

## Diving Deeper into Deep Work.

Andrew M Olivier. Partner, The Working Journey. 2018.

### Introduction.

[Jacki Johnson](#) recommended 'Deep Work'<sup>1</sup>, a book by Cal Newport to my business partner, Verena MacLean. Having just returned from a three-month sabbatical I snaffled it, intending to skim read, but ended up absorbed. Cal offers a solid contribution in Part 1. I enjoyed his fresh approach and perspective, much of what we in the Working Journey and our affiliates<sup>2</sup> have longed believed critical to individual, organisational and societal well-being.

For example, the opposite of deep work is 'shallow work'; which is a product of dysfunctional and ineffective work systems governed by a tyranny posing as collaboration. In our leadership workshops, which are challenging and require deep work, you can see which teams are dysfunctional by observing their learned behaviours. As Cal says, the principle of the 'easiest path' is on display, manifested in how delegates disengage from the learning process to meet shallow work demands, to appease their leaders and produce busyness. This is dangerous behaviour when amplified company and society wide.

This short article attempts to summarize and amplify the key points of Part I and I do this to reinforce the need that deep work is now more necessary now than at any other time in history.

### Key Points from Deep Work;

- His Deep Work hypothesis is; ***The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. Consequently, he says, the few who cultivate this skill and make it a core of their working life, will thrive.*** Deep Work takes place within the context of a 'Great Restructuring' of our economy that sees our technologies racing ahead, while he argues, our organisations and skills are lagging. As we have heard from many sources we are told to expect up to 40% of our current jobs will disappear, falling victim to automation and AI. Organisation will hire 'new machines' rather than 'new people'.
- Deep Work is defined as; ***“Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill and are hard to replicate.”***<sup>3</sup> He gives examples of how famous people used to (and do) lock themselves away to work, to focus deeply and avoid the shallow distractions.
- Shallow Work, defined thus; ***‘Non-cognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tend to not create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate’***<sup>4</sup> He links the growth of shallow work to the age of network tools, the need for constant connectivity, instant messaging and response demand, to social media presence and the distractions of open space offices. He argues that knowledge workers are forced to replace deep work with increasingly shallow work to satisfy demands and 'productivity'.
- He also argues that there is increasing evidence that the shift towards shallow work is not a choice that can be easily reversed, and it is possible he says, that you can permanently reduce your capacity to perform deep work.<sup>5</sup>
- One of the factors you need for deep work is myelin, the layer of fatty tissue that grows around neurons, which allows cells to work faster and more effectively. The science says that you get better

<sup>1</sup> Newport, Cal. *Deep Work. Rules for focused success in a distracted world.* Piatkus. 2016

<sup>2</sup> The Working Journey is an Australian based consultancy and operates in association with a global network of affiliates and strategic partners with similar core practices.

<sup>3</sup> Newport, Cal. *Deep Work. Rules for focused success in a distracted world.* Piatkus. 2016. Page 3

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Page 6

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Page 7

at a skill as you develop more myelin around the relevant neurons. This he argues, provides the neurological foundation for why deliberate practice work are so important.

- Deliberate practices are needed to cultivate more quality, undistracted time to focus our attention on adding value. This means being able to focus on difficult work or challenges for long, uninterrupted stretches. Cal uses the following formulae for productivity; **High-quality Work Produced = (time Spent) x (Intensity of Focus)**.

This ability to focus and produce is constantly undermined by shallow work; e.g. - incoming emails that distract you, web browsing, back to back meetings, moving from one thing to another, your time being managed by others and ongoing interruptions through constant connectivity and a required social media presence. I will add another factor acting against deep work; **poorly trained and incompetent managerial leadership practices and ineffective organisational design**. *The bottom line; Shallow engagements end up permanently damaging your ability to focus, because sufficient myelin is not produced.*

Cal argues (supported with examples and research), that the type of work that optimizes your performance is deep work. He makes the point that not everyone can do deep work and cites examples of some CEOs such as Jack Dorsey who founded Twitter, who does not do deep work, but then gives example of Bill Gates who was a deep work maniac. He points out that to ask a CEO of a huge company to spend four hours thinking deeply about a single problem is a waste of what makes him or her valuable, but rather to hire smart people to think deeply and ask him or her for a final decision. Cal also makes the point that there are some parts of the economy where deep work is not valued nor necessary.<sup>6</sup>

He argues that the big trends in business today are working against people's ability to perform deep work and many other ideas are being prioritized over the need for employees to do deep work. I often tell delegates attending our leadership courses to hang a sign outside their cubicle or go home and leave a note which says, 'Manager Thinking' or just 'Thinking'. It's part of the job, it's not some extraneous extra or time out. True that Agile and scrum project management frees people from attention breaking connectivity, but only to a point and not at the more complex work themes of an enterprise. The tyranny of busy does not equate with productivity.

