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It seems like a syllogism that is obvious, but it actually doesn't tend to work out that way in practice. We have tons of research literature on workplace satisfaction and meaning. And the things that lead to workplace satisfaction and meaning often have very little to do with the matched of the topic of the work to some pre-existing interest, but instead have to do with much more generic but powerful traits like a sense of autonomy, a sense of impact, a sense of connection to other people, a sense of creativity, or creation from scratch.

Robert Glazer: Welcome to Elevate. A podcast about achievement, personal growth, and pushing limits in leadership and life. I'm Robert Glaser, and I chat with world class performers who have committed to elevating their own life, pushing the limits of their capacity and helping others to do the same.

Welcome to the Elevate podcast. Our quote today is from Joshua Becker, and it is the first step in crafting the life you want is to get rid of everything you don't.

Our guest today, Cal Newport, is one of the most thoughtful people on the topic of technology in our work and life. He is the Provost, Distinguished Professor of Computer Science, an MIT graduate, an author of six books including most recently the New York Times bestseller, Digital Minimalism.

And Cal has also delivered a TEDx talk, Quit Social Media, that has been viewed nearly six million times, probably mostly across social media. So, we'll talk about that. Cal, welcome. Excited to have you join the Elevate podcast.

Cal Newport: Yeah, I'm excited. It's my pleasure to be here.

Robert Glazer: Great. Well, I've done some research. It seems that you're an academic at heart and have started there and stayed there. I love to hear a little more about how you got your start and what topics interested you in high school and college.

Cal Newport: Well, more specifically in academia, I'm a computer scientist. So, I work on some of the fundamental theory that eventually leads to the types of technologies that has such a big impact on our lives today.

And so that's where I started. I started as a computer scientist. I started as an academic technologist. And it seemed to me that it was a reasonable person to be writing and thinking about topics of tech in society. Well, someone who actually had their hands pretty deep in the actual details of these technologies. And so that's the way I think of myself as an academic who has also been writing about the impact of some of the things I study on our lives.

Robert Glazer: And you gravitated towards computer science, as you said, but a little bit from a different perspective, in terms of not becoming a coder or an engineer, but about, I guess, the intersection of this technology with how we live.

Cal Newport: Yeah. So, I'm more working with the fundamental. I would categorize myself more specifically as a theoretical computer scientist. And so I basically first set foot on college campuses when I was 16 years old and started taking some of the computer science curriculum at nearby Princeton University, and I basically haven't left since then.

I went to college. From college to grad school. From grad school to postdoc. From postdoc to professorship. From professorship to a tenured professorship. And so I've spent most of my life at this point, actually, in the world of academia.

I like the ideas. I like the theory. I like the cognitive challenge of trying to understand what are the underlying truths about these type of technologies and things like what we can and can't compute and the best way to compute things. Maybe not the best decision from a financial perspective if you will get the salary coders are making these days.

But actually, I'll be honest, my dirty secret is I don't think I've really programmed a computer in the last 10 years. So, again, I'm really on the science of this stuff, and not so much on the practical application. At least it can seem that way sometimes.

Robert Glazer: So, do you have a room for all your diplomas at this point? You must have a prolific diploma wall.

Cal Newport: Well, I carry them with me, of course. It's like a wagon.

Robert Glazer: All right. So, at some point, you moved from studying all this stuff to writing it, and have become quite a prolific writer. I think I read that you started ... Your first writing focused on study trips, is that right?

Cal Newport: Yeah, it's true. So, I had this parallel path as a writer and academic. It was pretty separated until it came together on this topic of technology. So, I actually wrote my first book when I was an undergraduate. And it was on study advice, which is basically the only topic on which you should probably give a college student a book deal is to write a book for other college students. So, that was my foot into the publishing industry.

So during my last couple years as an undergraduate and through a lot of my time as a graduate student, I wrote these three books that were really aimed at students. I wrote all three of those for Random House. And so I had this parallel thing going on where I was, by day, taking math classes and solving theorems

and, proverbially speaking by night, I was writing books and giving talks and going on tours and being on radio shows.

And these two things were happening almost in complete parallel until later in my career, they came back together when I realized, "Hey, I know how to write. I'm also a technologist. What if I wrote about the stuff that I was doing during the day?" And ever since I made that consilience, it's been off to the races.

Robert Glazer: Well, we'll get into that in a second. I'm curious though, how did you get a book deal as a college student? What was the process around that?

Cal Newport: That's an interesting question. Well, first of all, it's important to know that I was an entrepreneur during high school. So, when I was in high school, this was the late 1990s, which was the first dot-com boom. The one where they had all those large dot-coms that went bust.

Robert Glazer: I graduated right in the middle of that.

Cal Newport: Yeah. Well, one of the reasons why so many businesses crashed is because this was a period where you would give money to someone like me who was 16 at the time to run a business. I took advantage of this odd moment in our economic history where we felt that teenagers would be good business people because teenagers know a lot about technology. Right?

Robert Glazer: Right.

Cal Newport: That was the general idea. So, I was an entrepreneur in high school, which meant, A, I was interested in entrepreneurial thinking, but I was also used to business and advice books, because I was running a business. You go and you get books. How do I market? You buy a book on how to market. How do I manage my time? You buy a book on how to manage your time.

And so I get the college heavily taken on personal student debt. So, I was results oriented, we'll say. I wanted to get my money's worth. And when I went to find, "Okay, where is the book about this is how the top students study, this is the book about how to do really well in this type of major?"

At the time, they didn't exist. Most of the books that they were publishing for college students in this sort of late 1990s, early 2000s time were all trying to be sort of whimsical or fun or cool. There's a sense that if you were too serious about academic performance, that you would somehow scare away The younger reader.

And I thought that was all nonsense. And because I had a sort of entrepreneurial streak in me, I said, "Okay, I can fill that gap. Why don't I write a college book in the same style as a business book, just no nonsense? Here's what you want to

do, you want to get good grades, great. I studied 30 straight A students, here's how they did it."

So, that's where I got the idea. And then the way I executed it is, again, with my entrepreneurial background, I just researched how to book deals work. And I discovered this would be the process. If I actually want to get a book deal as a teenager or as a 19 or 20 year old, here's what I would have to do, and then I just execute it, ABC. And it turned out pretty well.

Robert Glazer: I can sense you're good at breaking down processes. So, I'm surprised you haven't written a book about getting a book deal.

Cal Newport: I wrote a post about it. It's probably the post that I ended up emailing to people more than anything else. I wrote a book that was called something like how to get a nonfiction book deal. And I send it to people all the time. I mean, the thing that surprises me about that world is that a lot of people have this notion, maybe I want to write a book.

And yet, they often don't want to confront, "Okay, so how does the industry actually work?" They want it to just work in the way that matches their dream of what that should mean. Like they want to just write every day or be bold and do this and that. And so I finally wrote this post like, "Okay, here's how it happens. Here's what you really have to do. It's not so hard, but this is what you have to do."

