in a flexible, convenient, improvisational way for a few decades, and then we get more sophisticated. It is inevitable that we're not going to keep working this way. It would be very ahistorical and arrogant to think this very first thing we tried in the first 20 years of having computer networks in the office is the best way to work. Of course it will change. Now the question is, are you going to be out ahead of that and reap those benefits, or are you going to be trailing behind, and in some sense maybe pay a punishment for that?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. I'd love to start getting into the reconstruction, because you have a pretty long nuanced argument in your book about different principles and processes. But you also quote Neil Postman a couple of times. Finally, finally, finally, I read, I've been meaning to since college, Amusing Ourselves to Death, and last summer I read it. Great book, very philosophical, and dated in the 1980s but still very applicable today in his principles. You quote Postman as saying that "this isn't just addictive, technology is not just addictive, email is not just addictive. It's ecological." What do you mean by that? What's the distinction there?

Cal Newport:

The point he was making is, there are certain technologies that when you introduce them to a culture, it changes the culture. We often don't get this. We think about, oh, we have the culture we had before, plus the new technology. But he said that's often not the way it works. Look at the printing press. He's like, if you go back to pre-Gutenberg medieval Europe, and then you go forward to after the advent of the printing press, he says, you don't have medieval Europe plus there's printing presses, you have a whole different culture. In some sense, that's what I'm arguing happened with email. In the year 2000, we did not just have, oh, it's the 1990s office plus people also had email. We had a completely different notion of what it meant the work.

Cal Newport:

We become used to this constant back and forth ad hoc communication, but we never did anything like that before. It was the tool itself in some sense, just the arrival of the tool, the possibilities it opened, that transformed the way we worked. This is actually one of the big, semi-controversial arguments in the book, is that I'm arguing that no one really actually decided that this is a better way to work. There is no Harvard Business Review case study that is advocating for the hyperactive hive mind. You cannot find memos from CEOs of big companies saying, "Here's what we're missing, we need to be sending a lot more messages. We need to be communicated a lot more." No one ever decided that was a good idea. It was a side effect of bringing email into the offices.

Cal Newport:

I even tell stories in the book. I go back and I document the rise of email. People brought this into the office strictly to replace existing technologies. It was a better version of the voicemail for internal communication, and a better version of the fax machine. In fact, one of the big things that enabled the rise of email, it's a little known fact that at the end of the 1980s, a giant consortium of aerospace contractors, so these like really huge Northrup Grumman style aerospace contractors, lobbied to force the big telecommunication companies to put in place the standard, it's very technical, I think it was called X.400, but that made it possible for email messages from one company's network to go to another company's network, because they wanted to send files back and forth without having to use fax machines or couriers. That unlocked the whole thing, because then lots of companies said, "Oh, great, fax machines are an annoying technology. This is much better."

Cal Newport:

So email came into the office for prosaic reasons. It's a more efficient fax machine. It's a more efficient voicemail. In some of these case studies, a week later the amount of communication in the office is off the charts. Just the ecological impact of the tool being in the office, and we just completely changed how we worked. No one planned for it. Then we all look back and are trying to say, "Oh, okay, I guess this is what work means now. Let's have some etiquette about subject lines, or how often we batch email checking." We were completely unaware of the ecological change and that this invasive digital species unexpectedly created.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's interesting. You're right, because the design rules, email is just something that happened. It's not like someone said, "Let's get everybody distracted, stressed out, anxious, and on 24/7." Nobody sat down. But Seth Godin has been a guest on this podcast. I know you're familiar with his work. He made the argument that when he was at Yahoo, and he resurrected this on his podcast recently, he made an argument he lost that was that email should not be free, that it's almost like a postage stamp, that you

should charge someone, I have to pay to read your email, and then you become much more selective about what emails you read. He said, "Hey, that didn't work. It's probably not going to work in the future, but it's an interesting model."

Carey Nieuwhof:

But you make the argument too that because all of this technology is free, it gets hyper used, and you get that instant access. Any thoughts on that, on the design stage? Because I find that fascinating, because here we are reaping the benefit of all that, or the curse of all that, and I'm just curious about what you think the impact of free technology is in the midst of this.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. Weird things happen when you reduce friction down to just about zero. Engineers know this. If you don't have any friction, things spiral out of control. The same thing seems to happen with email. One of the stories I liked from the book is, there is this study that these researchers from UC Irvine did, where they went to a company, it was at an East coast research forum, and they said, "We're going to take a group of people, a group of employees of your company, and we're going to take them off email for a week. We're not going to prep for it. We just want to see what happens." Really, it was an interesting experiment, because usually these business and ethnographies have been observing how people use email. They said, "Let's see what happens. What goes wrong if you take it away?" It's a classic experiment, knock out this gene and see what happens to the fruit fly. Right?

Cal Newport:

I was talking to the researcher about this experiment, and she told me a story that wasn't in the paper. There was a scientist who was one of these subjects in the study, and he had been very annoyed because part of his work is he had to set up this laboratory every week for experiments they did at this company, and his boss would email him and interrupt him all ... "I need this, what about this? What about this?" All of these questions and tasks. It was really annoying because it's hard to set up the lab, and it really distracted him, and it made it take a lot longer. When this guy was off email, the scientist was off email for one week because he was part of this study, he told their lead researcher, "Oh, my boss stopped bothering me, so when I was setting up the lab, my boss wasn't bothering me."

Cal Newport:

But what made the story interesting is that the boss's office was two doors down. Literally the boss could just walk nine feet down a hallway and be like, "Hey Bob, can you do whatever?" It was slightly more friction without email, was still not a lot of friction. Right down the hallway, he was right there, he could go bother him. But just that slight bit of friction when you took away email, all of those requests went away. I think that is a great example of, when you bring the friction down to nothing, I could basically just shoot off a message whenever, get this thing off my mind, there's no social capital costs, I don't have to see your face, I don't have to interrupt you, I can just do it, the system runs out of control, just like with physical systems. I think Seth is absolutely right with that analysis, is that when you went from making communication easier ... Okay, a telephone is much easier than having to write you a letter. When you went from easier to free, I think things spiraled out of control.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You spend a good chunk of time in the book talking about the industrial revolution, and particularly the invention of the assembly line, Henry Ford, that whole idea. Then you link that to Trello as a modern

knowledge workers' equivalent. I'd love for you to unpack that for people, because there's some principles there moving to the solution side that I thought were really helpful.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. Well, so I go back to the assembly line a lot. To be clear, it's not that I think there's anything specific about the industrial assembly line that we should do elsewhere. The assembly line is very specific to industrial manufacturing. It was actually quite detrimental to the workers. What I care about is the overall process engineering mindset. What's important about the assembly line is that Henry Ford's big idea was, the most convenient and flexible way to do something is not necessarily the most effective way to do it. You could think about the processes and actually say, "let's experiment and re-engineer these processes to try to find ways that we get a better return on our capital." That's a huge leap in thinking, but it's what I think we need in the knowledge sector.