Cal looks critically at the internet tools released by for profit companies, funded by investors who want returns and design by twentysomethings who are often making things up as they go along. He says we are quick to idolize these digital doodads to signify progress and outliers of a brave new world without any deep work about them or their consequences. Deep work in contrast is not sexy, is old fashioned and often nontechnological, but it is and can be deeply satisfying.

The addictive behaviour of shallow work is even more dangerous than we suspected. Spiritual leaders have long argued that we need to still our minds, to stop continuous thinking and to let go our ego and just 'be'. Our addictive monkey brain embraces 'shallow work' as it feeds our ego, robbing us of the ability 'to be', demanding 'we do'.<sup>7</sup> This creates ongoing stress, worry, psychosomatic illness and loss of 'well-being'.

Deep work Cal says is a rare commodity which produces significant value. Unfortunately, deep work is increasingly rare, and the requisite activity is not valued. Distraction inducing behaviours are valued and rewarded (instant replies, availability) yet at the same time these values destroying behaviours are difficult to measure and even more difficult to detect. He calls this the *metric black hole*. As knowledge work and complexity increases, it is becoming harder to measure individual (and team?) contributions to a business output. A study by a French economist showed this to be true, especially the irrational extreme growth in executive salaries<sup>8</sup>. Cal argues that if these behaviours could be shown to be clearly hurting the bottom line, they would not survive. Our own work shows deep work is almost absent in our studies of CEO. A CEO has their own value to add, and this is not something that can be delegated. **Unfortunately, many CEOs are not clear on how they add value and where they should focus their own unique deep work.**

The head of the list of distracting behaviours is what he refers to as the culture of connectivity. He provides research examples to show this culture of connectivity and the need for instant responses is a myth

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Page 46, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Tolle, Eckhard. *The Power Of Now. A guide to spiritual enlightenment*. 1999. Hodder and Stroughton. Reissued 2016.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* Page 55

in terms of improving productivity or as a demand to client need.<sup>9</sup> This culture of connectivity hurts employee well-being, destroys deep work and probably does not help the bottom line. Why then is it so pervasive? He feels the answer lies in the **principle of ‘least resistance’ which is in not being clear on the impact of various behaviours to the bottom line, so that we will tend towards behaviours that are easiest in the moment.**<sup>10</sup>

It's here he talks about time management that sees people managing their day from their inbox or having their work managed by others. This makes planning difficult, encourages shallow work and adds to the metric black hole. In our terms people want to earn their keep, but for many knowledge workers they are not clear on what that means. Cal argues that because of poor leadership people substitute clear goals and clear value adding work for the industrial age proxy, namely being busy. This is a fractal of Taylorism and he defines it thus; **In the absence of clear indicators of what it means to be productive and valuable in their jobs, many knowledge workers turn back towards and industrial indicator of productivity; doing lots of stuff in a visible manner.**<sup>11</sup>

This resonates because it reinforces that not only is clear unique value adding lost or misunderstood, but so is wellbeing through poorly designed and lead enterprises. Job ambiguity, role confusion, meetings, lack of metrics and disruptive behaviours thrive in an increasingly complex business landscape.

### A Deeper Understanding of Deep Work

While Cal has made a significant contribution to the importance of deep work, his real contribution is raising this issue and highlighting that it requires urgent attention. I would like to add some amplifying thoughts to his work. First, let us define ‘work’ and what does ‘hard or difficult work’ mean. In our world of Requisite (as required by the nature of things) we define work complexity or ‘hard work’ as;

- **the number of variables operating in a situation, the clarity and precision with which they can be identified, and their rate of change,**
- **‘Work’ we define as; ‘The exercise of judgement and discretion in decision making to produce a specified output within a targeted completion time, with allocated resources and methods and within identified limits.’**

There are three spirals in our work. *The first is that of Structure.* Adding Value is a fundamental design principle. We use a nested hierarchy where each work theme adds a unique value. Strategy defines structure and therefore the number of work themes required is derived by understanding how value is proposed to be added. Structure is the framework on which muscle is added. All work is based on dealing with increasing ambiguity and complexity in decision making and therefore the need to exercise appropriate judgement. The complexity of exercising judgement rises exponentially with the complexity of the work theme. All the required work themes must be present for organisational coherence and effectiveness. Now here is what is missed;

**Each work theme requires the associated deep work to take place to enable clarity of work and the contribution of each theme and roles to emerge. This ‘deep work’ is essential for each CEO, each executive and every managerial leader; individually and as a team.** This DOES improve the bottom line and it does not happen without commitment to deep work.<sup>12</sup>

### Flow.

Cal's focuses strongly on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of Flow<sup>13</sup> which is a core principle of Requisite<sup>14</sup> teachings. The basic idea is people are happier at work when they are deeply engaged with some

<sup>9</sup> The caveat is where the function of the work system is to be directly customer facing.