And it's probably the post I send to people most often when they say, "Well, how do I write a book?" I say, "Okay, read this post that I wrote in 2009." Because I break the whole thing down. It's pretty technical, but it's not that hard.

I mean, basically, what it comes down to, for those who are interested in, is A, and this is key, if it's nonfiction, you don't write the book first, which people don't always like to hear. You get an agent. First, it's easier to get an agent than it is to get the book deal. So, if you can't get an agent, you can't sell the book, so there's no sending out manuscripts. This is not how it works in nonfiction.

C, you have to have enough demonstrable skill as a writer that they know that you can actually deliver something professional. And then D, and this is the hard part, you have to have an idea that matches two criteria. One, people are going to feel like I have to have this book and, two, you're the right person to write it. And that's kind of the hard thing.

So for me, the way I threaded that needle was I'm a college student who's also a writer. That's the right person maybe to write for the college student environment. And I had a novel idea, which is, "What if we wrote college advice like a business book, no nonsense?"

And so by hitting all of those marks, the whole thing can unfold. From there, you can get an agent. From the agent, you can get the book deal, and the whole thing unfolds. But if I instead, for example, just said, "I'm just going to write every day. I'm going to do my pages, or I'm going to ... I'm just going to put together this manuscript and send it out there into the world." It wouldn't have gone the way I wanted it to.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. Interestingly, having just published a book five weeks ago, and my guess is you'll agree with it. I mean, it's changed a lot in the last 10 years. You have a lot of self-publishing, a lot of nonfiction writers going that way.

The thing I spent a lot of time sharing with people is that marketing the book, maybe is much work as writing the book these days. And I don't think a lot of people are prepared for that. In fact, a lot of what gets you a book deal these days is that you already have a list and an audience, which is a little bit of a chicken and egg problem.

Cal Newport: Yeah. That was still around even back then. I remember in 2000 talking to editors that were talking about, "Man, this author we just signed has an email list. This is large." Back then it was email list. Now, it was social media. Ironically, it's going back to email list size again.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, that's totally true. Okay. So, another big topic that you covered in one of your next books, *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, is this notion that following your passion, which is very popular these days, does not necessarily lead to a fulfilling career. I'd love to hear your philosophy on that, then I have a few specific questions.

Cal Newport: This was really a transitional book. So, I had written the three books for students. And I was wanting to transition out of the student books as I was no longer about the A student anymore. And at the time I wrote *So Good They Can't Ignore You*, what was going on in my life was I was going to be leaving grad school, entering the academic job market.

If that goes well, it's the first and last job interviews you ever do in your life, because an academic tenure position is going to be a job for life. And I had this sudden realization, if there is any time where I'm going to get a lot of leverage out of understanding how people end up loving their work, it was going to be right now at this point in my life.

This was the point where I really better have an answer for that question before I go off and go try to get a job for life. And so that book, the whole premise was I'm going to go out there and study the question of how people end up loving their work. And the secret motivation is I really wanted that answer, because it was at a crucial pivot point in my life.

And so that was the premise of the book. As you alluded, one of the first things I discovered when doing that research is that the most common piece of advice that people were getting was follow your passion.

The second thing I discovered is that, that's also probably terrible advice. And by terrible advice, I mean, if your goal is to end up passionate about your work, if you simply tell someone follow your passion, you're probably reducing the probability that they end up passionate about their work.

Robert Glazer: So, where are you on the Gladwell 10,000-Hour Rule?

Cal Newport: Well, so first of all, I would think of it not as the Gladwell Rule. I mean, I know ...

Robert Glazer: Sorry. I know, he popularized it. Yes, sorry.

Cal Newport: Yeah. So, I'm a big fan of Anders and deliberate practice theory. And I think probably the both the best and worst thing that ever happened to Anders was having Malcolm Gladwell write about it, because it turns out that there's a whole sport out there, if you're a journalist or a social scientist, to try to attack Malcolm Gladwell. So, it was sort of a blessing and a curse.

But the main observation of the 10,000-Hour Rule was just Anders Ericsson saying, if you study people who get to an elite level in a lot of different fields, they spend a lot of time practicing. And not just practicing, but doing what's known as deliberate practice, which is practice is designed to actually stretch your ability as opposed to, let's say, just repetitiously doing what you already know how to do.

Now, his point wasn't this number is magical, but between 9,000 and 11,000 hours, something magical happens. His point was the average number ... And the average, by the way, he talks about it in the original paper, so numbers are all over the place. The point is the average value is large. And what matters is not its particular value, but the fact that it's really big.

And the core of deliberate practice theory, which I believe has remain unchallenged and I'm a big believer in is that essentially, if you want to get good at a hard thing, you have to practice it, and the practice has to be designed to stretch you. And if you want to get to a really elite level, it's probably going to take a lot of practice.

We're used to this idea now, but that was actually innovative and fundamental when they actually first proposed it. It supplanted a lot of other theories about where expert performance comes from. And I think that basic point essentially remains unchallenged, and it's something that I'm a big believer in.

Robert Glazer: So, where is the danger in passion? And so what would you advocate? What do you think the danger is following your passion is? Is that you're just not good

enough at it, that there's not a career in it? Is there a difference between following your passion and honoring your passion? I'm curious as to where you land there.

Cal Newport: Well, there's two real issues. So, one is an issue with even this phrase we're used to, your passion, which we treat like you would describe an [crosstalk 00:14:31].

Robert Glazer: Yeah.

Cal Newport: Like someone's hair color or their height or something like this. And one of the key things I discovered in my research is that this idea that most of us have clearly identifiable, predefined passions that can be the foundation of a career choice is just really not backed up by any literature I can find.

So, if you move from a scientific literature and say, "Well, let me actually just talk to real people," which I also did. People who are obviously passionate about their work, and you say, "Tell me your story." Nine times out of 10, it turns out that they had no idea in advance that what they were going to end up doing and loving is what that was.

It almost always the stories are more complicated and rich than just I knew in advance what I wanted to do. And then it was just a matter of having the courage to follow it. So, that's the first two issues. I think, it teaches people that you have this immutable attribute, and it's only about whether you follow it or not.

Most people don't. It's much more complicated. Our relationship with work and what we want to do and don't want to do and what interests us and what doesn't. That's a dynamic, subtle and nuanced piece of our psychology. It can't be distilled down to most people to a set passion.

And then the other problem is, is we don't have a lot of evidence from the research literature that matching your work to a topic that you really like means that you're going to really like your work. It seems like a syllogism that is obvious, but it actually doesn't tend to work out that way in practice.

We have tons of research literature on workplace satisfaction and meaning. And the things that lead to workplace satisfaction and meaning often have very little to do with the matched of the topic of the work to some pre-existing interest, but instead have to do with much more generic but powerful traits like a sense of autonomy, a sense of impact, a sense of connection to other people, a sense of creativity, or creation from scratch.

And these are traits that you can get in a lot of different work. So, a lot of what I focus on is, "Okay, if people think that they have some clear passion that they just need to identify and then match it to their job and then they'll be happy, it's

essentially a fairy tale." It's oversimplifying the much more interesting and complex story of how people actually cultivate over time deep attachment to their work.