Cal Newport:

If you go back again to Henry Ford, they were building cars before the assembly line, using what was called a craft method. Just like the hyperactive hive mind today in knowledge work, it was very convenient and obvious and flexible. They would just put the chassis up on saw horses. You'd have a team working on a car. If you wanted to scale up your factory, you'd have more teams and more cars. It's the exact same way that Benz created the first automobile, just scaled up in the most natural possible way. Well, okay, if one team could build one car, we'll have 15 teams building 15 cars. It was very natural, very flexible. Ford said, "Okay, I get that, but maybe there's more effective ways to build cars." He began this long series of experiments that ended up with the continuous motion assembly line.

Cal Newport:

The whole point, though, is that all of these experiments of where he ended up with was much less convenient, much less flexible, much less obvious. It created a lot of exceptions. If you didn't get it just right the whole assembly line could stop. You had to hire more managers. You had to invest more money. I'm sure everyone hated it at the time. Why are we doing this? We have to spend ... We're building these chains, or these conveyor belts. It's so hard. Why would we do this? But it was ten to a hundred X more productive at producing cars. I think the hyperactive hive mind is the craft method. That's the obvious way to do it. It's one tool. We all know it. It's very simple. Let's all gather around our proverbial saw horses and work on the cars. It's natural. Let's just rock and roll. But what's natural, what's obvious, what's flexible, it's not always the best way to do it.

Cal Newport:

When you see more sophisticated approaches of organizing knowledge work, like using something like Trello, or for each project we have a board that we all share, we could see all the tasks, we could see their statuses, communication happens on the board not through emails, you're in one context at a time, you begin to get intimations of Henry Ford's assembly line. Hey, more overhead? Yes. Could bad things happen? Yes. Could something be missed? Yes. Could the whole assembly line come to a halt because you didn't quite calibrate it right? Yes. But we're producing Model Ts a hundred X faster than we were before. To me, that's an incredibly important lesson to remember when looking at the way we work today in the knowledge space.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'm going to give you a real life example, which would be my little company. Having been, I was a pastor for 20 years, a lead pastor, and the last five years done this communications company pretty much full time. I lived in the space of managing by email, which was frustrating, exhausting. A couple of years ago, my team made a plan where we said, "We are no longer using email for internal communication. The only time you're allowed to use email is if it's an outside client, somebody who isn't on our staff." So if my podcast producer, for example, says, "Hey, what about this thing?", he can jump in on email and I'll loop in a couple staff. But it's not cool for team members to email each other.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We did introduce Slack, and Slack isn't quite as voluminous as email is. Basically the expectation was, you have to respond the same business day. Not right away, same business day. Just get back to somebody. Then we have weekly meetings where we just park everything for the weekly meeting, because most stuff, as you point out, Covey said it's important but it's not urgent. It can really wait until Tuesday or Thursday. And then if it's conflicted, or super difficult, or complicated, then we absolutely default to video and we do this. We just have a face-to-face communication. Because sometimes you're 10 Slack messages later, you still haven't figured out.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We also realized, getting ready for this show, this podcast, this episode and reading your book, that we're probably using ... We also use Asana for task management. It probably functions way more like Trello than we realize, and we could be creating boards and spreadsheets that are even more efficient than Slack. I'd love for you to just pick that little, we call it the workflow triage system, it's definitely reduced friction in our company. It means we can work on it, not in it, all the time. But I'm sure we can get better, so any thoughts on that, or what's good, what could be improved?

Cal Newport:

Well, first of all, I love that general principle that email is good as a means of delivering information. Email is good as a means of delivering files. But it is not great as the primary tool for which internal coordination happens. So just as a general heuristic for thinking about rebuilding your company, I think you're on the right track there. You do not want internal coordination to occur as just back and forth messages that all fall into the same undifferentiated inbox. I think that is great.

Cal Newport:

The way I would just put some structure around the way you're thinking is that you take your company and say, if we're reflective about it, there are certain processes we do. There's a process for podcast episode production. There's a process for marketing. There's a process for, whatever, consulting engagements, or whatever it is. Whether you call it that or not, there's these different processes that produce things that are useful to the company. Once you name them you can then ask for each, "how does the information flow work for this process, and how do we want it to work? Is there a more effective way to build this process?" And by effective, I think typically in knowledge work what you want to try to minimize is the number of context shifts required to actually produce valuable output out of this process.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Slack to Asana would be a context shift.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. Or if it was the way that this podcast episode gets produced is there's a dozen back and forth emails, that's a dozen context shifts that you're inducing. There's a dozen times someone's going to have to stop what they're doing and look at that email. Then you might prioritize alternative processes that maybe you have to save overall time spent, or even more time spent in a weekly meeting, but it prevents back and forth emails in-between, that would be more effective. One of the case studies in the book, for example, I talked about a media company that produces videos that go out every single day. I talked about how they had a whole system put together that required essentially no back and forth communication. They had the spreadsheet that had the current status of each video, and the various people involved would just check it on the spreadsheet.

Cal Newport:

When the status had changed to something that was relevant for them, there was pretty clear expectations. Okay, now it's in my court, to whatever, do the edits, move the video over here, that'll change the status on the spreadsheet. Then okay, now it's ready for being pushed out to the platforms, and the people who do that take it. They had taken a media production process and got rid of all the back and forth communication. It was all driven by, they had a process that had really clear steps and a really clear indicator of what step it was currently in. Once you have things processes, once you try to optimize processes for minimizing back and forth communication, it leads to a lot of innovations that allows everything to get done without you individually having to feel like there's this constant unstructured deluge of messages that you're trying to keep up with.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I found that, I took that directly to my team, when I read that in the book you gave me. You were kind enough to give me an advanced copy of A World Without Email, and when I read that, because it was so simple, I think it was a Google spreadsheet or something like that, or an Excel spreadsheet. It was funny, because I remember we did that process with a West Coast firm that does our marketing, when we were doing a sales funnel, and it was literally a spreadsheet. Then it said, "Edited", or "Ready for publication", or "Ready for filming", and you would just change the status inside the document.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:48:04]

Carey Nieuwhof:

So it's not even an expensive software solution, but what it meant is, it wasn't 17 emails back and forth like, have you edited that yet? Okay, when will you be done? Thursday. Thursday morning, Thursday afternoon? That 17 chain reply-all email that drives everybody crazy.

