

Session 07
Energy Management and Monotropism
January 5, 2025

BOTTOM-UP EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

The key to developing a deep work habit is to move beyond good intentions and add routines and rituals to your working life designed to **minimize the amount of your limited willpower that is necessary** to transition into and maintain a state of unbroken concentration.

Cal Newport

professor of computer science and productivity author

Slow Productivity

Deep Work

Digital Minimalism

A World without Email

So Good They Can't Ignore You

The Time-Block Planner

[quotation from *The Time-Block Planner* (Newport,2023, p “week 11, weekend”)]

Bottom-up executive functioning
is creating a lifestyle and environment designed to
**“minimize the amount of your limited
willpower that is necessary”**
to carry out your intentions.

[quotation from The Time-Block Planner (Newport,2023, p “week 11, weekend”)]

Energy Management

Confidential. Please do not share.

Management

- ◉ Most people who want therapy to support ADHD ask for help with time management or task management or space management.
- ◉ **Time management:** How do I stop wasting time and procrastinating?
- ◉ **Task management:** How do I break down the project so that each step can be crossed off on my to-do list?
- ◉ **Space management:** How do I clean my space so I can find things?

Energy Management

- Nobody talks about energy management.
- Example: Washing dishes.
 - You have the time. You're watching TV.
 - It is at the top of your to-do list. You have it broken down into tiny steps. You know HOW to finish this project.
 - You WANT a clean space. The dishes are overwhelming and a clean space feels impossible.
 - It feels impossible because you can't imagine having enough energy to do what you know how to do and have the time to do.

Case study: Time vs Energy

- ◉ 6 hours to do, 1 week's worth of energy
- ◉ 1 week off: no laundry, no dishes, no cooking, no phone calls, no emails, no showers, nothing that uses up any kind of executive functioning



Monday: Think about taxes.
Tuesday: Think about taxes.
Wednesday: 2 hours.
Thursday: 4 hours.
Friday: Shower.
Saturday: Recover
Sunday: Recover

Note about energy cost

- ◉ It has to include warm-up energy.
- ◉ It has to include recovery energy.
- ◉ Recovery sometimes takes longer than overnight. It can take days or weeks. Or months or years.
- ◉ Recovery is different for different kinds of output: social, work, self-care, physical, etc.

Warm-up cost

- Mental preparation.
- Mise en place in cooking.
- Airplane fueling and checks before take-off.

Recovery cost

- Winding down.
- Cleaning up in cooking.
- Airplane clean-up and checks after landing.

Hard things cost more energy

- ◉ What is hard for you? Discussion.

Spoon Theory: energy budget

- ◉ Measure of executive functioning energy
 - Spoons
 - Hearts (health bar in a video game)
 - Battery charge
 - “Execs”
 - Bandwidth
- ◉ Work with a finite pool of energy

Measure of executive functioning energy

- ◉ What language do you use?

Estimate actual-time & energy-time

- Estimate actual time your project would take once you're rolling.
(e.g. dishes: 30 minutes)
- Estimate energy needed.
Translate energy into time.
Estimate how many days' worth of energy your project costs. (e.g. 8 hours' worth of executive functioning energy)

Dishes cost: 30 minutes actual-time, 8 hours energy-time

Estimate energy-time per day

- ◉ How many hours of executive functioning do you have available per day? (E.g. 8 hours energy-time per day)

What influences how much energy-time you have per day?

- ◉ Stressful work week
- ◉ Emotional dysregulation, emotional upset from confrontation
- ◉ In recovery mode
- ◉ Discussion

Time Blocks (adapted)

- Block off energy-time in your planner, not actual-time.
- Time blocks need to account for everything else that needs to be done during the block, including energy time for : food, bathroom, children, etc.
- Variety of activities within the time blocks will happen. You may watch TV, but you're thinking about taxes in the background.