Robert Glazer: So, would that imply ... I haven't seen a lot of work you've done in the culture space, but would that imply that the culture of the company for a lot of people matters more than what they're actually doing in terms of their contribution?

Cal Newport: The culture of the company can certainly matter, but it's more the attributes of your particular working life. The formula that seems much more common when you study people who love their work is that they begin their work in this intense, almost like apprenticeship style phase where what they're doing is making themselves very valuable. They're building up rare and valuable skills.

As they build those skills, this gives them leverage over their working life. In my book, I call it career capital. It's like as you get better at rare and valuable things, you acquire career capital. And then the key is to turn around and reinvest that capital to bring into your working life the things that really make work great.

And so it's once you're really good at something, suddenly you can get autonomy in your work. You're going to feel more of a sense of mastery and impact. You're going to get more of a sense of creativity. And so it's this cycle of you get better at things and then use those skills that leverage to shape your working life to be better, and then you get even better, and then you use that as leverage to shape your working life to be even more better.

That cycle of skill, reward, skill, reward, skill, reward, much more reliably predicts people who love their work, than the other model, which is you knew when you were 12, that you were meant to be a social media brand manager. So that when you took that job at 22 as a social media brand manager, you loved your work from day one, and lived happily ever after. That's just way too simplified.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, and sounds like it's a little bit of a chicken and egg argument. I heard a speaker had a quote once. I wonder if you disagree with it, or agree with it, or maybe somewhere in the middle. And maybe this gets to it in terms of sometimes what we're passionate about, we're not that talented.

But he said, "Passion without a talent is a hobby. Talent without passion is a job. Being passionate about what you're talented in is a calling." I remember thinking that, that was an interesting way of stating it.

Cal Newport: I think it is interesting, because you do need talent, but I would go even farther and say when thinking about your career, because it's too overloaded, just banish the terms, your passion, your vocabulary and then think through what you want to do with your career and it opens up a lot of things.

I mean, in general, this idea that get good at things that are valuable, use those skills as leverage to make your working life more valuable to you, that works out pretty well. Now, this doesn't mean, to be clear, that you can just throw a dart at a job board and wherever it lands. What it does though, is it lowers the threshold.

So right now, we set the threshold really high. You have a one true passion. If you miss it, you'll be miserable. That's way too high of a threshold. That leads to anxiety and chronic job hopping. The threshold instead is find something that's interesting to you, that matches well, your talent and pre-existing skills, and which crucially looks like it has many interesting opportunities that will open up if and when you get really good.

There might be a ton of things that satisfy those criteria for you. They're all roughly equivalent. What's important is that you grab one and start the hard but fulfilling work of getting really good.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, and it sounds like the environment and the organization and the company matters too. If you're really good at X, but you work for a company that gives you no autonomy, or mastery, or probate, it's going to be hard to succeed in that area.

Cal Newport: Yeah. It's absolutely true. And what I advise companies, because you have to walk a fine line. I mean, if you tell the 21-year-old who walks through the door, "The key to the shop is yours," you could have some problems. But on the other hand, to the highly skilled lifer, if you're micromanaging their life, it's going to make them miserable.

And so one of the things I often advise is that if I was running a company that did a lot of hiring, and especially of young people, I would be sure to be very clear when people came in the door, here is the path. Here is the way. You do this and get to this level, you're going to get this much control. See this person up here, and how much you might admire their position in our company, here's how she got there. She started here, she got to here.

So, it's not that they have to have all of these traits from beginning, but they have to see a very clear path. If you can get this good, move these numbers, introduce this many clients, whatever, produce this much code of value, then you're going to move to this level and it's going to be rewarded with more autonomy and more impact. We reward skill with X, Y, and Z.

And so there's a path for how to do it. The tools are given, so that people can put themselves in that apprenticeship phase and do it with a sense of, "I know what I'm doing this for." I think that's the recipe for building a very fulfilled and passionate workforce.

Robert Glazer: I think that makes a lot of sense and ties to, I think, where a lot of companies are going in terms of things that are moving faster, they're more open and everyone ... There's jokes that everyone wants to raise. And I think the way to handle that is to say, "Here are the expectations. Here's what we're looking for. And when you do these things, here's what you can expect to get." But it goes both ways. It's not just all the praise and positive feedback along the way.

Cal Newport: Yeah, and I think that's what works. People want challenge. But for a challenge to work, you have to actually understand the rules of the game.

Robert Glazer: I was literally just going to say that quote. I think what we've seen is the biggest way to bridge between Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z, is to make everyone really clear about the rules of the game so they understand what they're playing, and that everyone is willing to understand that. What they're not willing to do is say, "I'm just going to come to your company and make money for you and not understand what my development path is at all."

Cal Newport: Yeah, because the company is going to say, "Also, I don't think you have any idea how to do that. How do you make money for us?" It's like, "Okay, that's very specific. Like you have to master this system and how this works and what our client model works." Yeah, I think we're on the same page about this.

Robert Glazer: Great. Well, let's talk about one of your more recent books, Deep Work, which has led to a lot of your recent work in sort of technology and focus and how ... Our ability to focus intently on tasks is a rare commodity. And we will get more into technology after the break. And I know this is a part of it, but is this a trend that we're going to be able to reverse? Or is this a slippery slope that we can keep going down?

I keep hearing the ... What's the average person's attention span these days? It's worse than a goldfish. So, clearly, we're living in a much more distracted world, and I don't think people understand how much it's impacting us.

Cal Newport: Yeah. In the world of work, the best data I have is of the knowledge worker study. In this particular study, which is really pretty good actually. We're talking about 50,000 or 60,000 people from a variety of jobs monitoring software on their computers. The average time between an email or Slack check is six minutes

Robert Glazer: I would have thought it was less.

Cal Newport: Yeah. But that average includes things like lunch breaks or just things where there is no ... The monitored computer is not with you. It's not their phone and it's just [inaudible 00:23:31]. But anyways, and I think it's a big problem. This is the big argument in Deep Work.

This is a big argument in a book I'm writing now called *The World Without Email* is the human brain does not function very well especially if you want it to actually create value, create valuable thoughts, adding value to information, the core activity of knowledge work. It does not do this well. It has to keep context switching to communication channels and back.

Also, having constant overwhelming communication for various reason makes us miserable. We're just not wired for that either. So, I think the way we're working is broken. The argument in *Deep Work* is like, "Hey, I don't think we've noticed this yet that unbroken concentration is actually a huge value producing activity, and yet we give no attention to it." That was sort of the cry for help that was *Deep Work*.

To answer your question of can we reverse this, I think, of course we can. And in the workforce, we're definitely going to, because it's dollars and cents. The day before we're recording this, I had an op-ed in the *New York Times* where I was talking about this issue. I said, "Let's look back at car manufacturing as an analogy of a sort of complex new industry that arose." And I said, "You could go 30 years up to 1913."