Cal Newport:

Oh yeah. It's an easy change, but it's one that you wouldn't make unless you realize the game here is trying to minimize back and forth.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right.

Cal Newport:

If what you're trying to do is just keep things convenient and flexible, you would say, "Why bother with that? I could just email you." So the hyperactive hive mind is always easier, and it's always more flexible. I interviewed this researcher of the book who was in the '80s and the '90s was at the forefront of, how do we use new computer technology and computer networks to try to make things more productive? And everyone's trying to build these very complex IT systems. If you have a podcast production, then we're going to have this custom built network application. She said all that research ended when email came along, because everyone realized we could just get everything done with this one tool. You learn how to email people, you learn how to attach things to it, you learn how to do CC's. And you can basically do any process. So it's always more convenient, it's always more flexible.

Cal Newport:

So the key thing in your discussion there is shifting the goalpost from what's going to be easiest, to what is actually going to make us most effective. And by effective, we mean, make the most use of this resource that we call attention capital. And those are two different things.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You mentioned Trello. I used, I think, a beta version of Trello a few years ago, and we moved to Asana. Any thoughts? A lot of people use Basecamp, et cetera. So are you saying a project management system like that can reduce a lot of friction? And can you elaborate on that a little bit?

Cal Newport:

Yeah. I think all of these are good options. I mean, Asana tends to be more popular in software development type worlds, because it has a lot of hooks into the specifics of agile project management philosophies. Trello has a lower learning curve. Basecamp has more features. But all of these can be much better than the hyperactive hive mind, because what you start to do is, A, you structure what needs to be done. B, you make it transparent, so the whole team could see it. C, you take information out of this big pile, that's your inbox, and you move it into the context where it's relevant, "Here's the site for this project. All of the information for this project is on this site." That alone is so much better than all the information needed for this project is spread out above messages over 28 boxes.

Cal Newport:

It's buried, by the way, with information about 20 other projects. So, all of that makes it much better, when you move information to these type of project management type tools also, it's much easier to synchronize and coordinate, because now we can all just get together and look at the Trello board, or the Asana board, or the Basecamp site, and we could just have a quick check-in. "Okay, I can see who's working on what, what do we need to change, who needs what, let's go." And that is so much more efficient than having all those decisions made over 20 different back and forth ad hoc email conversations throughout the day. So it seems like sometimes I have stuck at Trello because I pushed that particular example up. I really think, as you said, a shared Google document could go really far away. Before the pandemic, just what you could do with a whiteboard that everyone sees, could go a really long way. So yeah. It's not about having just the right tool, it's about optimizing the right thing.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. So is that what's underneath the process principle or the protocol principle? Do you want to unpack some of those ideas in a world without email?

Cal Newport:

Yeah. So, there's these three principles that have to do with how you get rid of the hive mind. So the process principle is really hitting that overall point that you need to identify and optimize processes. "This is what Ford did when he built the assembly line." You have to have that mindset. "We have processes, we have today, but we have to optimize them." You have to get to that mindset. Knowledge work has not done a lot of that, but it needs to. The protocol principle is a principle that could help you do that, and that talks in particular about if there's certain types of communication that happens commonly, putting in the effort upfront to build an optimized protocol. Even if it's more of a pain at the beginning, can minimize the overall impact on people's brains. So it's often worth building, like we talked about with the spreadsheet, and you change the status, and then when I see that, I know it's my turn to pick it up.

Cal Newport:

That's more of a paid upfront that just say, "email me when you're ready." But when you put that effort in upfront, you get back dividends over time, because it's every day less context shifted. And so every day you're getting a little bit more out of that attention capital. And then the final principle I had for optimizing processes is talking about specialization. And in general, I think that, we get a better return on attention capital when the people do less things, but they do the things they do better. There's been a shift over the last 20 years towards making people more generalist, people do more things and they do all of them worse. And I do not think that's the right equilibrium if you want to get the biggest return.

Cal Newport:

So I'm kind of calling for what the things I see as a return, for example, at more support, more separation of frontline value production from backend logistical support, people with less on their plate but more accountability that the things they do, they do really well. I'm just convinced that that is a configuration to which you get the most value out of your resources and people are the happiest.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's funny, I had a corporate coach last year who coached me, and another mentor who really spoke to me, and they've scaled companies and both would say specialization is a key to scale. Because when you're a small operation, small church, small company, small business, you want a generalist, "Oh, you can do this, and you can do that." But they said, "if you really want to make that pivot, particularly in a high growth environment, you have to specialize." And the older I get, the more I realize, actually, I'm only really good at a couple of things. I can interview people, I can write and I can talk. And that's about it, I'm a communicator. So you would see the same thing, like specialization?

Cal Newport:

Well, sometimes that's counterintuitive at first, because specialization seems like it's more expensive, if you need more people. But it could... In the end it could be way more profitable. One of my favorite studies from the book was to study back from the late 1980s, where this economist from Georgia Tech was studying these Fortune 500 companies that were firing their support staff, because what happened as the 80s or the 90s, we got personal computers, and things like word processors, and you didn't have to have support staff. A lot of the logistical tasks in Corporate America became just easy enough with personal computers that it's possible for an executive to do them. Whereas before, it's like, "I don't know how to type, I don't have a type," or whatever. So, a lot of companies agreed. "We could fire the assistants, we could fire the type people, we could fire the support staff. And we'll save a lot of money

because that's salary we don't have to pay." And so someone crunched the numbers, and basically said, "yeah that's true. But all of that work shifted onto the plate of the executives."

Cal Newport:

So now the executives could not do as much of the frontline value production as they could before. So what do you need? You need more executives, to get the same amount of work done. The problem is executives have higher salaries than the support staff. So he crunches all the numbers and said, "Okay, in the end, to produce the same stuff, your salary costs ended up 40% higher." So it felt like you were saving money by firing the support staff, but you weren't taking into account the cognitive cost of putting that work. We just treat people's brains like these infinite black boxes, just, "Hey, whatever you throw out, they'll do." And there's a psychological reality to it.

Cal Newport:

So I think that effect, he called this the diminishment of intellectual specialization, I think it's a crucial factor. So specialized, it feels more expensive. You're like, "I could have you also do this and also do this, and I don't want to have to hire another person." Or I don't know. I was just doing an interview with a print reporter who talked about how he got a lot of pushback from his peers, because he started hiring someone to do his transcription of his interviews. Because they're like, "But you could do that and you would save the money," but he's like "Yeah, but if I do that, I can't write as many articles, and in the end, I'm not going to be as successful." I think that plays a huge role, letting people do less, but do it better, specializing. Maybe it's more people, maybe it's more money at first, but your growth, and your value production, and your success as an organization, will almost certainly far outweigh what you had to outlay to support that specialization.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So I want you to paint a picture if you can, pick an office environment, a church environment, but just, let's say it's a smaller business or mid size organization. What does a day look like if you're not playing whack-a-mole with Slack or your inbox all day long? Like what might that look like in a practical term for a knowledge worker?