<sup>10</sup> Newport, Cal. *Deep Work. Rules for focused success in a distracted world.* Piatkus. 2016. Page 58.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Page 64.

<sup>12</sup> Barton, D, Manyika, J and Williamson, SK., [Finally, Evidence That Managing for the Long Term Pays Off.](#) Harvard Business Review. Feb 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Csikszentmihalyi. M. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* Harper and Row. 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Requisite Organisation is a body of knowledge formulated by [Dr Elliott Jaques](#) and which forms the bedrock of our management approach. His work, plus many others have seen this body of work continue to evolve globally.

work which they find challenging, interesting and in which they feel valued, are contributing and appropriately rewarded. He believes the connection between deep work and flow is clear.<sup>15</sup>

*Our second spiral focuses directly on the individual and the concept of flow.* Our professional work<sup>16</sup> helps people understand their personal growth trajectories and how they prefer to work and value. We help them understand how this has emerged in the Work Journey to date and how it will evolve in the future. There is now a significant body of work collected from enterprises globally that describe what, how, when flow is experienced. And it is the ‘deep work’ as Cal describes it. People describe it as a ‘golden period’ and remember deep work as tough, rewarding, fun, challenging, ground breaking and recognised as adding value. We have used the concept of flow for decades, linking it to how an individual will want to add value and how leaders need to create the conditions for his or her team to flourish with people in roles who can deliver at the requisite complexity of their role.<sup>17</sup>

*Leadership is our third strand.* Cal suggests that craftsmanship, part of deep work, is a link to what was lost in meaning when enlightenment and the autonomous individual which saw the world of sacred, shining things die. We have been searching for meaning ever since. Cultivating craftsmanship is a requirement of deep work.<sup>18</sup>

Our daily leadership practices *require a rigorous commitment to a shared set of common sense managerial leadership practices.* Often sadly it is just too hard for shallow work addicts. When the context for ‘deep work’ is created by those executives entrusted to do so, the scene is set for ‘flow’. Shallow work can be limited, while deep work should be part of the managerial leader discussions and expectations. This will change daily behaviors changed from shallow to deep. Our practice of asking managerial leaders to look at how their work is allocated in the daily cycle is a powerful tool for achieving this.<sup>19</sup>

Our work over the last two years with Australia’s biggest general insurer in a top to bottom intervention that has seen the company turn itself around. Astute leaders saw the value in deep work and while challenging, some of them made the call. We had similar results were had with an South Australian organisation<sup>20</sup> with whom we have partnered now for almost a decade. This is not new, all successful companies practice it in pockets. What we want is to make it the preferred and agreed way to design, operate and lead.

In the Great Restructure many will lose jobs, but others will survive, because of their skills and those capable of doing deep work, will thrive. To join these winners, he argues the two core abilities are being able to quickly master hard things and secondly, the ability to produce and perform at a high level consistently, both in quality and speed. These two abilities he argues, depends on you being able to do deep work and if you don’t have this fundamental skill, you are stuffed.

The remaining question which he does not attempt to answer (nor play in that space) is what do we do about five billion people being marginalized in the Great Restructure? What about the huge challenges we are facing? He fails to draw that all important macro link. Of course, we are making progress but it is patchy and uneven and billions are missing out an invite to play in the new Game. Here’s what you can do; look at the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) then ask how are you supporting them or even bringing them into your intent? And closer at home, how many of our political leaders encourage deep work or do any themselves?

We need some real deep work here, I think you would agree!

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<sup>15</sup> Page 87

<sup>16</sup> Primarily through appreciative interviews such as the Modified Career Path Appreciation (MCPA).

<sup>17</sup> Olivier, A. [The Magic of Stress](#). Originally published by Australian Human Resources Institute but available here online and Shepard, K (ed) et al. A. Organization Design, Levels of Work and Human Capability. An Executive Guide. 2007. See Olivier, A., Chapter 2 . [Individual Capability and Our Working Journey](#).

<sup>18</sup> I do urge interested readers to read the book because I have only covered key points of his understanding of ‘deep work’ and highlighted that which is relevance to our work.

<sup>19</sup> Work is broken up into two major areas of where we spend our time; our Unique Value Adds and People.