

Humanity at Work: *Slow Productivity: The Lost Art of Accomplishment Without Burnout*

By Robert Edison Sandiford



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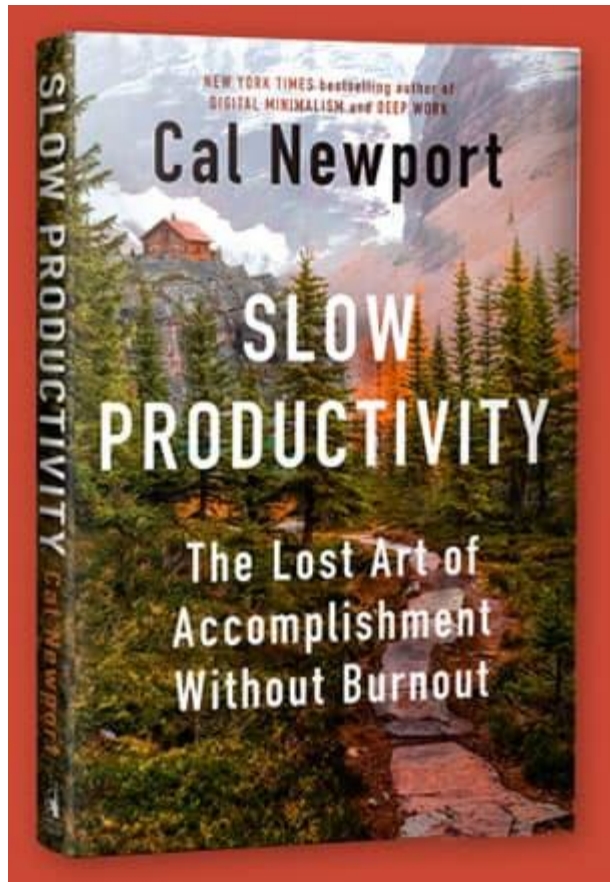
“Ten half-done jobs are not five complete jobs.” Carl Gittens, Master Plumber

Who says the pandemic wasn't good for anything? In a world locked down by the coronavirus from 2020-2023, some of us spent our real-life Blip (as opposed to the fictional Marvel movies one) thinking of ways to live and work and even play more sanely and serenely than we hitherto had been. Cal Newport was ever one of these types, and *Slow Productivity: The Lost Art of Accomplishment Without Burnout* is a brief – overview? – distillation? – I'm not sure which word fits best – but a run-through his thoughts, feelings and philosophy with respect to what could be called a noticeable, ongoing development in the world of so-called knowledge work.

Newport's immediate past titles are telling, not just intriguing: *A World Without Email*; *Digital Minimalism*; *Deep Work*. They have increasingly examined ways for us to work smarter, not harder, and the last listed is concerned with “seeking focused success in a distracted world.”

These are books that suggest a reckoning – with how we work today, how we define progress in our social spheres and also in our private lives. His current book's dedication to his family, who have reminded him of the art, the vital *necessity*, of ease, puts a fine line under his way of thinking these days.

Newport opens with an anecdote about John McPhee's writerly anxiety, or picnic table paralysis, in 1966. It is, in fact, a situation most of us can directly access, and a motif he repeats throughout *Slow Productivity* with other “teachable moments” or telling tales. I've never been



one to overcommit – but I should say no more. With the years, my work has gotten more challenging to me, if to no one else. The “fear and panic” McPhee felt over his Pine Barrens story I have felt over my next book. The upshot? We do it to ourselves: more than stress ourselves out.

According to Newport, there are some decent explanations for this behaviour. “It doesn’t matter that something you’ve done before worked out well. Your last piece is never going to write your next one for you.” Even after figuring out the way forward, “it still took McPhee more than a year to finish writing his article....”

The focus is not so much on McPhee’s “fear and panic,” rather on the time required to produce “a marvel of long-form reporting.” What’s equally significant is that Newport “came across this story of John McPhee’s unhurried approach” during the COVID-19 pandemic – “a complicated time for knowledge workers.” A time of great

“unease” and uncertainty about “*productivity*.”

A *New Yorker* contributor, blogger and podcaster, as well as bestselling author, Newport says that many of his readers during the pandemic were “*fired up*” over productivity expectations. He detected, at least in those who wrote to him or commented on his blog, “this growing anti-productivity sentiment.” He further linked “[t]his exhaustion with work” to “multiple waves of heavily reported social trends...during the pandemic,” such as “the so-called Great Resignation” and “the rise of quiet quitting,” notably by younger workers in the West who were, to borrow the words of journalist Celeste Headlee, “overworked and overstressed, constantly dissatisfied and reaching for a bar that keeps rising higher and higher.”