Cal Newport:

Imagine a day in which, maybe you look at your inbox once and if you forgot to do it, it wouldn't be a big deal. That's where I think a lot of people could get. I'll give a specific example. There's a small, like a dozen person tech company that I profiled in the book. They had gone through all the standard hive mind issues, they were huge email people, then Slack came along, and so then they became huge Slack people, and it became completely overwhelmed into the point where it burnt out two of their engineers who quit. And the co-founder says, "enough is enough. I'm not going to work this way. I don't care if the company goes under, we're not writing this on email. We're not writing it out on Slack. We're going to have to figure out how else to do it." And they shifted to a model where they had project management software, they had a morning check-in and an afternoon check-in. All the information, who's working on what, all the knowledge-

Carey Nieuwhof:

So is that a video and an in-person check-in or was it inside the project management tool?

Cal Newport:

It was a mix. It was outside the project management tool, some people would be in the office and the people who work would join via video.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right.

Cal Newport:

So if they had all been to the office, it would have been at the same room, but-

Carey Nieuwhof:

So it's like a standup meeting, a 15 minute standup meeting, or so?

Cal Newport:

They'll do stand ups, like you see at software, and they do one in the morning, who's working on what, who needs what, what happened to thing you could do yesterday? Good work. And the people just worked on those things until the afternoon and they checked it again. It all logged, they were updating the product management system, and they were putting notes in there, and updating the status. Everybody is logged, they check it and get to the afternoon, and that was it. And I actually heard the CEO, I heard him on the phone, this was years ago when I first interviewed him. I said, "open up your inbox, go through it now, I'm just curious, what's in your email inbox right now?" And he was, "Oh, okay. I haven't seen it yet today."

Cal Newport:

He was going through it. And he was using it like you would have used a mailbox 20 years ago. It's like, "Okay. Here our accountant is sending us an invoice saying, "Here is a bid from a contractor." Yeah. It was like nothing urgent, no work... The stuff you would get into your mail box without the inconvenience of going to your mailbox. I just thought it was fantastic that they mainly just worked and they coordinated in a very condensed way. They had very structured environments to keep track of information. And the email inbox was like, "Oh, here's an announcement about, we're going to have Boxing Day as a vacation day this year." Like the thing is all right. So that's... Another example I could talk about. Marketing firm in there, where they had a Trello board for every project, the workflow there was, you were like, I got to work on this project now.

Cal Newport:

Now you go to that Trello board, all the information is there. You see what needs to be done. You make progress, you update the boards. Like I'm done working on this product out. Great. Now let me go to a board for another project. That's where all the interaction happened. So that's what we're talking about, a world in which you're not talking about your work all the time. And your email inbox really seems like it used to be in the old days where you'd go to your mailbox at your office it'd be like, Oh, let's see what letters I got today.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. This is so timely for us. I mean, coincidentally, one of our goals, our wildly important goals for the X framework was to improve our systems. We've had double, triple digit growth the last five years in a row. Some of the people are new and it is duct tape and band-aids for our systems in that context. And

so much of what you are describing is exactly what we're trying to tackle. Are you actually proposing a world without email where there is no [carey@careynieuwhof.com](mailto:carey@careynieuwhof.com) or [cal@calnewport.com](mailto:cal@calnewport.com) or... Because I mean, we connected for this interview over email. I emailed you off your website. That kind of thing. Are you saying it's a world without email or it's just where it's like the post office box from the mailbox from 20 years ago.

Cal Newport:

Yeah, exactly. The actual title would be "A World Without the Hyperactive Hive Mind Workflow". That doesn't quite roll off.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Publisher didn't go for that. No.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. I think email is a perfectly fine protocol for delivering information, delivering files. It's great. I'm a computer scientist. I think it's a great protocol. The thing I dislike is the idea that we can organize and coordinate and do all of our business, all of our collaboration with ad hoc and supervise back and forth messaging. So, right away in the introduction of the book, I say, okay, here's what the hyperactive hive mind workflow. This whole book is about evaluating this workflow. That's part one, spoiler alert. It does not come off looking very good. Then part two is what are the principles for moving beyond it? So I love email as a tool. I just don't think it should be the foundation of how all collaboration occurs.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And you make the argument probably will lead to a shorter work week as well for a lot of people. Is that correct? Did I read that right?

Cal Newport:

Yeah. There's a ton of overhead because of all this context switching, it's an incredibly inefficient way to actually use our cognitive resources to the point where I actually think this is a problem, that knowledge workers, especially creative knowledge workers, are not worried enough about when it comes to AI. We are so inefficient at working because of the hyperactive hive mind workflow is that one of the things we should be worried about is that what AI comes in and reduces that burden. So one of the huge under the radar investments in workplace AI right now is basically to take the hyperactive hive mind coordination off your plate. So you could have... The dream is you will have your equivalent of a Chief of Staff like Leo McGarry at the West Wing, but it's an AI agent and it talks to everyone else's AI agent. It just tells you like, "Hey, here's what you should work on. Here's the materials. Go". Right?

Cal Newport:

AI is going to that direction, to allow human race to do the things that human brains do best, which seems great, except for we're so inefficient right now that if that happens too fast, it is going to drastically reduce the number of paid employees required to get the same amount of work done and what's going to happen? What's going to happen when you come into a law firm and say, "Oh, well, you're not billing emails in every six minutes we could service the same number of clients with half of the first year associates." Well, if you're the partners, you're like "great, we're going to hire half as many

first year associates because that's way more profits for us" or an ad agency needs half of the creative executives because they get twice as much done. It could actually be a problem.

Cal Newport:

So it's not that AI can automate creative work, but we're so inefficient right now that if it makes it more efficient, there's going to be this debt period where we're going to lose the need for all of this cognitive capacity. I think eventually the economy will reconfigure and find uses for all this highly skilled creative capacity, but that could be a really rocky transition. So in other words, I think we're so inefficient right now that we should be worried about... We should worry what will happen if we become, if we rip off these inefficiencies and there might be long bread lines of lawyers and ad executives and professors once we get so efficient.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Any, this is a little hobby of mine, just barely studying AI, but I'm fascinated by the dialogue. Do you have an approximate timeframe of when you think technology like that? And I know it's a million dollar question if you knew, you'd know, but is this five years down the road, 10 years down the road? Any thoughts on that?