Time Blocks: Shutdown Ritual

- Cal Newport: Make a ritual for shutting down work mode for the day, to transition into personal time.
- It is important to turn that work EF mode off, so you are not leaking work EF energy in the background.
- Rituals: standing up, kneeling, posturing, saluting, moving around, dances, chants, songs, anthems, music. Rituals play a role in transitions.
- Mental and emotional transitions follow what the body is doing.

Time Blocks: Discussion

- Think about the 6 month project.
- How much time do you need to block off?
- How would you make it interesting enough?
- What sensory environment would you need?
- What low EF activities would be ok that would not leach EF energy, but would supplement sensory environment?

Time Blocks: Discussion

- ◉ Discussion

Monotropism

Confidential. Please do not share.



MONOTROPISM

“AN INTEREST-BASED NERVOUS SYSTEM”¹

Attention resources allocated at high concentrations.



POLYTROPISM: ATTENTION RESOURCES SPREAD OUT

Attention resources are distributed widely across many interests, responsibilities, and spheres. Polytropics can pay attention to low-interest obligations and keep track of multiple interests at the same time.



MONOTROPISM: ATTENTION RESOURCES TO FEWER THINGS

Attention resources are focused on one interest or a few interests at a time. It is exceptionally hard to allocate attention resources to low-interest obligations or keep track of multiple interests at the same time.



MONOTROPIC FLOW: ATTENTION TUNNEL / RABBIT HOLE

When they are allowed, monotropics get into a hyper-focus “zone” that makes their processing and creative abilities sharper, faster, more efficient, more productive, and sometimes euphoric.



TRANSITION AND CHANGE: NO BRAKES

Monotropics find it very difficult to switch in and out of their flow. It is like skiing, where you have to gently ease to a stop. Transitions require a lot of mental preparation. It is hard to get started on a second thing if waiting on something already scheduled.



