

PRINCIPAL'S MESSAGE ASSEMBLY 8th Feb 2019

Infinity wells and deep thought: Tomasz Tunguz

Over the weekend, the NY Times interviewed a classmate of mine from Dartmouth and fellow oarsman on the freshman crew team, Cal Newport, about his book and his idea, Deep Work. Here's the crux of the idea:

Deep work is my term for the activity of focusing without distraction on a cognitively demanding task. It describes, in other words, when you're really locked into doing something hard with your mind...In order for a session to count as deep work there must be zero distractions. Even a quick glance at your phone or email inbox can significantly reduce your performance due to the cost of context switching.

The costs of switching and of interruptions is real. The typical American worker is interrupted every 210 seconds. But half of those interruptions are self-interruptions. If we check our phones every 12 minutes or 70 times per day, the question is how much deep work can we do?

The longer I work in technology, the more I value long blocks of uninterrupted time. It's probably the scarcest resource at work. When is the last time you had 90 minutes to work on a project without an interruption: a phone call, a text message, an email, a buzz or a ring or a knock?

In a different book Make Time by two Googlers, Jake Knapp and John Zeratsky introduce the infinity pool. The infinity pool is technology that deliberately devours as much of your time as possible. We all have these insatiable monsters in our pockets. They are boredom cures, fixes for dopamine desire, triggered by a two minute YouTube video, a quick Fortnite campaign, a voyeur's social media blitz.

In Make Time, the authors advise you not to wait for technology to give you back your time. Because it won't. There are PhDs in every discipline learning how to take it from you.

The authors advocate extreme measures to combat the algorithms using our predilections for newness against us. Delete all infinity pools from your phone. It's an interesting experiment, but I'm not ready to go that far.

Instead, I installed an app that recorded each time I activated my phone and challenged myself to reduce it touches from about 40 to about 20 times per day, which I thought was great. But then I realized, that's still more than once per hour. A long way to go. They also push for checking email once per day, which might be possible in some work environments, but definitely not for me.

Deep work is the most satisfying work. I like to write early in the morning because then I have the luxury of uninterruptedness. I'm sure we all know that feeling. We can make real progress in short periods of time; we're at our intellectual peak. We have to defend it, first by being aware of the challenges impeding our focus.