Newport talks about covering “the anti-productivity movement” during the pandemic, but he edges closer to his topic when he writes, “The pandemic didn’t introduce this trend as much as push its worst excesses beyond the threshold of tolerability.” This was loudly so for knowledge workers, whom he defines as creatives, technicians, artisans and countless others in various fields “who made a living with their minds.” Going back to McPhee, whose example hangs over the narrative, Newport notes that, after 29 books, a Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award nominations, countless articles, mentoring and more, his fellow *New Yorker* contributor has indeed been productive, “and yet nothing about his work habits is frantic, busy, or overwhelming.”

“The intersection of work and life needs some work,” observed Jim Harter as Gallup’s chief workplace scientist. What Newport proposes is that “knowledge workers’ problem is not with

productivity in a general sense, but instead with a specific, faulty definition of this term that has taken hold in recent decades. The relentless overload that's wearing us down is generated by a belief that 'good' work requires increasing busyness – faster responses to email and chats, more meetings, more tasks, more hours." What Newport's after, by way of solution, is the transformation of "our modern understanding of professional accomplishment." This brings us to his philosophy of "slow productivity" and its three easy-to-remember tenets: 1) Do fewer things; 2) Work at a natural pace; 3) Obsess over quality. (Here I wonder if, by the end of the book, he will have a similar plan for us to maintain our income. But not to get ahead of ourselves.)

***"Taking your time ain't laziness."* Barbadian proverb**

For people like me who have exercised what Newport advocates for most of our professional life, there is much here that is as validating as it is familiar. We *should* live the slow way. If only because we already know its benefits. We know we are just as productive during periods of calm as we are during periods of seemingly endless entropy. There may even be evidence to suggest we are more so.

Newport's goal with *Slow Productivity* is as simple as his three rules, and this is for all kinds of workers: "to...propose an *entirely new way*...to think about what it means to get things done." Personable as he is, convincing as his writing may be (the occasional overuse of "however" aside), does he succeed?

First, there are some challenges, both social and historical. A twentieth-century view of work is that "[t]he most successful companies have the hardest workers," and managers are there "to ensure *enough* work is getting done." Quantity remains king in the twenty-first century, even if quality suffers. The truth we seek, notably in the knowledge sector, is far more nuanced. Largely because how I define productivity or being productive might be quite different from how my nearest colleague does.

For me, it has to do with the amount of work accomplished in a set period of time; deadlines, and meeting them; and with maintaining the integrity of my hourly rate depending on the project. So, it's connected to meeting a budget, which then is connected to meeting my bills and balancing my budget, and that would be for home, work and play. *What* I do comes far less to mind than *how* – these days, at the age of 56. This is not the case for many others, particularly those younger than I am. In a survey Newport conducted, none of his respondents answered with "specific goals to meet, or performance measures" to determine a job well done.

And this may be because there are usually several on the go. "In knowledge work," he contends, unlike in other fields, "individuals are often wrangling complicated and constantly shifting workloads": a PR campaign along with website content along with AI training along with a poem, short story or script. "In this setting," unlike that of, say, an assembly line, "there's no clean single output to track."

The prevailing belief since the mid-1990s, with the arrival of "networked computers in the office," is that "[i]f you can see me in my office – or, if I'm remote, see my email replies and chat messages arriving regularly – then, at the very least, you know I'm doing *something*...."

But this is pseudo-productivity, asserts Newport: “[t]he use of visible activity as the primary means of approximating actual productive effort.” The perpetuation of this false metric is the real roadblock to greater life-work balance, causing “significant” damage.

That’s perpetuation by *us* as much as by others. As I told a colleague of mine recently who commented on how “consistent” my output was as writer/editor/publisher, “I may be more *persistent* than consistent.” Some myths are useful. Lying to ourselves, especially when trying to determine an average work day and the value of the work we do today, not so much.

My usual solution when the world is too much upon me is to slow it down: reorder my schedule to reflect considered deceleration, not frenetic acceleration. It is, as Newport makes clear, my schedule to control after all, wizard-like. If this sorcery doesn’t work, I’ll go into quick-hit triage mode: take, maybe, five items/projects/files/jobs that need to be done in, say, a week and work *only on them*. “Our brains work better when we’re not rushing,” Newport reminds us. Priorities remain priorities only if we say they are and treat them as such. And it’s a rather rare day in life when everything is a priority.