Cal Newport:

No, it's a really good question. AI, it's interesting because it's not continuous. It tends to have these discontinuous jumps, right? And we've seen a few of those happen recently. So we've seen the discontinuous jump in semantic understanding of spoken speech. So a lot of this was driven by things like Siri and Alexa. We're putting these devices and tens of millions of people's homes so they could have all of this data and practice trying to understand what people are saying, interpret speech and interpret the intention behind speech. I used. You know, I took a course on this when I was a grad student at MIT, not that long ago. And the world is completely different today. What happens today is magic, right? So we have these discontinuous jumps. So it's a little bit hard to predict, but there is a ton of money.

Cal Newport:

Like the reason why there's so much money, for example, Alexa or Google Home is not just that, "Oh, this is a big market. Everyone will have one of these in their home". It's because if we could get to the point where we really understand, when you talk to me, not just the words you're saying, but what you want, "Oh, you want me to turn up the volume? You want me to do whatever". That's really the killer app for workplace Chief of Staff style assistant AI like, "Oh, I understand what Carey wants. I know now I could, I could talk to another AI, we can very efficiently, we could very efficiently figure it out". There's a ton of money in it. Like there's a lot of money in the Watson project at IBM right now that not everyone really knows about that is going into monitoring workplace communication and try to figure out like what's going on here and how can I help?

Cal Newport:

I profile a company called x.ai in the book that all the things they were trying to do is just schedule meetings. You talk to this AI bot, it'll schedule a meeting with you and they put like six or seven million dollars into this over like a period of a year just to try to get it. So there's a lot of money going into these things, by the way, it was the CEO of that company who told me like, "No, no, the goal is not to get that really good at understanding you and scheduling your meeting, the goal is to get my x.ai bot the talk to

your x.ai bot. And the neither of us have to think about the meetings at all". They figure out that we need to meet and they schedule it on our behalf, right? So I think five to 10 year window. Based on the jumps we've had recently, we're going to start to see potentially a fundamental change, a fundamental change to the office.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You are a computer scientist, that's your training. That's what you teach. Do you, and I know, do you have a dystopian or utopian version of AI in the future? It is a fascinating, widely debated subject.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. I go back and forth. So I'm not sure. So I'm not confident in my answer. Like I think, for example, the workplace that the intersection of the workplace technology is something that somewhat known for. It depends on the speed. So I think if we have these highly efficient Chief of Staffs faster than we know what to do with, there'll be a period of disruption. I'm also optimistic though, where I think that the economy will find ways to redeploy this cognitive capital and long-term, that could be more positive. Like there's a lot of areas of life in which the scarcity of our own cognitive capitalist scarcity of our own time and attention is a real impediment. So if you could free up a lot of highly creative, highly trade cognitive capital that could be redeployed.

Cal Newport:

I mean, even just thinking about students at an underserved school, to be able to have more cognitive capital could come out and be like, "We could work with you with tutoring or one-on-one attention", or we could there's a lot of potentially socially beneficial redeployments of this capital. I just don't know how bumpy that's going to be. But the one thing I'm sure of, is we are using way too many people now to produce stuff in the knowledge economy than we're going to need, whatever the period is 10 years now, 50 years, 20 years from now, just because of the huge inefficiencies of the hive mind.

Cal Newport:

We saw the same thing, of course, at industrial technological advancement, it took a lot of people to build stuff. We built stuff with a lot less people now because of technology. Those people now we've had to redeploy and a lot of that got redeployed to our current knowledge economy, actually over time, it's very disruptive what had happened. We're going to have the same thing happen with dollars work. I mean, we don't need as many people as we have right now to match our current level of production, but we're just so inefficient. That's where we are.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, and often expansion staff, expansion hiring can be. I remember I was on a consulting thing a couple of years ago, and they're like, "We need more staff. We need more staff". As an outsider looking in, I'm like, "No, no, you've got plenty".

Carey Nieuwhof:

Cal if you have a couple more minutes, just a couple of quicker questions for you, I run a 100% digital company. So I think the post pandemic world is going to be hybrid companies, digital companies, virtual organizations, as well as some people with totally in-person staff. But there's a massive acceleration

going on in that field right now, as we speak. Are there any particular rules that you would have in mind for virtual or hybrid companies where you don't have everybody in the office?

Cal Newport:

Well, so I went deep on this topic after I'd finished writing this book, I did this big piece for the New Yorker earlier in the COVID pandemic to look at remote work, the history of remote work, what's going to happen as we shift more companies to more remote work. And what are the big conclusions I came away with is that when you move completely remote some of the issues of the hyperactive hive mind get amplified. So the urgency and the benefits of having more structured work, both become more important the more remote that you actually shift. This is why for example, the one industry, the knowledge sector in general, that really doesn't have much trouble being completely remote, in fact, even before the pandemic, there was giant companies that had huge remote teams, was software development. And why software development easily able to make that jump to remote is they have very structured workflows.

Cal Newport:

They use these agile project management methodologies. Their work is already very structured. So if you shift remote, it could handle that very well. The companies that are having the most trouble are those that were way ad hoc, just like "Let's rock and roll as fly. I'll grab you in the office, let's send emails". And we kind of just like make things work that just flies off the rails when everything becomes completely remote and everything gets abstracted that just these emails that get sent back and forth. It's so that's been my big message is that the way to adjust to the remote economy is to get more processes in place. You've got to structure your work. You got to get your systems in place.

Cal Newport:

Remote work can be very, very effective if you have these structures and processes that you're evolving as a team over time, trying to optimize things like context shifts, having transparency and task assignment, try to specialize all of these things. So I think a world without email became a lot more relevant after we had this sudden acceleration of what was probably inevitable move towards more remote work. But as we accelerate that the type of principles I talked about that book, I think are more relevant than they've ever been.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We'll link to that piece for the New Yorker in the show notes too, for leaders and what I've found too, is that sometimes, and I just love your take on this, but running a digital company and running remote work, that sometimes that inefficiency is a bid for attention and human connection. In other words, I just want to talk to someone because I've been stuck in my office all day home alone. And what we've discovered is it's much better to jump on a zoom call and actually just have a water cooler moment or build in some extra time into our weekly, or maybe that daily standup that you talk about, which I'm toying with. Like in other words, make the connection about connection, but the work about work. Thoughts on that?

Cal Newport:

I think that's right. Yeah. I think it's, I think it's better to be clear about what you're trying to do as opposed sort of informally or implicitly trying to achieve goals. Another example of this that, that

became kind of clear during the pandemic is that there was inequities in people's time availability because of the disruption of let's say if you had kids and like their school was closed out or this or that.