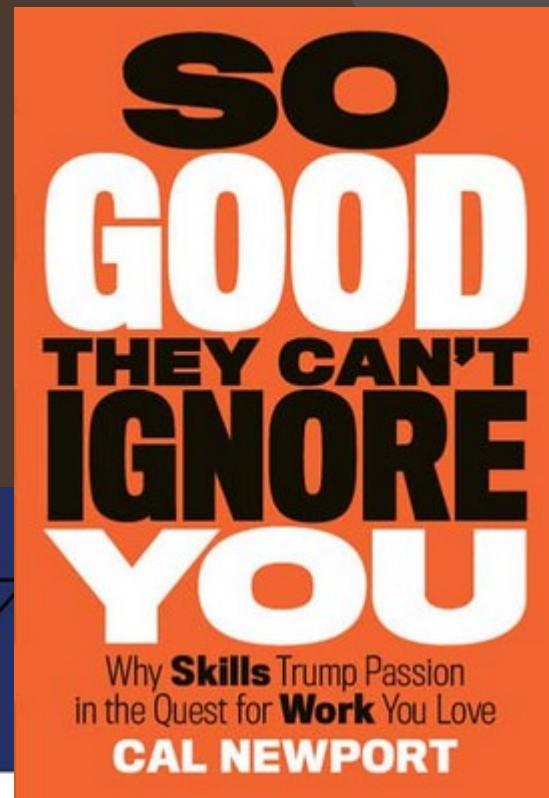
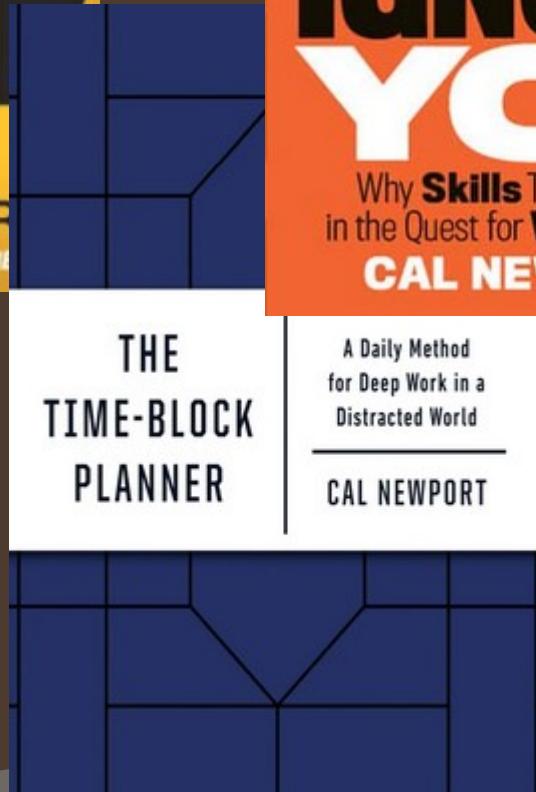
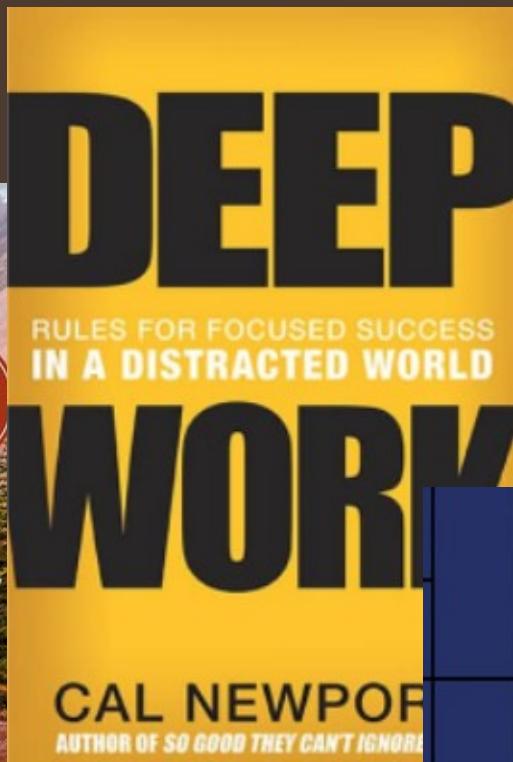
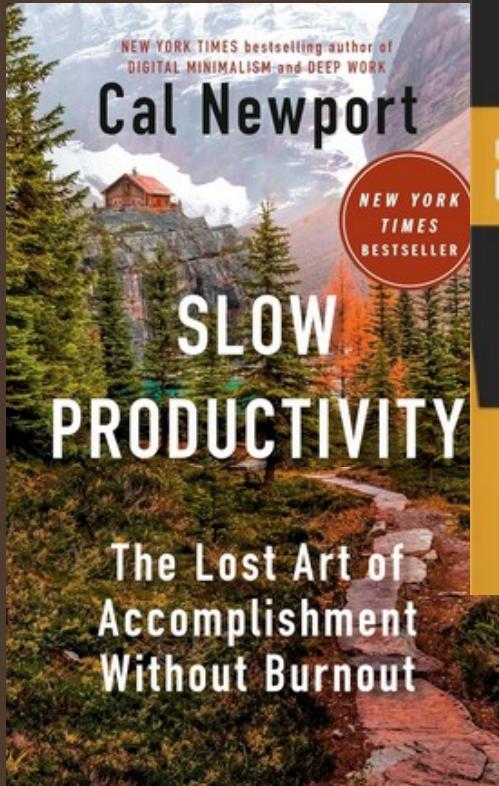
MONOTROPIC SPLIT: ATTENTION OVERLOAD

Overload happens when attention has to be split--such as when plans change suddenly. Instead of reducing the resources to each demand like polytropics, monotropics continue to put out a high level of focus per demand, which quickly leads to depletion.

Cal Newport, author & podcaster

calnewport.com

- He wrote 9 books with productivity advice in “knowledge worker” fields (creative, writing, research, innovation, academic).
- He advises “deep work” with higher quality. My impression: he is selling monotropism to the general public.
- What he calls “productivity” is what we call “executive functioning,” except it is aimed at people with a roughly 2:3 actual-time to energy-time ratio.
- I have adapted and cherry-picked his advice.