So, about 30 years after Karl Benz built the first practical automobile in his workshop, and we were still building cars in that same way using what was known as the craft method. We would build each car on a pair of wooden sawhorses. And in the factory, you would just have a bunch of cars spread out and you'd have a team at each car building it from scratch just like Karl Benz did in the original workshop.

And then Henry Ford came along and said, "Well, I don't know if this is the best way to actually deploy our capital. There might be a faster way to actually build cars." And by 1914, he had dropped the time, the labor hours required to produce the Model T from 12 and a half hours to something like 90 minutes after he had innovative specialized tools in the assembly line.

In knowledge work, we are today like where the auto manufacturing was in 1913. We're still figuring it out. We're doing what's natural. We're doing what's simple. We're doing what's convenient. But the thing is inevitable that some knowledge age era, Henry Ford is going to come along and said, "Hey, maybe yeah, it's a pain that we can't all access each other on email, but who cares? We can produce the proverbial Model T an order of magnitude faster."

And so I think we are going to look back in 10 or 15 years and say, "Man, that was naïve the way we worked in the first 10 to 20 years of having digital networks and knowledge work." And the reason why it's definitely going to change is because people are going to make a lot more money once they actually get past this sort of initial simple craft method that we're using today.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, there's two things that made me think of that I've seen coming out recently. That's not been talked about as openly, but I think it's the total debunking of the open office space as one of the worst decisions in the last decade.

People are so distracted that now they're just putting on headphones, noise-canceling headphones and not talking to each other. And the other is like some companies dropping their work hours and seeing higher productivity. I've seen this a lot.

I just saw some study this week about some company that dropped an entire workday and saw higher productivity because everyone really had to focus and pay attention the rest of their time. So, that seems to be something that a lot of companies are testing these days.

Cal Newport: Yeah. Well, you might have seen me. I mean, this is what my op-ed was yesterday was about a company that had dropped down to a five-hour work day. And I talked also in there about a company that had Microsoft Japan, actually, that has gone to a four-day a week workweek.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, it was the Microsoft one I saw. It might not have been your ... It was someone writing about it, but it was the Microsoft one.

Cal Newport: Yeah, they claimed 40% more productivity. The American technology company Basecamp used to be 37signals, but Jason Fried's company, they do that every summer. Every summer, they've been doing this for over a decade. They go to four days a week, and the productivity goes really well.

It's interesting. I wrote about this in Deep Work, but when they first did that, there's this business columnist for Forbes who said, "Oh, what an unfair thing that Jason Fried is doing. He's making these poor workers squeeze five days of work into just four days."

And Jason wrote back a response essay and said, "No, no, no. We're doing one day less of work, and yet, we're still getting the most productive things done, because what gets squeezed out, the unproductive things. The things are just filling work."

And I also agree with you on open offices. The data is clear, like you said, it doesn't accomplish any of the goals that they think. And there's a gold standard study from last year. This was published in the Royal Proceedings where they actually took an office that was going to transition to an open office so they could put these socio meters, these complex sensors around the worker's necks before they switched the open office and then immediately after.

Same worker, same work. The only variable that changed was the office. And what they found is when they went to the open office, as you alluded, the face

to face communication went down. They spent less time interacting with each other because it turns out in an open office, you're self-conscious about talking to someone because it's going to distract everyone else who's around. Email and instant messaging went up. Their metrics of productivity that they had fixed in advanced all went down.

The only place where I give a little bit more credit to the open office movement, and I've argued this before in some of my more recent essays is that I think it was never fundamentally about productivity. It was never fundamentally about creativity. It was mainly a signaling mechanism.

Robert Glazer: No corner office.

Cal Newport: Yeah. And it was a way of signaling like what ... Especially in the tech industry where it arose. What are the two things you need to succeed, like two most vital things? You need venture capital and really good employees.

And so this was a signaling mechanism that actually in sort of evolutionary sense probably helped them with both. They just said, "Look, we're running our organization differently. We're disruptive. We're innovative." And that's the power of that signaling is that you can attract more capital and maybe hire some better people.

So, I sort of understand where it came from, but the idea that it's going to make you more productive or creative I think has been debunked, which is all to say. I mean, the whole summary here is this point that I've been making a lot in my writing which is the way we work today and knowledge work is really not that good.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, it's interesting. We are probably now one of the largest remote distributed companies in the US and people always come here and are surprised that, A, the connection, because I think we're intentional about it, but, B, the productivity of ... Particularly, a lot of us have kind of synchronized our Do Not Disturb time in the morning. Aligned with Dan Pink's kind of when you're cognitively stronger.

So, a lot of us just 8:00 to 11:00 is kind of no meeting time and no distraction time. And Jason wrote about this REM work, but put your head down for two or three hours and get the most important stuff done for the day. And a lot of times, that's a lot more than people end up getting done with a slew of meetings and interruptions.

Cal Newport: Yeah, we need a lot more experiments like this. The idea that we just somehow got it right in the first 10 years of knowledge work, like this is great. Give everyone the email address, put everyone on a Slack channel, let's just rock and roll all day. Everyone can reach anyone at anytime. We'll just let's kind of let the whole work unfold like a conversation.

I get why we did that, because it's easy. It's like really easy. It's really flexible. It's very easy to intake people into this type of working, but it really is a terrible way to try to extract value from human brains.

And so I'm heartened to hear experiments of the type that you guys are trying because the reality is, yes, it's hard. If you step away from just let's all be accessible at all times and just figure things out like an ongoing conversation all day, if you step away from that, things become more difficult.

There's going to be hard edges. So going to be things that miss. There's going to be situations in which something that could have got done more easily doesn't get done. There's going to be opportunities that are squandered. There's going to be places where I wasn't online when you weren't, and this thing never got accomplished on time. Like bad things will happen and it will be really inconvenient, but none of those should disqualify it, because that was also true, we should remember the assembly line.

That was an incredibly inconvenient way to run a factory, probably a factor of 10 more annoying, cost a factor of 10 more issues, requires probably a factor of 10 more investment than the way that they built cars before, but who cared? Because it produced cars a factor 10 times faster.

And so I think this mindset of let's move away from what's easiest and try to find what's actually going to produce the most value, and let's experiment, and measure, and see what works, I think that's definitely the future of work.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, and the thing that people have to figure out, and we're doing a lot of training on this because of accessibility, I think is a lost skill, but urgent versus important. I think we're back to the Eisenhower matrix that, that has been totally lost, and it's something we need to bring back.

Cal Newport: Yeah. I'm a big believer. I'm working out these theories right now in this new book I'm writing, but we probably need more systems within work. We probably need some more defined communication interfaces.

Right now, the model that we often use as we think of the humans as these sort of general purpose computers, and then they're hooked up with communication channels, and we sort of pass tasks back and forth, and the computers execute the tasks. And the focus is on the people. The people are task executors, and then we just pass tasks back and forth between people.

It's probably better to think about processes. Like what are the processes that your company does. It produces this type of thing that's valuable. It produces this type of thing that's valuable. And then for each of those processes, thinking, "Okay, so how do we want to actually run this? How does information come into this process? How does it unfold? How do people coordinate?"

