

PRODUCTIVITY

The Organizational Importance of Deep Work

by Jae Park



In the information age, organizations and individuals should hone their ability to focus intensely. The many distractions of modern life have made the ability to engage in 'deep work' both more valuable, and more difficult to achieve.

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Background

In 2007, entrepreneur and 37signals co-founder Jason Fried did something strange. He decided to cut the workweek at his company from five days to four. And it wasn't just a typical 40-hour workweek compressed into four 10-hour days. Instead, Fried simply chose

to give everyone an extra day off, every week: employees were working less, and being paid the same amount.

In startup culture, an overwhelmingly busy schedule is often seen as a badge of pride. And there was certainly no shortage of work to be done at 37signals, a rapidly growing web company that was among the first to pioneer the software-as-a-service (SaaS) model. How could a lean organization in a competitive industry afford to maintain such a laidback work schedule?

In a **2012 op-ed for the New York Times**, Fried revealed the rationale behind his decision, along with some surprising results: “Better work gets done in four days than in five,” he explained. “When there’s less time to work, you waste less time... you tend to focus on what’s important. Constraining time encourages quality time.” Today, 37Signals (now called **Basecamp**) is one of the most popular project management software suites in the world, actively used at nearly 70% of Fortune 500 companies.

Conscious Constraints

Jason Fried isn’t the only one who has consciously integrated downtime into a busy schedule in order to improve productivity. Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s COO and mother of two, recently said that many colleagues were surprised by her **strict 9:30pm bedtime**. Another prominent example is Bill Gates, who famously retreats from his corporate and nonprofit responsibilities for two full weeks each year to disconnect and read a tall stack of books.

What’s going on here? In a **recent book** entitled “*Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*,” author and Georgetown computer science professor Cal Newport argues that imposing these types of conscious constraints is the first step toward producing the type of work that propels organizations forward in the most significant ways. Newport calls this “deep work,” to contrast it with the distraction-prone “shallow work” that eats up a lot of time in many modern organizations. He defines deep work as “professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities

to their limit” and argues that, in our modern information economy, the ability to focus on cognitively demanding tasks amidst many distractions is simultaneously becoming *more valuable* and *harder to achieve*.

Deep Work

Optimizing your schedule for focused work is important, but it isn’t always easy.

A “deep work” schedule — characterized by long, uninterrupted periods of concentration on a single project — is most easily implemented by creative professionals: artists and writers, for instance. As with most professions, these roles demand high levels of focus. But creative professions are usually the most flexible. Because an author does most of his writing alone, it’s easier for him to rearrange his schedule to prioritize long stretches of uninterrupted time.

Knowledge workers have a little less flexibility — meetings, email, and phone calls all compete for their attention throughout the day. And while everyone likes getting responses as quickly as possible, seeing a new message notification and rapidly switching gears to type out a reply is a sure way to break your concentration. And this doesn’t even account for social media and other distractions that can be just as hard to ignore. Employees must make a conscious effort to set aside distraction-free times each day to focus on important projects.

Managers will find it hardest to implement a “deep work” schedule. Because presence and availability are among the primary expectations of her role, a manager must accept that she will be engaged in meetings and conversations throughout the day. As a result, setting aside time for deep work each day might be impossible. In this case, it might be most effective to follow the lead of Marissa Mayer or Bill Gates and make formal plans to disconnect from day-to-day managerial responsibilities for a pre-defined period, in order to refocus on high-level organizational goals and planning.

Action Items

The benefits of a deep work schedule are indisputable. Here are some tips on making the transition:

- **Impose Constraints** — block out your workday in advance. Meetings and appointments should be scheduled first. Then include blocks of 90 minutes or longer devoted to a single project or task, and write down exactly what you hope to achieve during that time. This might feel a little robotic, but remember: you can be flexible. You don't need to follow the schedule perfectly. Instead, the goal is simply to have a well-defined understanding of exactly what you should be working on at each moment of the day.
- **Get Rid of Distractions** — during your “deep work” blocks, put away your phone and close your email inbox. As a matter of fact, disconnect from the internet completely! If you need to look something up online, write it down and perform the search at the end of your deep work session. You might be surprised at how much you can accomplish without an internet connection.
- **Explore, then Focus** — it's impossible to exist in a deeply focused state all day. So don't even try! During periods of your schedule when you're not working deeply, plan to handle as many “shallow” tasks as possible. These are the non-demanding administrative duties present in any job, like answering emails, responding to calls, chatting, browsing, or scheduling future meetings.
- **Always Be Creating** — ultimately, all of us are judged by our productive output. Try to continually produce work of higher and higher quality. Optimizing for learning is an excellent means of growth, but be sure to make that knowledge visible by applying it in new or existing projects.

Conclusion

A few years after making the four-day workweek a permanent perk at 37signals, Jason Fried was pleased with its impact on his company. Employees were consciously planning how they were going to use their time, and productivity actually increased. The workweek

reduction experiment disproportionately eliminated a lot of daily distraction and “shallowness,” encouraging employees to focus more deeply. Feeling optimistic, Fried decided to conduct an even more radical experiment:

“In the spirit of continual change, this summer (2012) we tried something new. We decided to give everyone the month of June to work on whatever they wanted. It wasn’t vacation, but it was vacation from whatever work was already scheduled. We invited everyone to shelve their nonessential work and to use the time to explore their own ideas.”

After the full month, Fried organized a “pitch day,” where his employees shared what they’d been working on. Among many new ideas, the experiment generated two working prototypes that were immediately integrated into the Basecamp software suite. “How can we afford to put our business on hold for a month to ‘mess around’ with new ideas?” The real question, Fried noted, was: “How can we afford not to?”



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