“Slow Productivity”

(Newport, 2024)

- Do fewer things.
- Work at a natural pace.
- Obsess over quality.
- The world pressures us to do the opposite:
 - Always look busy doing as many things as possible (“pseudo-productivity”)
 - Push to keep up with the assembly line.
 - Quantity over quality.
- Resist the pressure.
- Not everyone can afford to do slow productivity.
But if you can afford it, this could improve your accomplishing long-term goals.

1. Do fewer things.

(Newport, 2024)

- ◉ “Limit projects.” Have your favorite few and decline the rest.
- ◉ “Contain the small.” Make your world small and protect that smallness.
 - Outsource extra duties.
 - Live in a cabin in the woods.
 - Rigid do-not-disturb routines.

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Study about cell phone

(Ward et al., 2017)

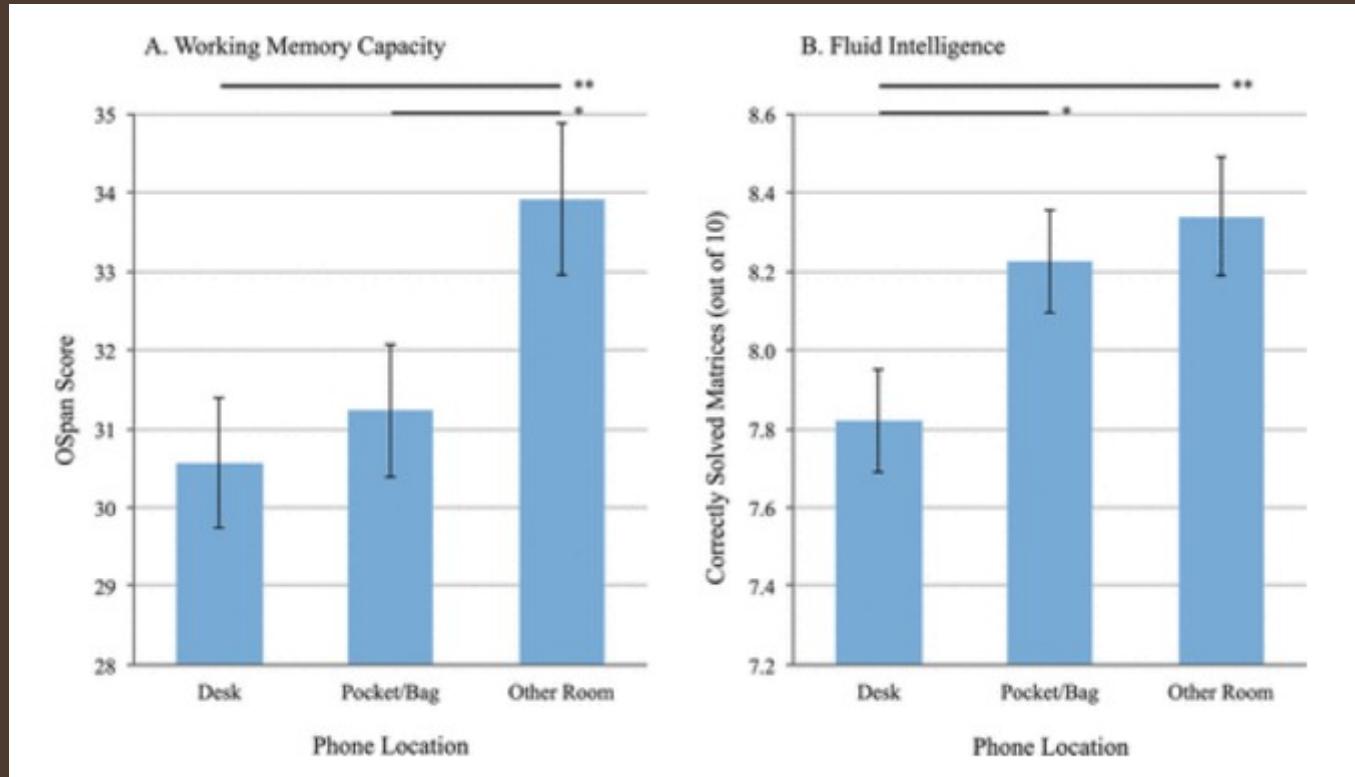
Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity

Adrian F. Ward, Kristen Duke, Ayelet Gneezy, and Maarten W. Bos

- “Because the same finite pool of attentional resources supports both attentional control and other cognitive processes, resources recruited to inhibit automatic attention to one's phone are made unavailable for other tasks, and performance on these tasks will suffer.”
- Translation: The brain has to unconsciously spend energy to inhibit automatic attention to the phone. This inhibition sucks up energy. Simply having a phone around will decrease executive functioning.

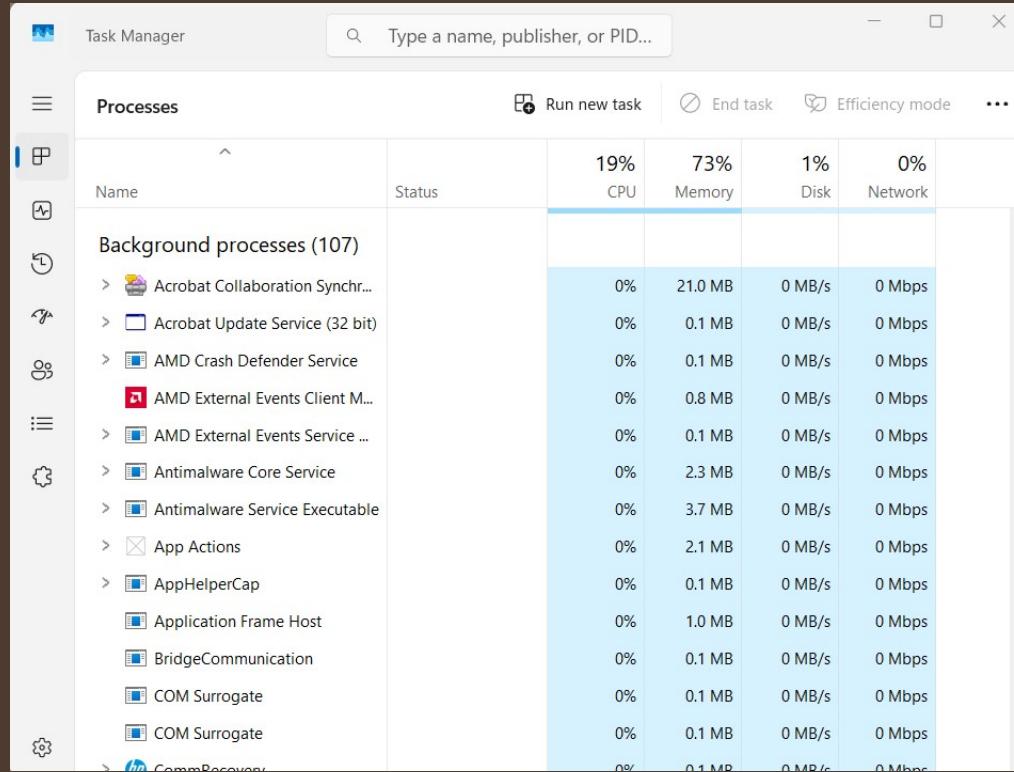
Study about cell phone

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- Working memory: the ability to hold information in mind and process it to respond.
 - e.g. remember a list of 7 things to do, remember a 7 digit phone number long enough to write it down.
- Fluid intelligence: the ability to reason things out and solve problems.
 - e.g. notice patterns and resources and connect information in a coherent response

Task Manager



- Background processes can slow your system down.
- “End task” on unnecessary background processes can improve your executive functioning.
- Do fewer things.