I mean, I think we probably need a lot more of this bespoke process centric thinking if we're going to unlock more of the potential the human brain. Because the thing we have to avoid is lots of unstructured communication. Lots of unstructured communication. The ongoing communication model does not work after you get above maybe five or six people. And I think it's really killing productivity and making people miserable.

Robert Glazer: All right. We're going to dive into that a bit more after our quick break from our sponsors.

In 2004, Mike Zani and his partner started a search fund. A search fund is where you raise money with a leadership team already in place and then look for a company to buy. Well, here's what Mike learned the first time he bought a company.

Mike Zani: Bob, we were really pretty good at the strategy stuff, and we were good at the financial side of things knowing what to pay for a company. But when we finally bought the company, figuring out how to get the right people and the right roles and managing them was really hard, surprisingly hard and we sucked at it.

Robert Glazer: So, Mike and his team use the predictive index to help them fix their people problems. Then when they bought and ran two more companies, they use the predictive index again. In fact, they became so enamored with the predictive index that you guessed it, they bought the company.

Mike Zani: Yeah, we bought a 60-year-old technology company. I have to pinch myself. I get to run a company that helps people solve their people problems, designing teams, hiring, inspiring managers. And when it comes down to it, almost all business problems come down to people problems.

Robert Glazer: So, if you're trying to figure out how to get more out of your people, I'd recommend you go to [predictiveindex.com/elevate](http://predictiveindex.com/elevate) and request a demo of their product. That's [predictiveindex.com/elevate](http://predictiveindex.com/elevate).

Whenever I'm doing an interview and someone asked me about the best productivity tool I use, my answer is SaneBox. I've been using SaneBox for four years and could not manage my email without it.

SaneBox's artificial intelligence monitors your inbox and moves email you don't need to read right away to your SaneLater folder. All that's left in your inbox is the important stuff. You can also snooze emails and have them come back to in your inbox at the right time.

If you know how email folders work, then you know how SaneBox works. Find an email in the wrong folder, just move it. There's nothing to learn, nothing to install, SaneBox works directly with every single email server or service that's

ever been created. Get a free two week trial and a \$25 credit by visiting [SaneBox.com/elevate](https://SaneBox.com/elevate). That's [SaneBox.com/elevate](https://SaneBox.com/elevate).

And we're back with Cal. Well, we are talking about focus a lot before the break and your latest book, Digital Minimalism takes a lot of the ideas in Deep Work and then applies them more to our day-to-day life. So, what made you start focusing on digital overuse? And there was a specific moment where you felt like technology has gotten out of control and that we went over the cliff.

Cal Newport:

Yeah, it's an important question, because as your listeners can probably tell from our conversation, a lot of where I've traditionally focused in this space is at the intersection of technology and work. I care a lot about knowledge work and how we use tools and email and Slack and these type of issues. And that was more my sweet spot.

But after Deep Work came out, so it came out in 2016, I began to hear more and more from people that says, "Yeah, but what about tech in our personal life?" And it wasn't an issue that I knew as much about. And as I got into it, my head started spinning that there seems to be this moment and I can really pinpoint it.

I pinpoint it based on people's reaction to my writing and speeches. So, based on how people's reaction to my writing and speeches changed. I can see that some transition happened between 2016 and 2017 where people went from generally being enthusiastic about the technology in their personal life, to people being very wary about the technology in their personal life.

We reached a tipping point essentially. And on the other side of that tip, people were looking up and saying, "I don't know. Getting a little bit uneasy about the role of this screen in my life and how much I'm looking at and how much of my energy is taking up and how much it seems to be pushing around my emotions, even my activities."

And so I actually put a book on hold. I was supposed to be writing A World Without Email, a follow up to Deep Work. That was supposed to be my next book. I put that on hold and said, "I need to tackle this issue of tech in our personal life right now, because it seems to be on everyone's mind. It seems like it reached some sort of crisis point."

And so the premise of digital minimalism, the book that came out of this was I wanted to figure out why are we so uneasy about this technology all the sudden, and what should we do about it.

Robert Glazer:

So, what was the tipping point in that time period? I know there's a lot of article started to come out and we're seeing a lot of depression and lonely ... What it's interesting to me is that the things about the more people use technology and engage with people online, the more they say they're lonely and they have no

friends, which is fascinating in itself. What was it about that time period? Did you figure out what the tipping point was?

Cal Newport:

There seems to be a couple things coming together. So the really big arc, the really big arc that's important was understanding that maybe five or six years before that, the giant social media companies led by Facebook got really serious about revenue maximization.

So when the giant social media companies got ready for their IPOs, they had to switch from user acquisition mode to revenue maximization mode. And to do that, they had to get people to look at their services more. That's the foundation on which they make more money.

And so there's this great transformation of the social media experience that went on maybe five or six years ago, maybe a little bit longer depending how you calculate it. But there's this great transformation where a few things happened. The core thing was social media became less about you post things, your friend post things, you occasionally check what your friends post.

It became less about that and more about there's an incoming stream of social approval indicators, likes, and retweets, and favorites, and tags, and photos. And every time you hit that icon, you can get more information about what other people are thinking about you.

This was an incredibly intentional shift. Facebook led the way but almost every other major attention economy company followed their lead. It completely changed our relationship with our phones. They used to be a tool that we would deploy, like when we want to look up directions or play a song and they became a constant companion. We began to check them constantly.

That was engineered. It was a transformation, our experience with social media. They added onto that addictive interfaces and algorithmically optimized content. And there's other things they added, but this core transformation was constant incoming stream of social approval indicators that hacks our psychology. It's almost impossible to resist that information.

I think by 2017, that basically just caught up with everyone. These companies were so successful. We were looking at our phones so much that we couldn't ignore it anymore. It was just in our face.

Robert Glazer:

And I know you've said it or written about. It came out of Vegas casino. Like this was deep research and stuff that these things were built on, right?

Cal Newport:

Oh, yeah. I mean, all of this was very conscious. There's a lot of different factors that went into it, but this whole field called attention engineering that played a big role into this, which is how do we actually design digital tools that's going to get people to look at them more often.

And there's claims from ... So, this is Tristan Harris, the former Google employee and whistleblower. He claims that they were looking at the research that was done in Las Vegas casino gambling when they switched to electronic slot machines. And they did all this research to say, because you can precisely control the rate at which you get different rewards in electronic slot machine. And so they did research to say what is the optimal distribution of rewards to keep the little old lady pulling the lever all night long.

Silicon Valley looked at that research. And so both Tristan Harris and the NYU Professor, Adam Alter, claim that they have evidence that Facebook and Instagram, which is now the same company, went so far as to artificially hold back likes or favorites so that the distribution of those rewards would better match what they figured out what keep people pulling the slot machine more.

And there's a lot of other innovations like that, but it's hard to underestimate the degree to which this massive industry. And it really is massive. Facebook's market capitalization is 2X that of ExxonMobil. These are huge industries. The degree to which they geared up for exactly one goal, how do we get people to look at the screen more.