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:12:04]

Cal Newport:

A lot of companies, instead of directly addressing this, which you would do if you had transparency, a task assignment, you could see who was working on what, or if you were specializing, like, this is a reality, we have to adjust for it. Instead, they're like, "well, everything is so informal and ad hoc with the hyperactive hive mind, we'll just pretend like it's okay." And the people who have much less time, will just use the obfuscation of the hive mind to kind of just performatively seem like they're more busy, and send a lot of emails, but not really be doing as much work. That kind of ad hoc improvisational response to this issue is not best. I think it's always better just to have clarity. Here's who's doing work and why, here's what you do. Okay, we have to adjust this because of X. If we're lonely, let's find the best possible way for us to connect.

Cal Newport:

If you can't do as much work right now, instead of you pretending like you can, why don't we reduce what's on your plate, or whatever it is. I think clarity is better. And when you apply these principles to have smarter workflows, smarter processes, I think you're absolutely right, you can address these problems straight on.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I know you've got a whole section in the book on this, but just to avoid answering this in the comments, a lot of people listening, going "Cal, that's awesome, but you're kind of a professor. You work for yourself. You're at the top of the food chain. Carey, you've always been the senior leader. I'm not. Like my boss, he's on 24/7, we're in a bad culture, I'm expected to be there." What would you say to those who are sort of trapped in the middle, who are like, I'm a hundred percent on board, but I don't make the decisions.

Cal Newport:

Right, because there's different constituencies here. I would add that actually professors are not as autonomous as you would think. I wrote an article that got me in trouble a little bit at my university for the Chronicle of Higher Education that was called Is Email Making Professors Stupid. Let's just say that that led to a lunch with the Dean. You know what I mean? But it's a good point. There's different constituencies for this message. I try to be clear about that in the book. You have, let's think like executives that you control a team or a whole company, and you have autonomy, you have entrepreneurs, like it's your own thing. You're a sole entrepreneur, it's a very small company that you control, and then you have employees.

Cal Newport:

If you're an employee and you don't really have control over your workplace culture, and you try to slip copies of this book into your boss's backpack, but that's only going to do so much. You might not be able to deploy everything, but there's a lot you could still deploy. And what I recommend to people is, look at your personal processes. Like here's all the different things I deal with at work, and let your inbox be the guide. As you're answering emails, be like what process is this email associated with? What process is

this email associated with? You focus on the parts of that process you can control, and do the same thing. Let's structure them, let's try to optimize to reduce the amount of back-and-forth emails I have to send. Let's specialize where I can, like maybe I could adjust my portfolio. I talk about this in the book, you could try to make a trade to gain more autonomy over how you work. Typically, if you're an employee, you're going to have to offer up accountability in exchange.

Cal Newport:

I get into that, that potential exchange, like I've got to do less, I've got to specialize, but you're going to hold me more accountable, which can be scary, but there's things you could do. By identifying and optimizing your personal processes, you'd be surprised by how much impact you could have. Yes, you can't control the emails that come in, but if those emails come in, you put them into a process that's going to reduce the amount of back-and-forth you need to do with this person. Even if they don't know that you have this process, even if you're not telling them about it, even if you're not having sort of annoying auto responders, even if it's just, "it seems like he's suggesting some more stuff in here." You could significantly control and reduce what comes into your inbox by just having and apply the same principles the best you can.

Cal Newport:

It could be as simple as like someone sends you an email is like, "hey, thoughts on the client?" And you're like, okay, here's the right process. I'm just going to kind of explain this in my email, not in an over-top way, like, yeah, this is great. We should talk about it. Here's what we're going to do. By noon on Friday, I'll have my thoughts in a document in this shared Dropbox we have. You could then review it. Let's have a meeting on the books for Monday morning when we'll then make our final decision about what should go into the draft. Here are four times that are available. You just email back which one do you want to do, and we'll rock-and-roll.

Cal Newport:

You're essentially bringing them into your process without saying, "let me preach to you about a world without email. We need to have processes, and you send me too much emails." They don't care. Like great, that's less emails I have to send. It's a great question. There is a lot you could do, is my answer. There's a lot you could do by just optimizing the processes that you control, even if the people around you are sort of frustratedly not onboard.

Carey Nieuwhof:

This almost moves more into Digital Minimalism territory. Again, I highly recommend your books. But you have a lot of people listening right now. Everybody's online more post pandemic, like churches got catapulted a decade and businesses did. I know my favorite restaurants are all hyper online now. And so we're all a little more attached to our devices, but you quite famously, you have real minimalist footprints on social media, but you've also emerged as... And there's people listening who are trying to build online companies. It's like, I'm going to be an influencer online. I'm going to be whatever. But here you are, you've written numerous best-selling books. You have a national profile, have a voice that people seek out, and you've done it kind of without much of a social media digital imprint. You had a website and that kind of thing. Can you talk about that dynamic?

Cal Newport:

Yeah. I've never had a social media account.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I thought that was true, so they're all fake. If you think you're following Cal, you're not.

Cal Newport:

Oh, there's fake ones. There's weird... That's a whole other thing. There's multiple Cal Newport Twitter accounts with my picture. I have no idea who -

Carey Nieuwhof:

I wondered if that was you, and I'm like, I don't think that's Cal, no.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. A lot of them are sort of suspiciously Russian bot-ist in their content.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Asking for money, right?

Cal Newport:

Yeah. A little bit. Well, what'd you expect? I've never had a social media account. I do have a blog/email newsletter, which I've had forever and I love. I have this great audience. It's not huge, like if I was on Instagram or something like this, but it's people who come to Calnewport.com, which is on a server in Michigan. I control it, and I email people. I have a podcast. I love podcasts because I feel like it's very distributed. I control it. There's not a small number of companies that are in charge of it. Podcasts, you just put it on a server, and anyone could access it through any service they want to access it. I've never had a social media footprint. My strategy has been, this was the title of a book I wrote in 2012, which is Try to be so Good You Can't be Ignored. I want to produce good stuff. I think hard about it. I write about it. I have a couple of ways of reaching people about it that I like.

Cal Newport:

I like my blog and email newsletter list because I can get my arms around it. Some of the people who comment on my blog have been doing so for a decade. I know them. It's interesting. It's like my friends. In the long run, that worked. If I've been putting a lot of energy into Twitter, I could probably get a lot of followers, and maybe it would've helped like the last book I wrote, maybe have more sales right up front or something like this, but the impact on my cognitive resources is such that instead of publishing my seventh book right now, maybe I'd just be on my fifth.