2. Work at a natural pace.

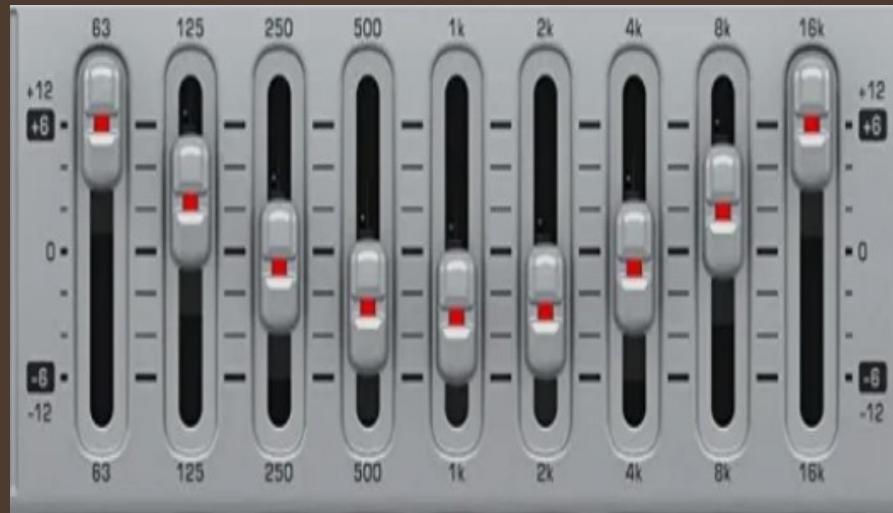
(Newport, 2024)

- ◉ “Allow [work] to unfold...with variations in intensity.”
- ◉ Hunter-gatherer pace: many variations depending on opportunity and environment. Spikes and breaks.
- ◉ Agricultural-industrial pace: “monotonous, continuous work.”
- ◉ [Similar to *Hunter in a Farmer’s World* by Thom Hartman]
- ◉ “Embrace seasonality.”
- ◉ If you can afford it, schedule slow seasons and shorter work year.

Allow yourself to work at your natural pace. Don't fight it.

(My interpretation)

- Find your own pace that feels sustainable. Marathon, not a sprint.
- Find your own sweet spots between routine and change, boredom and overwhelm, activity and rest, nature and screen, hyperfocus and scanning, hermit and traveling, etc.



2. Work at a natural pace.

(Newport, 2024)

- Pull instead of push.
- Pull work into your space as you become ready for it.
- The world wants to push work on you at the pace they need. Like an assembly line.
- Change push to pull.
 - Holding tank for projects.
 - Active list of no more than 3 projects at a time.
 - Estimate how much actual-time a project requires.
 - Estimate how much energy-time a project requires.
 - If you can't afford the project in your energy budget, remove it from active list and/or the holding tank.

3. Obsess over quality.

- The first 2 principles (doing fewer things and pacing) allows the third principle: hone your skills to deliver exceptional work.
- Jewel's story

3. Obsess over quality.

- ◉ “Improve your taste.” Raise your standards.
- ◉ Dive deep into your special interests.
- ◉ Find or start a group that shares values and inspirations (CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien in a group called Inklings).
- ◉ Invest in high quality tools.
- ◉ Carve out time for projects you care about.

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[quotation from The Time-Block Planner (Newport,2023, p “week 11, weekend”)]

Imagine a lifestyle & environment

- No willpower necessary to get things you want done.
- What does that look like?
- Sketch it. Sculpt it. Paint it. Write it. Plan it. Organize it.
- The lottery version, just so you can get in touch with what inspires you. Get in touch with your dream.

Create a lifestyle & environment

- ◉ That you can afford for now
- ◉ Lifelong project, but you have to actively create it. It isn't going to magically appear.
- ◉ What does the world look like that allows you to be as monotropic as you can afford to be?

References

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- ◉ Newport, C. (2023). The time-block planner: A daily method for deep work in a distracted world (2nd ed.). Portfolio.
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