Their entire industry, all of their profitability, their rise to such dominance is all built on how do we get people to look at these screens more. So, we were in an incredibly asymmetric fight. I mean, it's like, "Look, I bought an iPhone in 2009, because I didn't want to have an iPod and a cell phone. It's two separate things in my pocket." That was the original pitch.

I signed up for Facebook in 2005 because I wanted to see my college roommate's relationship status or something like this. And then you look up seven years later, and you say, "I can't even hold a conversation with my kid. I'm looking at this thing all the time. I'm going out with friends and I can't look up from the phone. What's going on here?"

And by 2017, they were just too good at it. They were too good at it that people could no longer ignore how much they were looking at these things. And the fact is that most people did not sign up for it. This technology changed under their noses when they were too busy doing other things. And eventually, they couldn't ignore it anymore.

Robert Glazer: So what are the largest costs on an individual of all this digital overuse?

Cal Newport: Well, it's mainly diminishment of satisfaction of life. So, there's two ways that, that happens. Directly speaking, the main thing that people complain about if you really push them on their relationship with their technology is the amount of time they spend looking at the phone. And that's an opportunity cost equation.

So, it's not that ... I think this is a key point. It's not that what you're doing when you look at your phone is in isolation bad. It's that it's taking you away from things that are much better, or things that are my richer.

Secondly, when people are trying to engage in those activities that are much more meaningful and richer, like spending time with your family, spending time with friends. You're outside in nature doing something challenging. You're doing a handicraft that you built up the skill with. They find themselves fragmenting the experience with quick check to the phone.

So, it keeps you away from high value things and it takes the high value things you do and it reduces the value you get out of them. And so what people are suffering from is an acute reduction in the value they get out of their life beyond work.

Robert Glazer: So, this is the big debate though. This sounds to me like an addiction. Is it an addiction? I've heard some of your perspective. I had your outline and just wrote in [Instructable 00:43:44] saying it's not an addiction. Where do you fall on this spectrum?

Cal Newport: So, when I talk to psychologists about it, they didn't seem to think this was that hard of a question. They would say, "Yeah, the right way to think about this is it's probably for most people what's known as a moderate behavioral addiction."

So, this is different, let's say, than a chemical addiction. Chemical addiction where you have an actual chemical crossing the blood brain barrier is a different type of thing, and it can be much more intense. This is not that, it's behavioral addiction, which is lesser.

But if you look at the definition of a moderate behavioral addiction, what it leads to is that you participate in the behavior more than you know is healthy, more than you know is useful if it is available to you.

So some people, for example, have a moderate behavioral addiction surrounding junk food consumption. If you put out the doughnuts at work, and the doughnuts are out there every morning at work, it's really, really, really hard for you to resist eating a few donuts even though it's not healthy for you, even though you know you should.

On the other hand, if someone doesn't bring doughnuts into work in that morning, you're not going to be on the floor suffering withdrawal or sneaking out the door to go to the bakery. That's moderate behavioral addiction.

The problem when it comes to social media and smartphones is that the proverbial doughnuts are always in your pocket. So, it's not that the draw that people have to these services is the same as like being addicted to heroin or

something like that. I mean, that's absolutely not true. But the issue is, if it's around, it's hard to resist.

Maybe you can sometimes, but if it's always around in the aggregate, you're going to use it more than you know is useful and more than you know is healthy. So, I think that's where we land with this, which the problem is, that's not a great place to be. It's always around, we're using it more, then we're healthy.

I mean, the good news is we're not going to be shaking in a bed for a month trying to withdrawal. But if we don't change something, it is going to have a negative impact on our lives.

Robert Glazer:

I think it's interesting with kids thinking about kids and parents these days, in that parents, today, the resources would pay any amount of money to give their kids an advantage, right? If it's a test they can take, if it's a thing they can do. But the data is coming out pretty clear on how much the technology is probably hurting them and cognitive distraction, but they just don't seem to ...

And again, it's not a chemical addiction, but they don't seem to be addressing it with same urgency. I mean, you talk a lot about the cost. Is it that people aren't seeing the costs? Because if you read the articles and stuff, I think it's pretty clear or their kids really lonely. But it doesn't seem like anyone is willing ... I know Apple has this screen time stuff, but no one is willing to really kind of jump in and do the same thing as locking the liquor cabinet.

Cal Newport:

Well, I think they are now. I mean, this is the sense I got during my book tour. When it comes to teenagers in particular and the relationship with these phones, I think the siren is something that everyone is hearing. I hear it from the teenagers themselves who will very clearly tell you, "This thing is making me anxious. This thing is making me depressed. I am really unhappy by how much time I have to spend on this thing."

The parents see it very clearly. Educators see it very clearly. I mean, this is kind of recent, maybe the last year or two, but the other thing that seems to be happening is that this type of research from a literature perspective is complicated. It's hard to do this type of epidemiological behavior studies well, and so the research is a little bit erratic.

But the people I talked to, the psychologists I talk to who I respect say, "If you know how to read these literature and know how to take the positive studies and the negative studies and figure out what's going on, the signal is getting stronger and stronger. This stuff, especially social media, with ubiquitous access on smartphones, is not good for the developing minds of teenagers. Also, addictive video games, very not good for the developing minds of teenagers."

And so my prediction is, I think what you're talking about was the case a few years ago, but it's tipping. I think that really is changing. I think it's increasingly seeming like a public health issue. I can't tell you how many schools I've talked to where they're deeply involved. I can't tell you how many schools where they're reading Digital Minimalism, like all the parents and the teachers.

I mean, this is out there now. I think five years from now, the time when my oldest kid is probably getting to an age where this might be relevant, I think my job is going to be much easier than it is for a parent of a teenager right now. Because five or six years from now, I think it's going to be completely acceptable.

This idea that, "No, of course, you're not going to give a smartphone with social media access to a 15 year old." Is the same as leaving the liquor cabinet unlocked.

Robert Glazer:

Yeah, it's interesting. One of the things that you were saying, the video games. The problems of this stuff as you bring in the socialization and isolation elements, which is an irony in all of this, but now I've noticed that all the video games have a social element towards it.

So, if you are not letting their kid play the game, then your friends are all on that game talking and playing that games. Now, it's not just you playing it, it's you're excluded. And I know that's ... I don't know whether that's intentional or a lot of things are going, but it's become an interesting factor for us as a parent, and it's kind of like not letting them go to the party.

Cal Newport:

Well, there's a hidden trap there with video games. A lot of people don't recognize that actually, these massively online multiplayer games are substantially more addictive than social media.

If you want to look at the landscape of technology and addiction and say, "Well, what is the technology where we literally do have to send people to a detox style rehab program?" It's actually those video games. They really have it dialed in, this mix of effort that gives you reward and achievement and your levels go up.

And there's other people involved and you're talking to those people. And they're part of your clan, and it touches all of these buttons in such a way that video games, those online video games like Fortnite. Or I don't know what people play now. It used to be the World of Warcraft. This is the place where you actually see people soiling themselves.