Cal Newport:

Something people don't understand about books is like, if you have a really big Twitter account then maybe you could add an extra 5,000 sales to your first week, which could matter with the bestseller list, but it's nothing if you're trying to sell a million copies of your book. That's a drop in the bucket. And how do you sell a million copies of the book? It's producing just the right book for the right time. It's just the luck/craft. Yeah, I'm a big believer. The whole point of that book, Digital Minimalism, by the way, is not that like social media is bad or other technologies are good. It's just that people should be way more intentional. Why am I using this technology? Is there a really good reason? If so, what rules should I place around it so that I could get that benefit while avoiding all of the other harm?

Cal Newport:

It's like if you need to use social media because like, whatever, your ministry uses Facebook groups as a way to organize XYZ. Great. But if that's why you need it, then it shouldn't be on your phone, you shouldn't be looking at your newsfeed. It should be on your computer. You should log-on through your desktop once a week to update that group. Once you know why you're using technology, you can optimize how you use it. The thesis of that book is once you're trying to optimize how you use technology for this purpose not that, you get this huge shift in the benefit-to-cost ratio that goes decidedly in your advantage.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I don't know whether this was intentional or maybe it's just a misreading, but having read most of your books, including *Be So Good You Can't Ignore*, whatever that title is, Steve Martin quote, I noticed a shift in a world without email where it felt almost as philosophical as practical, that there was a real narrative that was developing. Like I put that on my list of books to reread when I get the physical copy in my hand. I wonder if that is a cumulative benefit of years of *Deep Work*.

Cal Newport:

Yeah, I think for sure. I've been thinking hard about technology and culture for many years, try to produce the best possible writing on it. Also, I would say there was a shift right around *Deep Work*, where I began to find conciliates with my academic work and my writing. So if you go up to *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, the books I wrote before them, it was, I had my academic career where I was a computer scientist. And then I also wrote books. And they're almost like two separate things, but with *Deep Work*, there began to be this conciliate where I began to focus more on technology and its impact on our culture. It made a lot of sense that as a computer scientist, that I might also be writing for a public-facing audience about the impact of these technologies on our culture.

Cal Newport:

That started to make sense, especially after I got tenure, which typically opens you up for bigger thinking, so then I began thinking about this much more through an academic frame. And so I really ramped up the intensity of thought, the thought leaders I was around, the back-and-forth. I began doing more what I would say like high-end writing for like the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *Wired*, like writing for places that were really demanding the quality of your ideas and that melding between my academic and writing persona and just years and years of thinking is, I think you're absolutely right. I'm glad you noticed that, is I feel as if I'm increasing the sophistication. I'm really trying to lay out intellectual or philosophical frameworks for understanding technology and culture, because I think it's so much turmoil is going on right now. There's a lot of new exciting philosophy actually being forged, and I wanted to be a part of that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's very encouraging. What would you say from your approach that you've outlined in your book, what's the, like, just Cal as the human being? You go home, what is the benefit of having that kind of cognitive clarity and the lack of continual distraction and buzzing phones? What would you say at this point, "this is the thing I'm getting the most joy out of?"

Cal Newport:

My overall philosophy, I sometimes call the Deep Life. I talk about it a lot on my podcast, which was unexpected. I had launched the podcast early in the pandemic, but the idea was I'm going to answer questions from my readers. I thought it would be almost entirely pragmatic, like the type of stuff we were talking about. I want to update my process; I want to reduce email I want to get more deep work, et cetera. I just found myself pretty quickly kind of pulled by my listeners and by my own interests, laid out these philosophies for how to live and articulating my underlying philosophy, because I think there was a real hunger for this as people went through resets during the pandemic about what's important, what's not, how do I want to live my life?

Cal Newport:

I think a of people are going through that. So I articulated my underlying philosophy, is what I call the Deep Life, which is you identify the different areas of your life that are important to you. I do these alliterative buckets where I talk about like craft, community, contemplation, which captures theological, philosophical, ethical concerns, constitution, like your health, your fitness. Here's the things that are important to you, the areas. Then for each, what you try to do is basically get that signal-to-noise ratio up. I want to put my time on things that are really important and valuable and meaningful in each of these buckets and minimize the time I spend on everything else. I only have so much time and attention, so I want to make sure that in each of the buckets that are important to me, it's going to big wins.

Cal Newport:

I just think that is a foundation for a resilient, meaningful, satisfied life. And there's just not a ton of room for doom scrolling on Twitter, or being up to your neck in Slack 12 hours a day. Like suddenly that type of behavior says, I don't see what bucket that shows up as one of the most valuable ways for me applying my time. This notion of depth, I've really extrapolated it out of just the world of work and be like this is my philosophy for sort of all areas of life: focus on what matters, don't waste too much time on what doesn't.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Man, you have been so generous with your time. It feels like that's a good springboard into a whole other conversation for perhaps another time. Yeah, listening to your podcast, I'm going to go back and back listen. I got a few episodes, because I discovered it researching for today, but it feels like there's almost another book there, the Deep Life, and we didn't even get into making or craft something that I was challenged in your previous reading. You're not on social, but they can find you at where online? And then we'll talk about the book, and thank you, Cal.

Cal Newport:

Calnewport.com is where you can learn about the books, and that's where my weekly newsletter is housed. And then the podcast is called Deep Questions. You can get that wherever you find podcasts, and that's about it when it comes to trying to find me online.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Cal, you've been so generous and this has been so helpful. Thank you so much.

Cal Newport:

Thank you. It's my pleasure.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I so appreciate the philosophical approach that Cal is taking and the hyper practical. And honestly, if you want more of the hyper practical, definitely get his book, A World Without Email. It is both deep and practical, but his podcast, The Deep Life, really, really practical. He answers questions. I'm a subscriber, I'm a listener. Hey, if you haven't yet subscribed to this show, I would love for you to do that. And if you found this helpful, share it with some friends on social, tag me, I'm Carey Nieuwhof on Instagram. We try to repost. A lot of you who are sharing the podcast, we really appreciate what you're doing. We're approaching 16 million downloads on this show. It's incredible. Thank you so much. We never take that for granted. And we try to bring you really, really helpful content every week.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Speaking of which we have show notes for this. You can go to [Careynieuwhof.com/episode403](http://Careynieuwhof.com/episode403), and you'll find transcripts, quotables, some insights, and a whole lot more links to everything we covered. And we have some guests coming up that I'm very excited about. Adam Grant, John Maxwell, Rick Warren, Annie F. Downs, Amy Edmondson, Simon Sinek, and many more coming up on this show. And next time, I sit down with Chris Heaslip. Chris is somebody I've gotten to know, and he's launched 14 companies that didn't work before he launched one that did, which grew from a million to a hundred million dollars in revenue in four years. And so here's an excerpt of the next episode.

