

DEEP WORK

Does being busy necessarily mean being productive? **Carolina Casado Parras** investigates Deep Work, or how to produce elite-level work by cutting out superfluous tasks

If you think that a needy client or the PM who sends big jobs on Friday afternoon are the worst that can happen to you, think again.

Let me introduce you to your new nemesis – distraction. We are all over-exposed to stimuli, both physical and digital, and for many of us multitasking is now a natural part of our daily routine.

By the time we go to bed, our arms are sore from all the juggling and we feel we have accomplished a decent number of things. But have we really? Does being busy necessarily mean being productive?

A few months ago, at a translation conference, I learned about Deep Work (DW), a concept coined by American Professor Cal Newport. He defines it as the “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.”

A translation would be an example of DW. Needless to say, the existence of DW necessarily assumes there is Shallow Work (SW) – what we do while distracted, e.g. writing emails, posting on social media, or invoicing.

Newport claims that in order to produce elite-level work, we must cut out superfluous tasks – both personally and professionally.

There are four philosophies or levels at which DW can be adopted:

- 1. Monastic:** implies saying no to anything which does not fall into the DW category;
- 2. Bimodal:** focuses mostly on DW, but allows some SW tasks;
- 3. Rhythmic:** splits the time in blocks dedicated to DW and what is left goes to SW; and

- 4. Journalistic:** for people on the move who can only schedule up to two hours of DW per day.

Number one seems too extreme for us digital freelancers: not checking our email would promptly stop the DW flow, or any type of workflow for that matter.

The third philosophy is probably the most feasible for us, and I've been applying it to my routine for a few days now.

So, how does it work exactly? Let's look at the main principles of DW.

Digital minimalism: Distance yourself from social media. Allot a specific time of day to check it if you suffer from FOMO (fear of missing out) or get cold sweats just at the thought of life without Twitter. This might be the hardest change, but also the most powerful.

Labelling and prioritising: Decide which tasks are deep and

shallow and focus on the former. Set tight deadlines to improve your focus – pressure leverages deep concentration and improves efficiency.

Setting up a routine: Make a daily plan with blocks of time for DW and stick to it. Allow 'flexible' blocks to accommodate unexpected projects, but resist the urge to shuffle things around constantly.

Benefit from 'downtime': Use repetitive tasks such as driving, walking the dog, or washing up to dig deeper into your mental work. Most great ideas pop up when you are away from your desk. (Transcreators know this only too well!)

Jog your memory: Keeping your brain active with memory games enhances your concentration.

Take your pleasures seriously: When you are done, shut down your computer and enjoy your time off (away from the internet, if possible).

The first step is to build a routine. You need to find a distraction-free space with all the resources you need. Take a planner and, based on your work for that day, decide which blocks of time will be for DW.

You can start with 30-minute slots and increase them over time. You have to set rules for yourself, and this might sound like overkill, but it is crucial; I have even written mine down to take them seriously.

For example, are you going to turn off all notifications? What websites can you use? Will you open the front door if someone knocks?

Little by little, you will create a routine and will find it easier to

follow it. You will also notice the best conditions to carry out your DW: music or silence? Tea or coffee? Cat or no cat?

How can you tell if your productivity and efficiency have improved? By assessing your routine, of course. Keep track of the time devoted to DW and SW and figure out how long you need for different tasks.

Can you cut it down? You probably can! I have been surprised by how much faster I can translate or write an article by giving myself a 90- or 120-minute window.

Also, how are you feeling?

Focus is the new IQ in the knowledge economy

Spending less time on social media might make you anxious or it might mean you are relieved.

There are times when the usual DW routine simply does not work. Maybe you have received a new type of project or feel particularly distracted for some reason. It is time to execute a 'grand gesture'.

Newport suggests that "a radical change to your normal environment" might "increase the perceived importance of the task."

An example of a grand gesture is Bill Gates's 'think week' – twice a year, he secludes himself in a forest away from technology to think and reflect. Not all of us can do that, right? But we needn't aim so high; our grand gesture could be changing scenery by working in a café or the library for a week

or not checking our email at all for three days to focus exclusively on a translation job.

When I started reading about DW, I wondered about co-working and co-translation, both of which are an active part of my professional life.

According to Newport, collaborative work is beneficial but, to the dismay of open-plan-office advocates, only after the fact. That means you brainstorm with others and then, when you are alone again, you reap the benefits while deep working.

When I was preparing to write this article, I reflected on a co-translation session I had with some colleagues. It's true that we discussed and brainstormed, but it was only after a few days, alone in my office, that I gathered my thoughts and transformed them into a blog post, hence benefiting from the work we did together.

If this article has sparked your curiosity, you can read Newport's books. Also, Udemy offers a free online course on the principles of Deep Work; it's already in my planner for the autumn!

I would like to leave you with the quote that made me especially interested in this theory. Newport argues that "focus is the new IQ in the knowledge economy, and that individuals who cultivate their ability to concentrate without distraction will thrive."

Now, do you want to thrive? Maybe this is a good place to start!

Carolina Casado Parras is an EN/FR>ES translator working in creative fields. You can find her at www.vibrantwordstranslations.com, on LinkedIn, or on Twitter @VibrantWordsT