You will see with slot machines where they'll ... 12, 15 hours at a time in South Korea, they'll see deaths at the screen. The 24 hours, 36 hours not walking away from the screen. So, this is a bit of an aside, but actually, this is the more

dangerous of addictive technologies are some of these highly engineered video games.

But your broader point is well taken. Yes, there is a social component to it, but the idea that I like here ... And this is an idea that I actually give credit to the psychologist, Jonathan Haidt. He said this is positive deviance theory.

Let's say everyone in your daughter's class is on Snapchat. And your concern is if I don't let her have Snapchat, then she's going to not be a part of that social circle. Well, you might think that, okay, until we get to a point where no one is using Snapchat, I'm not going to be able to get her to do that.

But the reality is, is you don't need to get everyone in that class to stop using Snapchat. You need two people. You just need enough people doing something to demonstrate that there is an alternative, and then you've given cover.

And the reason why that's particularly effective, I think, for teenagers is that I was really surprised and agree to which, when I talk to these teenagers, they are tired of it. I mean, we suspect the teenagers are going to just be like, "Okay, Boomer, you don't understand. We need to be on these things."

They feel exploited. They feel exhausted. I mean, the new counterculture among teenagers is saying, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I don't let some massive conglomerate in Northern California dominate my time and make money off of my attention." I think this is a place where we can shift it fast. It's just a matter of ...

I would be nervous if I was Snapchat right now, because it's just a matter of the right influential people making that pivot where they say, "Man, this thing is kind of dated and uncool, and it's adults that are trying to exploit you." And then overnight, you can change the entire culture.

Robert Glazer: Well, it's an interesting point. Right. If it's one person that's isolating, but if you can get a few together, you'll move it. I'm curious. Do you think in 5 or 10 years? I remember when the BlackBerry first came out, and now I'm dating myself to the same time frame as you, but it was a status symbol. You were reachable. Do you think being unreachable will become a status symbol?

Cal Newport: I mean, it probably has already to some extent. I mean, you see this pretty commonly in the world of entrepreneurs, like the degree to which they end up having to make themselves less reachable.

Here's an assistant or someone you can talk to. I can't be reachable. I can't monitor that. I think it has become a bit of a status symbol, and I think it's going to change. And so we have two different worlds here though. We have the world of the personal and the world of work.

The world of work is more complicated. It seems similar, because we're on our email, we're on our Slack all the time, just like we're looking at our phone all the time outside of work. But there's really different dynamics at play.

In work, the reason why we're communicating all the time and accessible all the time is that we have implicitly adopted workflows that depend on that. And until we replace those workflows with something that doesn't depend on that, it's going to be impossible to get people away from that.

In the world of our personal lives, we're looking at our phones all the time. We're scrolling online news and YouTube and on social media. It's a very different dynamic. Over there, the issue is that these products have been engineered to get us to do exactly this behavior. And we're sort of dealing with a different dynamic there, which is trying to free ourselves from exploitation, to reclaim time for better uses.

Over in the world of work, what we have is a sort of Henry Ford type problem. Man, the way we're building cars is not that efficient, but it's hard for the engineer that is putting the fender on the car to be the person to change it. We have to kind of change that from the top down.

So, there's kind of two different dynamics going there. They're both going to change, but I think for very different reasons. Our personal use of technology is going to change for cultural reasons. Our professional use of technology is going to change for dollar and cent profit reasons.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, I know you say it's not a chemical reaction, but what does it look like to make significant reductions in this given the sort of some of the principles? I mean, does it look like a detox? Does it have elements of a detox? How does one cut back 75%? Is it easy, just tough it out? Or are there process you recommend?

Cal Newport: So, what I recommend is ... It is a 30-day process, because these forces are strong enough that I discovered that if you try to make these changes incrementally, tweaking your notifications on your phone, or changing your screen to gray scale, that's not going to work. The forces are too powerful. So, I suggest 30 days is what I suggest to my book.

And basically what I say is during these 30 days, step away from any of the technologies that you use in your personal life that are nonvital. So, technologies that you can plausibly step away from without it actually causing problems. For most people, this is like social media, this is streaming video, this is online news, this is video games.

You step away for 30 days. So, what do you do during these 30 days? Well, first, there is a detox period. I ran an experiment where I had around 1,500 people go

through this process, and a lot of them reported, yeah, it takes about a week just to get past the knee jerk urge to just look at a screen, but that passes.

So, what do you do with the rest of your time? Well, it's during this time that I recommend that people aggressively both reflect and experiment. So, reflect on what they really care about, and experiment with what they actually like doing.

Then when the 30 days are over, I think you should take the blank slate approach. All right, I am starting from scratch. At the end of this 30 days, I have none of these technologies in my life. If I want to add something back, I want to do it now much more intentionally. If I add back this technology, I have to have a really convincing story that this tech really boosts this thing that I really care about.

And then when you bring it back, you put some walls around it. Okay, if this is the reason why I'm bringing back this technology, then I can set up some rules about how I use it to optimize that value and get away from the cost.

And so people come out of this 30-day experience with a much more minimized but also much more intentional technological lives. It's a smaller number of tools that they use in very specific ways to boost things that they really care about.

I don't know any shortcuts to getting there beyond doing something like that. The radical rip the Band-Aid off approach seems to be more or less what you need if you actually want radical changes to your life.

Robert Glazer: And you mentioned the notifications. I would assume these are one of the easier things for people to just start. I know it's not the solution, but just turn off like they're literally getting notifications all day long. I mean, I have to think that, that's among the most destructive behaviors or activities that there is.

Cal Newport: It is very distracting. It is a bit of a red herring, though, because it's a change that's easy to make and most people already have. And for a lot of people, they feel like they've done what they need to do. I turned off notifications, so problem solved.

But it goes beyond that. I talked about in the book this columnist who wrote this column for The Post. It says, "Essentially, okay, I think I figured out my issues with my digital behavior. I had 150 different apps generating notifications. I went through and I turned off the notifications for all 150 of these apps."

But the real issue there is why do you have 150 apps? Does it require your time and attention? So, yeah, if you want to do some small things that try to have some benefit before you go to the major change, the biggest thing I think is dumb down the smartphone.

There's almost nothing on the smartphone that's capturing your attention all the time that needs to be accessed that way. So, take all the social media off. If you're allowed to take email off, take email off. Make the phone so it can no longer be the vector through which you access services that have been engineered to capture your time and attention.

I'm not saying quit them yet. You can still go on to Instagram and Facebook and what have you with your browser, but you're just making it harder. And for a lot of people, just taking that one step actually is quite eye-opening, because they'll say like, "My God, I need to use these things all the time." They're crucial and then you put in just this little bit of friction. Well, you have to log on to a computer browser, and they look up a month later and say, "You know what, I've been on there zero times."

Robert Glazer: I'm curious. In your travels, because you said this before and to what you said about you need a couple. I'm always amazed. I have two teenage kids. And the only phones that are really available, because a lot of them are on the Apple ecosystem are the baseline phone is \$700. And it is a smartphone whether you want it to be smart.