Chris Heaslip:

I just think that the greatest companies that are going to exist have not yet been started. And I think the greatest churches that are going to exist 10 years from now haven't even been started. To me, there's ways of doing ministry and ways of creating businesses that we haven't even thought of today. Naturally, we should be optimistic about the future because there's so much today that exists that we didn't have 20, 30 years ago.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Really looking forward to that conversation with Chris Heaslip. And now it's time for What I'm Thinking About. And I'm going to talk to you about a couple of productivity hacks. There'll be a lot more of this fall when my new book comes out, and obviously you should explore people like Cal Newport who have a lot of good things to say in this area. But I want to share a few things with you that really help me. These are practical. You can implement them right away. And What I'm Thinking About brought to you by GloopConnect, go to [gloopconnect.church/Carey](http://gloopconnect.church/Carey). That's G-L-O-O connect.church forward slash C-A-R-E-Y, to grow your digital outreach campaigns and get free access to my four-part course, Click to Connect, which is only available through GloopConnect and by Belay text Carey to 31996 to get your free download of Belay's Delegation Worksheet today. That will help you save some time.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Speaking of saving time, here's some productivity hacks. Listen, and my book will cover this, Cal's book covers this, and so do many others, but this is more than just, "oh, you know what? I'm going to turn off notifications on my phone, and everything's going to be great." No, but if you have notifications on your phone, you have a problem. I want to share four with you today that have really helped. My book actually that comes out this fall, will talk about this a lot, but I want you to start thinking about your peak energy window. Cal calls it time blocking. The theory is that we have 24 equal hours in a day, but not every hour is created equal or produces equally. So if you're like most people, you have about a three to five-hour window a day where your energy is at its highest.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Cal would say you have a four-hour Deep Work window. That's about the maximum that you can get on most days, even in ideal conditions. And you have other windows where you feel sluggish or tired. So here's a quick hack you can start using now. Don't squander your best hours. Often you spend them indiscriminately. I used to do breakfast meetings. I'm a morning person, not the best use of my time. Why? Because by the time I get to the office, I'm kind of distracted and tired, and I've had a two-hour meeting or whatever.

Carey Nieuwhof:

If I got to do some writing, or I'm working on a message or talk or a book, my best energy is burned up. So for me, my peak hours are 5 to 10 AM. I do all the writing I can in those windows. Then after, I can get to my other work, I can do my email, I can have a meeting, I can have lunch or whatever. I think that is the secret to high impact leadership. It's doing what you're best at when you're at your best. My book will be all about that this fall, with a lot of details about that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You can also use distractions as a reward. That's a second hack. We live in a very distracted era and I've never been diagnosed with ADD, but I'm pretty sure I have it. So it's easy to jump on Instagram or stop by a coworker's desk to chat, or raid the fridge, or check out a YouTube video on how to fix your garage door opener. Our lives are full of distractions, and here's a tip: use distraction as a reward. If you're working on a message, or you're working on a talk, or you're working on some Deep Work, then what you say to yourself is "I can't check Instagram now, I'm going to set a timer, I'm going to set a window, I'm going to watch a clock, but at 10 o'clock I can check Instagram." If you do that, then that's awesome.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Or maybe it's like, no, I have to finish this project and then I'm able to go and get a snack. Use distractions as a reward, because what happens, you're not on an assembly line, so it's pretty easy to go, "Well, I'm a little bit bored," so boom, the hive mind, as Cal talks about. So use distractions as a reward. Next hack. I already hinted at this, turn off all notifications on your devices. This is really, really important. In my company, we use Dropbox and Slack and email only for external clients, but there's so many things buzzing all the time. I've shut off all the notifications on my devices, and that allows me to focus.

Carey Nieuwhof:

This is not going to solve all your problems, but as I've coached leaders and I'm like, "Well, are you getting Slack notifications?" Yes. As Cal says, the average worker, knowledge worker, checks his or her email every six minutes. You are not going to get anything done if that is the level of your distraction. If you just shut off those notifications, I promise you, the world is not going to burn down for the two hours you're focused on your Deep Work. And if it is, somebody will knock on your door and rescue you. That's how it's going to work. A focused leader is a productive leader. Distracted leaders, they aren't.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Finally, take a break to find a breakthrough. The kind of work that a lot of us who listen to the show do is mental work. You're trying to... If you're Rob Pelinka, we had him on the show, he's trying to coach a team to championship performance. And that is, yeah, there's some technical stuff there, but that's a lot

of mental stuff. You're trying to write a book. We have so many authors on this show, you're like, "oh, what is that next idea?" We have a lot of preachers who listen. It's like, "I've got to figure out the angle for this series, I'm not sure what this text means." Or you're working on some strategy and you're trying to figure out how to take your company to the next level. And you're like, "I don't know, what we're doing right now isn't working, but I don't know what's working."

Carey Nieuwhof:

What I've found is that when you're trying to do that kind of deep thinking, that sometimes sitting at your desk is exactly what you should do, but often it's not. It was Nietzsche who said "there is no thinking without walking." Take a walk. Go into nature. I sometimes jump on my bike. There's good research that shows our brains actually connect the dots in the background when our minds are relaxed. That's one of the ideas, you have good ideas in the shower, right? Or when you're not trying to do work, you're like, "oh, that's what it is," and then you write it down.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Often I find if I'm trying to get to that level of Deep Work, yes, sit there in concentration, maybe sit at your desk in a chair, but it's okay once in a while to give yourself permission and say, you know what, I'm going to rake some leaves, or I'm going to pull weeds in the garden, or I'm going to mow the lawn, or I'm going to go for a walk. I'm going to go for a run.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Then often when you're not trying to think of it, boom, all of a sudden the idea hits you. Or when you come back to your desk, you kind of have a fresh motivation. If you do that semi-regularly, you will begin to discover breakthroughs. I always keep notes in Evernote, but you can use Notes, you can use whatever you want to do, but just have an easy capture system. Sometimes if I'm out running, I just record a voice memo. So those are productivity hacks. Guard your peak energy window, use distractions as a reward, turn off all the notifications on all your devices, and take a break to find a breakthrough. Hope that helps you. I have nuggets like this over at my website, [Careynieuwhof.com](http://Careynieuwhof.com).

Carey Nieuwhof:

I also have a email newsletter we send out almost every day to about 80,000 leaders. And if you're interested in receiving little leadership nuggets like this and making sure you don't miss anything, head on over to [careynieuwhof.com/email](http://careynieuwhof.com/email). You can sign up there. I'm really grateful for you. Can't wait to be back with Chris Heaslip, Adam Grant, and other leaders. Thanks so much for listening. And I hope our time together today has helped you lead like never before.

Announcer:

You've been listening to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. Join us next time for more insights on leadership, change and personal growth to help you lead like never before.

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