There are parallels here to the “slow food” movement, a term coined by “seasoned activist and journalist” Carlo Petrini circa 1986. One of its tenets: don’t “confuse efficiency with frenzy.” There are benefits to something developed (and enjoyed!) with an eye on “time-tested cultural innovations” versus something pushed out in higgledy-piggledy haste; one of them may be the preservation or evidence of “the human experience” in creative endeavour. There’s something to be celebrated about the *space* “traditional knowledge workers [once] enjoyed” to do their job. Newport believes it is ever possible to “find in their experience the foundations for a conception of productivity that makes our harder jobs more manageable.”

(Perhaps a convention of his genre, this may also be why Newport slows down his own narrative by pausing quite leisurely to describe what he will cover next. There are a number of interludes and references to work he has previously published on the topic. His pace, if not entirely unhurried, is easygoing. Do we need so much explicit foreshadowing, and does so much direct recapping of his own articles on the topic feel like padding? Not always to the first, sometimes to the second. As readers, though, we should remember not all text is to be speedread, skimmed or offered without backing reference.)

Newport admits that “those who...work in an office environment under close supervision might have a harder time fully instituting the strategies I suggest.” The same goes for certain other professionals; flexibility may depend on the stage they’re at in their jobs. But “the conditions for productivity,” particularly of the slow kind, must first be right – as they were for another of his slow productivity avatars, Jane Austen, from about 1796-1800, and again in 1809.

A reduction in the daily busyness of her father’s parsonage permitted Austen “the ability to establish the ‘rhythm of work,’ as [biographer Claire] Tomalin puts it” in *Jane Austen: A Life* (1997). Austen, the author of *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*, among other classics, didn’t only gain “real and meaningful space to think and work creatively”; she gained agency, actual power over her time and how (wisely) it was spent. She may not have been frantic with *related* work, but there were the almost ceaseless demands of her family’s professional and social realities to contain. On the other hand – and here we come back to budgetary considerations – “Even if

you're a solopreneur in full control of your days, the need for income might undermine your intention to reduce your workload." Few knowledge workers can count generous wealthy relatives, old-fashioned patrons or indulgent sponsors as resources.

***When you've done your best, angels can't do better."* Iris Carlottie "Lots" Sandiford, My Granny**

For all Newport and others have written, for all the hirings and firings, quiet quittings and HR debates, what have we learned about ourselves in the last half decade? Anything? I find *Slow Productivity* highly relatable. Often, I wonder which lessons about our climate (remember the returning animals and clearer mountaintops?), our vulnerabilities and our strengths we've retained in our mad need to get back out there and be busy, never to be locked down again.

All workers, claims Newport, can count on themselves and their ability to change their ways and, in turn, their fortunes. Apart from banking on ourselves, he provides an arsenal of approaches to work meant to convert pseudo-productivity into genuinely transformative productivity: the kind that has the potential to change worker's lives and maybe, in the process, our societies: by leaning into practical, sensible, humane ways of work that reduce the law of diminishing returns. More work does not necessarily equal more pay or more prosperity or more achievement. It's OK to say no to a job upfront, rather than wait until it puts us in "sufficient personal distress to justify the distress saying no might generate in the other party." People are more likely to respect our time when we respect our time.

Other Newport advice: don't put money above health. Much in the same way we should avoid putting money above our integrity. Work seasonally, work to a calendar schedule or five-year plan, work only certain days a week, work a pull rather than push method, work less hours for more money, work after the kids are in bed (or with them on our lap, if quiet and small enough, I say) – whatever we choose from his many excellent tips and suggestions, find what works *for us* to be truly productive. And then commit to it. Refine it by avoiding task and admin generators that "in sufficient quantities, can act like productivity termites." All the while remembering to be gentle with ourselves as much as with clients and family. To talk instead of text; to limit our projects lists instead of expanding them. Obsessing over quality "isn't just about being better at [our] job" but being better at improving our overall circumstances. It could be nurturing a hobby or going for a regular walk. We should, as a far younger colleague advised me almost 30 years ago, work to live, not live to work.

If anything, that's what's changed for me since the pandemic. I'm older. I can spot inefficiencies more quickly. I know there's more than one beneficial way to do something, and there will always be something that needs doing. And...I'm older. With experience gained over time has come the greater, sharper knowledge that I have less time to waste or have wasted.

But then I would argue: younger or older, knowledge worker or field labourer, student or newly employed, we should all feel this way.