Have you seen anyone or people talking about making like a phone that would sort of replace the teenage phone where, "Yeah, you need to call me from soccer practice." That they could have it without being, "Oh my god, you have the baby phone that doesn't do anything."

Cal Newport: There's a lot of people doing that. Now, there's whole subcultures. One of the things I realized is that there is a lot of people who intentionally askew smartphones. You'll be surprised by how many people do it. They just don't talk about it that much, because they think that they'll be branded as eccentric, but it's actually incredibly common.

So, there's a lot of different options. So, there's some new ones that have been designed specifically for this purpose. The Light Phone, for example, is a Kickstarter product that was designed for this purpose.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, I saw it.

Cal Newport: Yeah, it's meant just for phone calls, just for text messaging. But there's a lot of Nokia still sells a lot of what are called feature phones, which are essentially phones that you can do text messaging, you can do phone calls, you can do some basic photos, but you don't have apps. You can't access the web. You can't access social media. Those are really popular.

There's actually particular brands like the Doro, for example, is a particular brand of Nokia phone that I uncovered to be really popular among hedge fund managers. Hedge fund managers are dealing with hundreds of millions of dollars, and so their cognitive state ... If they're a little bit distracted, if they're a

little bit off their game because there's some attention economy, shiny doodad pulling their attention, it could cost millions and millions of dollars. They really, really optimize their brain and how their brain function.

So, a lot of them don't want smartphones anywhere near them, because they want to precisely control what information they see and when they see it. And so there's a subculture of hedge fund managers that use the Doro, a particular brand, the feature phone and they love it. It's a kind of a code word among certain people, which is all to say, yes, a lot of people have stepped away from those phones. And even larger group of people have just dumbbed down their standard smartphones.

You just take off the phone, any application where someone makes money off your time and attention. Make that one simple change and you go back to the relationship we had with those in 2009 when Steve Jobs first introduced them, which was this is a great iPod. It's built into my phone so I don't have to have a separate music player and phone. And when I need to look something up, it allows me to do it on the fly.

Like you go back to that original vision of the smartphone, and it changes from a constant companion, which is a huge source of issues, into one of the coolest tools that you own. And a lot of people are doing that.

Robert Glazer: That's a great standard. I have never heard that line where someone makes money off your time and attention. I think that's a really interesting way to think about it.

Cal Newport: Yeah, and they're good at it. They're really, really good at it. Don't underestimate the amount of money that's in that industry. It is massive. And that is the bottom line. To go back to that point. If you're an oil and gas, getting oil and gas out of the ground is everything. How much can you get out of the ground? The more you can get the better. If you're in the attention economy, how much user engagement minutes can we get?

And when I think about it through that analogy, what they figured out when they re-engineered social media to be about incoming social approval indicators is the attention economy equivalent of fracking. They developed using new high technology a way to extract a lot more time and attention from a place that we felt like was completely tapped out with billboards everywhere, radios everywhere, everyone was watching television.

We thought we had access to as much time and attention as you could get from the American public. The social media company said, "Essentially, hold my beer." We re-engineer these apps, put them on a phone, re-engineer these apps so it's incoming, intermittent social approval indicators. We're going to get people looking at these things everywhere. You don't even realize.

So, it's just the attention economy equivalent of fracking. High technology that suddenly allowed them to extract a lot more of this valuable resource in a place where we thought we were doing the best that we could.

Robert Glazer: Very interesting. Well, you mentioned your next book a few times. Tell us a little bit about what are you working on and when should we expect to see it.

Cal Newport: So, the new book is tentatively titled The World Without Email. It probably will come out at some point after the presidential election. That is a media dead zone for everything that's not politics related. So, at some point in the season after the US presidential election, it will come out if all goes well.

And it's basically arguing that the way we work today with constant unstructured communication is terribly unproductive. It's a really poor way to extract value from human brains, and it talks about what's going to come to replace it. And I think it's pretty clear when you look at all the evidence that knowledge work is going to evolve away from unstructured conversation as the foundation and towards something that's much more structured.

You might have tools like email or Slack existing and being used, but in a much different way. This notion that you just have an inbox that's always filling and that you're always tackling, we are going to look back at that and say, "Man, what a naïve way to try to get a bunch of human brains together and try to get value out of them."

Robert Glazer: So you're not going to be marketing this book via email marketing?

Cal Newport: Yeah. There's so many ironies. I got to tell you. There are so many ironies when you write about tech criticism, because this writing is disseminated. This article I talked about in The Times, it was about in part email and my editor sent me a note and said, "Hey, look, this is on the most emailed list. Oh, the irony."

Robert Glazer: Yeah.

Cal Newport: Yeah, that pretty much describes my whole life right now.

Robert Glazer: All right. Well, last question. And this can be a singular or repeated, but what's a personal and professional mistake that you've made that you learned the most from?

Cal Newport: That's a good question, that I've learned. So it could be repeated, you said.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, a lot of people have felt they've made the same mistake or very similar mistake over and over.

Cal Newport: Something I've noticed at several points in my life, and I wrote an essay about this when I was finishing up grad school, was when I was finishing up grad

school, I wrote this essay and said, "Why didn't I, and why don't more grad students, when they first get the grad school, go find the most successful person about to leave it in their group?" Like someone who's going on the job market and it's just doing really, really well and ask them, "Okay, what should I focus on? What shouldn't I focus on? What's really important and what's a waste of time?"

And I think this notion that we don't seek out the hard truth about what matters and what doesn't in the pursuits we care about, I think this comes up again and again. It's come up in a lot of different areas in my life. I know it comes up in a lot of other people's lives as well that we often ... And I often have this problem.

We want to write the story that we want to hear about how one succeeds in a given field, or what one needs to do to get ahead. We want to write a story that seems kind of interesting to us, that's hard, but not too hard. But often, those stories deviate from the actual ground truth.

And so this is something a couple different stages of my career I wish I had just confronted up front what really matters and what doesn't, so I could have really put my attention to the things that mattered as opposed to the things that I wanted to matter. And I'm trying to be better about that as I go forward in my career, but it's a lesson that I keep going back to.

Robert Glazer: Wow, wise advice, and I think one that people can take advantage of that across a bunch of different sectors. Okay, how can people get ahold of you?

Cal Newport: Well, it's a good question. So, I don't have any social media accounts and/or any publicly available email addresses. So, I am by design not that easy to get in touch with, but I do have a website, calnewport.com, and I have been writing weekly essays there since 2007.

So, if you're interested in finding out more about my type of ideas, or if you want to learn more about my books, that's a great place to start.

Robert Glazer: Right. So they can get links to all your books there?

Cal Newport: Yup.

Robert Glazer: Okay, great. Well, Cal, thank you for sharing your story with us. You're clearly a deep thinker on how technology affects our lives both inside and out of work and how we can all benefit from unplugging a little more often and having more focus in our lives.

Cal Newport: Well, thank you. It's my pleasure.

Robert Glazer: To our listeners. Thanks for tuning into the Elevate podcast today. We'll include links to Cal and his books on the detailed episode page at robertglazer.com. If

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